



**Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol  
FY2016 Annual Evaluation**

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## Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol FY2016 Evaluation

### 1. Introduction and Purpose

The Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP) is a safety assessment protocol used in child protection investigations and child welfare case in Illinois. This “life-of-the case” protocol is designed to provide staff with a mechanism for quickly assessing the potential for moderate to severe harm to children in the immediate or near future and for taking quick action to protect them. Staff utilize the protocol at specified milestones throughout an investigation or child welfare case to help them determine whether a child is safe or unsafe, and if unsafe, decide what actions must be taken to assure their safety. When immediate risk to a child’s safety is identified, the protocol requires that action be taken, such as the implementation of a safety plan or protective custody.

In accordance with statute, each year since 1997 the Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) at the University of Illinois has conducted an evaluation related to the reliability and validity of the CERAP. The FY2015 evaluation examined CERAP completion during placement cases (i.e., families with children in out-of-home placements). According to procedures, DCFS and private agency staff are required to complete a CERAP assessment at specific time frames, referred to as “milestones,” and at any other time when the worker believes that a child may be unsafe. For *placement cases with a reunification goal*, CERAP assessments must be completed at the following milestones:

1. Within 5 working days after a worker receives a new or transferred case, when there are other children in the home of origin.
2. Every 90 calendar days from the case opening date.
3. When considering the commencement of unsupervised visits in the home of the parent or guardian.
4. Within 24 hours prior to returning a child home.
5. When a new child is added to a family with a child in care.
6. Within 5 working days after a child is returned home and every month thereafter until the family case is closed.
7. Whenever evidence or circumstances suggest that a child’s safety may be in jeopardy.

The results of the FY2015 CERAP evaluation indicated that rates of CERAP completion at most of the required milestones were low, in many instances less than 50%. For example, over half of the children who were reunified during 2014 did not have a CERAP safety assessment for the milestone “within 24 hours prior to returning a child home” (see Table 1, reproduced from the FY2015 report).<sup>1</sup>

Table 1. CERAP compliance within 24 hours prior to returning a child home

	Reunification cases	Had CERAP within 2 days prior to reunification	Had CERAP more than 2 days prior to reunification	No CERAP prior to reunification
2005	1,326	185 (14.0%)	411 (31.0%)	730 (55.0%)
2006	1,140	226 (19.8%)	402 (35.3%)	512 (44.9%)
2007	1,196	286 (23.9%)	411 (34.4%)	499 (41.7%)
2008	1,422	366 (25.7%)	450 (31.7%)	606 (42.6%)
2009	1,407	403 (28.6%)	462 (32.9%)	542 (38.5%)
2010	1,337	407 (30.4%)	432 (32.3%)	498 (37.3%)
2011	1,263	402 (31.8%)	378 (30.0%)	483 (38.2%)
2012	1,131	347 (30.7%)	256 (22.6%)	528 (46.7%)
2013	979	296 (30.2%)	190 (19.4%)	493 (50.4%)
2014	499	127 (25.5%)	90 (18.0%)	282 (56.5%)

The low compliance with required safety practice raised concerns among members of the CERAP Advisory Committee, and several meetings were devoted to discussion of possible explanations for the lower-than-expected completion rates. One potential explanation was that workers were completing a “hard copy” of the CERAP assessment and placing it in the case file rather than completing the assessment in SACWIS (the state’s child welfare administrative database). Hard copies of the CERAP would not have been counted in the data used in the FY2015 report. In order to explore this possibility, the CERAP Advisory Committee asked the CFRC to conduct a follow-up study to determine how many, if any, of the non-compliant cases had a hard copy of the CERAP in the case file for the milestone “within 24 hours prior to returning the child home.” The Committee was especially interested in this milestone because many judges inquire about the results of the safety assessment before returning a child home; it is therefore especially concerning that over 50% of the children that were returned home in 2014 did not have a CERAP for this milestone.

<sup>1</sup> Chiu, Y., Nieto, M., Wakita, S. & Fuller, T. (2015). *Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol: FY2015 Annual Evaluation*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center.

## 2. Sample

There were 282 reunification cases that did not have a CERAP in SACWIS for the milestone “within 24 hours prior to returning the child home” during calendar year 2014. Of these cases, 202 cases (72%) were assigned to DCFS regional offices and 80 cases (28%) assigned to 27 different private agencies (Table 2).

Table 2. Sample Distribution by Agency

Agency	Number of cases	Percent
DCFS Northern Regional Office	53	19%
DCFS Cook Regional Office	74	26%
DCFS Central Regional Office	29	10%
DCFS Southern Regional Office	46	16%
Private (POS) Agencies	80	28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 3. Data Collection

DCFS provided the CFRC with the contact information for the agency director or regional administrator for each agency or office. One of the 27 private agencies was no longer providing services in Illinois; the one case located at that agency was removed from the sample, which resulted in a total of 281 cases. On February 17<sup>th</sup> 2016, CFRC mailed the director or administrator of each agency a cover letter, a data collection form that contained a list of the reunification cases that did not have a CERAP in SACWIS for the milestone “within 24 hours prior to return home,” and a return envelope. The director/administrator was asked to assign someone to look through the hard copy case file(s) to determine if a hard copy of the CERAP was present and check “yes” or “no” on the data collection checklist. If a CERAP was found, a photocopy of the CERAP was to be returned to the CFRC along with the completed checklist. On March 8<sup>th</sup>, the first deadline, a reminder email was sent to the agencies that did not respond and the deadline for completion was extended to March 31<sup>th</sup>. Sixteen of the 26 agencies/offices responded by the second deadline. On April 28<sup>th</sup>, the checklist and a cover letter from DCFS Director George Sheldon were sent to the 10 agencies/offices that had not responded, with a final deadline for response by May 2<sup>nd</sup>. Responses were received from all of the agencies.

## 1. Results

Survey responses for the 281 cases are listed in Table 3. Respondents indicated that hard copies of the CERAP were located in 20 cases (7.1%) and were not located in 201 cases (71.9%). However, only two hard copies of the CERAP were sent to the CFRC as requested.<sup>2</sup> For 59 cases, the checklists were left blank or marked as “not applicable.” Several agencies provided explanations for why the CERAP was not completed for particular cases. The most common explanation provided was that the children were in care less than 30 days and the case was still assigned to a child protection team. In these instances, a CERAP was not required by the placement worker.

Table 3. Survey Responses

CERAP located	Number of cases	Percent
Yes (hard copy provided)	2	0.7%
Yes (hard copy not provided)	18	6.4%
No	202	71.9%
Blank or N/A	59	21.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>100%</b>

To explore the possibility that the analyses in the FY2015 report included cases that did not require a CERAP prior to the child’s return home, the analyses were updated by limiting the sample to children in care more than 30 days. Table 4 shows the number of reunification cases originally used in the analyses, as well as the number and percentage of these cases that were in care more than 30 days.

Table 4. Reunification cases by length of stay in care

Entry cohort	Reunification cases	Cases in care 30 days or less		Cases in care more than 30 days	
		n	%	n	%
2005	1326	352	26.6%	974	73.5%
2006	1,140	310	27.2%	830	72.8%
2007	1,196	309	25.8%	887	74.2%
2008	1,422	370	26.0%	1,052	74.0%
2009	1,407	344	24.5%	1,063	75.6%
2010	1,337	308	23.0%	1,029	77.0%
2011	1,263	331	26.2%	932	73.8%
2012	1,131	301	26.6%	830	73.4%
2013	979	345	35.2%	634	64.8%
2014	499	222	44.5%	277	55.5%

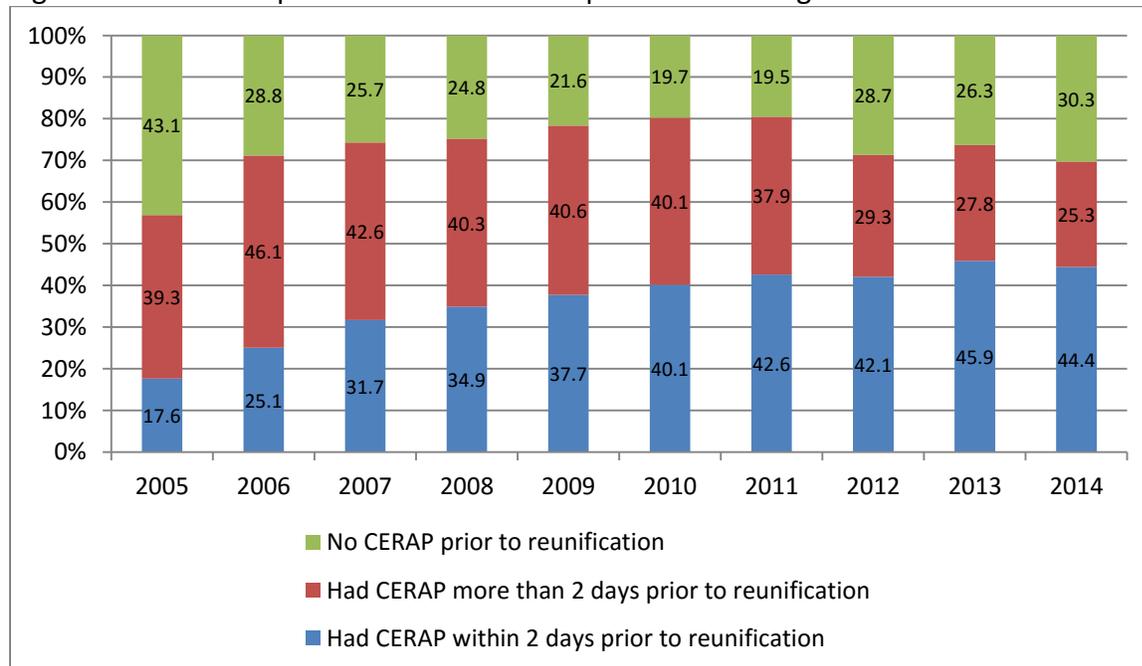
<sup>2</sup> One office sent 14 copies of the CERAP with the checklist, but they were for the wrong CERAP milestone.

The first analysis examines CERAP completion for the milestone “within 24 hours prior to returning a child home.” Selecting only those reunification cases with at least one child in care 30 days or more, Table 5 and Figure 1 show the numbers and percentages of families that had a CERAP completed within 2 days prior to the return home date, more than 2 days prior to the return home date, and those without a CERAP assessment when the child(ren) returned home.

Table 5. CERAP compliance “within 24 hours prior to returning a child home”

Entry cohort	Reunification cases in care more than 30 days	Had CERAP within 2 days prior to reunification		Had CERAP more than 2 days prior to reunification		No CERAP prior to reunification	
		Families	%	Families	%	Families	%
2005	974	171	17.6%	383	39.9%	420	43.1%
2006	830	208	25.1%	383	46.1%	239	28.8%
2007	887	281	31.7%	378	42.6%	228	25.7%
2008	1,052	367	34.9%	424	40.3%	261	24.8%
2009	1,063	401	37.7%	432	40.6%	230	21.6%
2010	1,029	413	40.1%	413	40.1%	203	19.7%
2011	932	397	42.6%	353	37.9%	182	19.5%
2012	830	349	42.1%	243	29.3%	238	28.7%
2013	634	291	45.9%	176	27.8%	167	26.3%
2014	277	123	44.4%	70	25.3%	84	30.3%

Figure 1. CERAP compliance within 24 hours prior to returning a child home



Once children in care 30 days or less were removed from the sample, CERAP completion rates for this milestone improved, compared to those reported in the FY2015 report. This is easiest to observe by comparing the last column in Table 1 with the last column in Table 5. For example, the percentage of families with children returned home in 2014 that did NOT have a CERAP completed decreased from 56.5% (old result) to 30.3% (new result). It is reasonable to conclude that the very high levels of non-compliance with CERAP procedures reported in the FY2015 report were inflated by the inclusion of some families that did not require a CERAP because their child was in care less than a month. However, even after updated the analysis, between 20-30% of families each year did not have a CERAP completed prior to their child's return home.

The second re-analysis examined CERAP completion at the milestone "within five working days after the child is returned home." Table 6 shows the results in the FY2015 report and Table 7 shows the results of the re-analysis (results of the re-analysis are also shown in Figure 2). Before controlling for length of stay, the non-compliance rates for this milestone (i.e., cases that never had a CERAP completed for this milestone) ranged between 35.5% and 52.3% over the past ten years (Table 6). After limiting the sample to families with at least one child in care for 30 days or more, the non-compliance rates decrease, ranging from 24.8% and 50.3% in the past ten years (Table 7). For example, the non-compliance rate among families with a child returned home in 2014 decreased from 41.3% (old result) to 28.9% (new result).

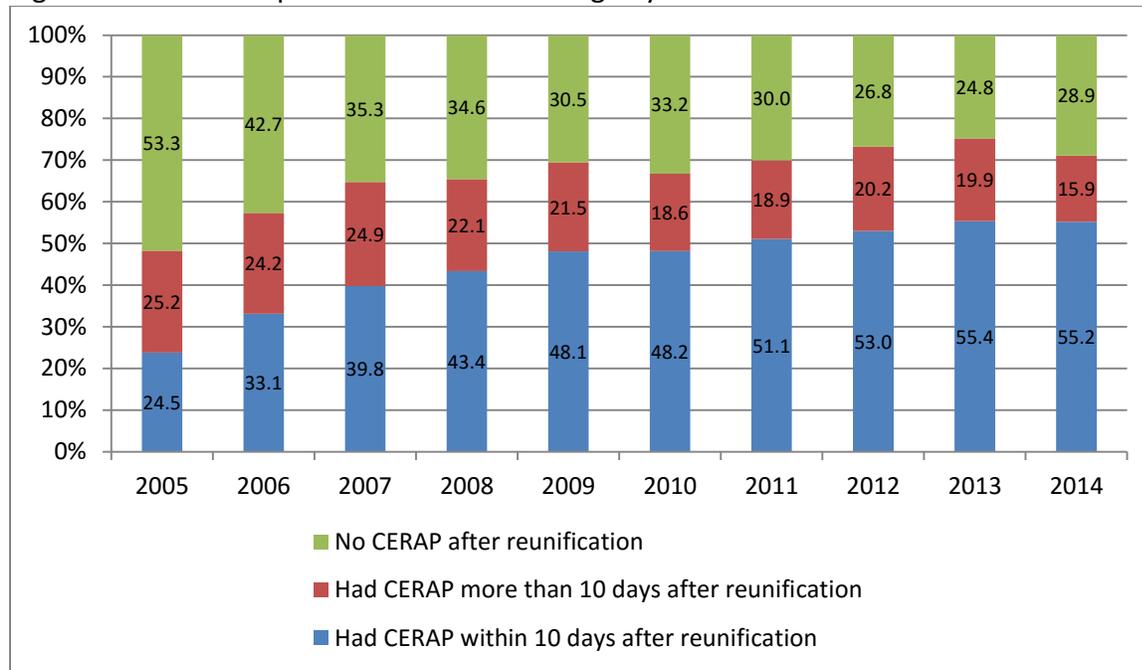
Table 6. CERAP completion “within 5 working days after a child is return home” (from FY2015 report)

Entry cohort	Reunification cases	Had CERAP within 10 days after reunification	Had CERAP more than 10 days after reunification	No CERAP after reunification
2005	1,326	287 (21.7%)	346 (26.1%)	693 (52.3%)
2006	1,140	321 (28.2%)	308 (27.0%)	511 (44.8%)
2007	1,196	382 (31.9%)	353 (29.5%)	461 (38.6%)
2008	1,422	490 (34.5%)	358 (25.2%)	574 (40.4%)
2009	1,407	556 (39.5%)	351 (25.0%)	500 (35.5%)
2010	1,337	539 (40.3%)	296 (22.1%)	502 (37.6%)
2011	1,263	502 (39.8%)	292 (23.1%)	469 (37.1%)
2012	1,131	456 (40.3%)	256 (22.6%)	419 (37.1%)
2013	979	380 (38.8%)	225 (23.0%)	374 (38.2%)
2014	499	176 (35.3%)	117 (23.5%)	206 (41.3%)

Table 7. CERAP completion “within 5 working days after a child is return home” (re-analysis)

Entry cohort	Reunification cases in care more than 30 days	Had CERAP within 10 days after reunification		Had CERAP more than 10 days after reunification		No CERAP after reunification	
		Families	%	Families	%	Families	%
2005	974	239	24.5%	245	25.2%	490	50.3%
2006	830	275	33.1%	201	24.2%	354	42.7%
2007	887	353	39.8%	221	24.9%	313	35.3%
2008	1,052	456	43.4%	232	22.1%	364	34.6%
2009	1,063	511	48.1%	228	21.5%	324	30.5%
2010	1,029	496	48.2%	191	18.6%	342	33.2%
2011	932	476	51.1%	176	18.9%	280	30.0%
2012	830	440	53.0%	168	20.2%	222	26.8%
2013	634	351	55.4%	126	19.9%	157	24.8%
2014	277	153	55.2%	44	15.9%	80	28.9%

Figure 2. CERAP completion “within 5 working days after a child is returned home”



## 2. Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the high rate of non-compliance of CERAP completion among placement cases that was reported in the FY2015 CERAP report. Specifically, the study investigated the possibility that caseworkers were completing a hard copy of the CERAP and placing it in the case file rather than completing the CERAP in SACWIS. Hard copies of the CERAP would not have been included in the analyses for the FY2015 CERAP report, which were based on SACWIS data. In order to investigate this hypothesis, one milestone was selected (within 24 hours prior to returning a child home), and staff at each of the agencies or offices assigned to the cases that did not have a CERAP were mailed surveys. The surveys listed all of the cases that did not have a CERAP in SACWIS for this milestone and asked agency staff to review each case file, determine if a hard copy of the CERAP was completed, and check the appropriate response (“Yes” or “No”). If a hard copy was located and they checked “yes,” staff were asked to return a copy of the CERAP with the survey. Overall, responses were received for 280 of the 281 cases in the sample. Only 2 of the 281 cases had a hard copy of the CERAP in the case file. Thus, we concluded that this was not a likely explanation for the high rate of CERAP non-compliance revealed in the FY2015 report.

However, when completing their surveys, several agencies noted that cases did not have a CERAP for the milestone under consideration because the children were in care less than a

month and therefore did not require one. In order to investigate the possibility that this affected the results of the FY2015 report, the compliance rates for two milestones (within 24 hours prior to returning a child home and within 5 working days after a child is returned home) were recalculated after removing all families from the sample that had a child returned home after less than a month in care. The results of the updated analyses showed lower levels of non-compliance for both milestones, suggesting that the high levels of non-compliance reported in the FY2015 report were due, in part, to incorrect sampling. However, even after correcting the error, around 30% of the children who were returned home in 2014 did not have a CERAP completed either 24 hours before or 5 days after returning home.

## **6. Recommendations**

The CERAP Advisory Committee has several areas of concern based on the finding of this study.

- Almost a third of the cases in which a child was returned home in 2014 did not have a CERAP at the milestone immediately prior to reunification.
- The non-compliance rate for CERAP completion at this milestone (that is, the percentage of cases that should have had a CERAP but did not) has shown a noteworthy increase over the past 5 years, from less than 20% in 2010 and 2011 to over 30% in 2014.
- The majority of the cases that did not have a CERAP for this milestone were assigned to a DCFS office, as opposed to private agencies, even though the majority of placement cases are assigned to private agencies. This suggests that non-compliance issues may be higher among placement cases assigned to DCFS compared to private agencies.

Based on these concerns, the Advisory Committee makes the following recommendations:

1. Completion of the CERAP at all designated milestones should be reinforced with all DCFS and private agency employees. When reinforcing this practice, it should also be reinforced that the CERAP should be completed in SACWIS rather than in hard copy. Supervisors should stress the importance of each of the designated milestones and ensure that their workers understand the timelines for completion of each of the milestones.
2. The importance of CERAP completion should be stressed in the core training as well as in any subsequent mandated trainings related to safety and risk.
3. In order to ensure that non-compliance rates do not continue to increase, the Committee would like to continue monitoring CERAP completion rates at this milestone. The Committee will explore ways in which ongoing case monitoring efforts within the Department can incorporate this CERAP monitoring.