



**Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol  
FY2017 Annual Evaluation**

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## Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol FY2017 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 and FY2016 evaluations examined CERAP completion among placement cases (i.e., families with children in out-of-home placements). According to procedures, DCFS and private agency placement caseworkers 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:

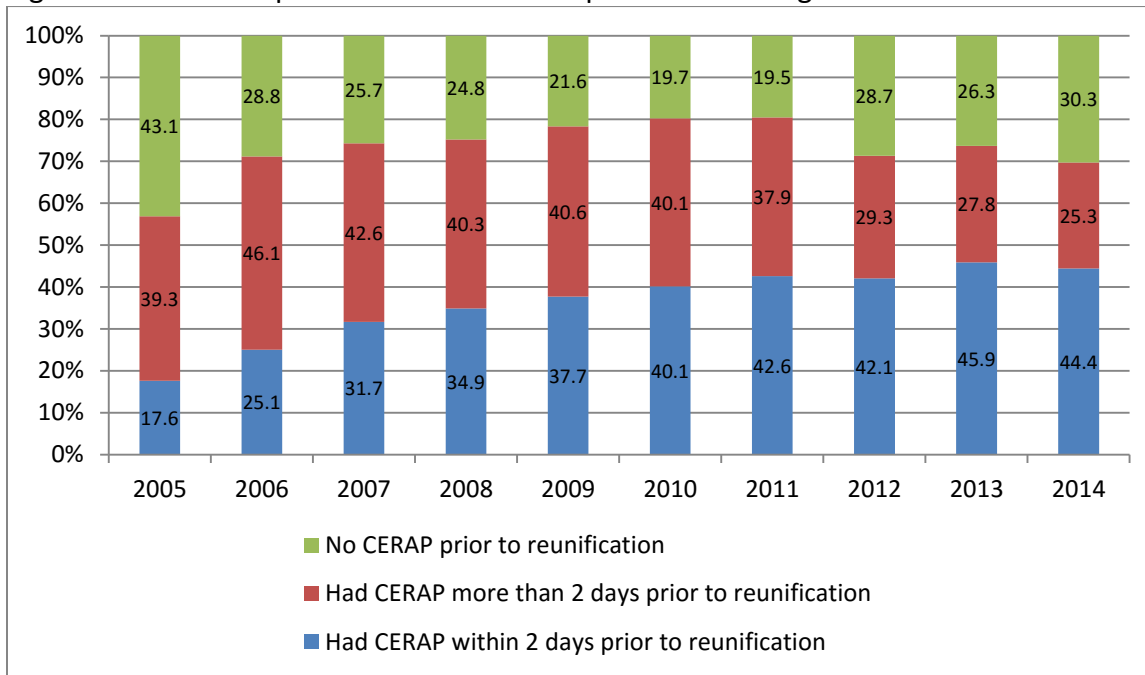
1. Within 5 working days after a worker receives a new or transferred case, when there are other children in the home of origin.
2. Every 90 calendar days from the case opening date.
3. When considering the commencement of unsupervised visits in the home of the parent or guardian.
4. Within 24 hours 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 FY2016 evaluation indicated that rates of CERAP completion at the two milestones immediately before and after reunification (within 24 hours prior to reunification and within 5 working days after a child is returned home) were lower than expected. For example, less than one half of the children who were reunified during 2014 had a CERAP safety assessment within 2 days prior to reunification and almost one third had no CERAP completed prior to reunification (see Figure 1, reproduced from the FY2016 report).<sup>1</sup>

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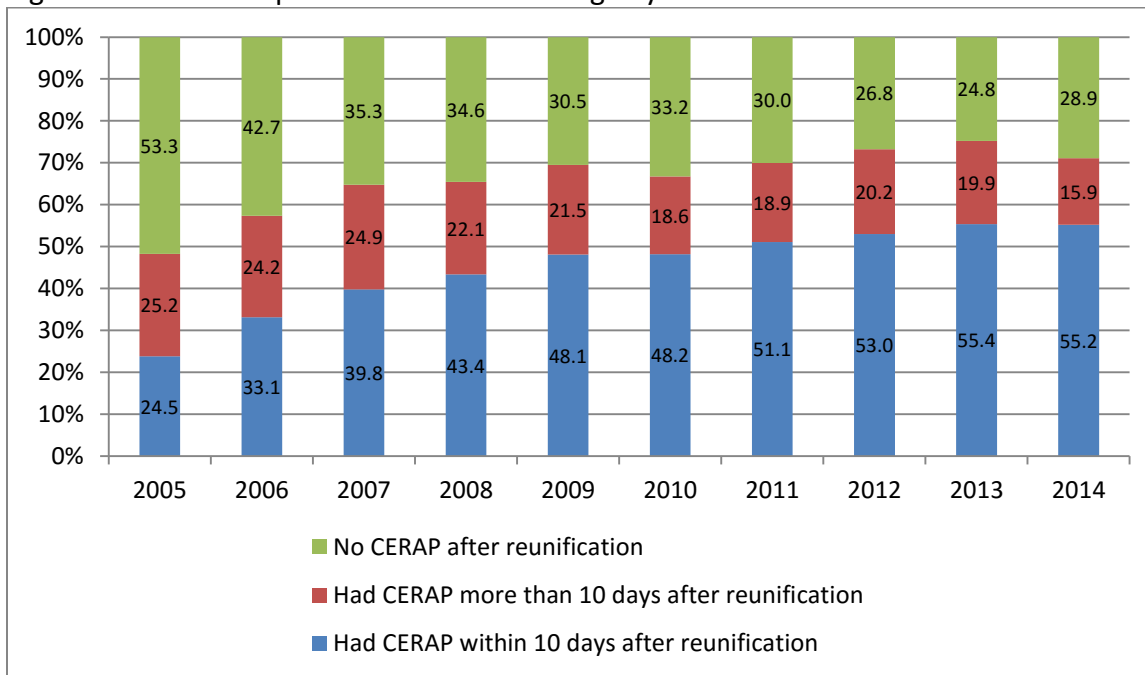
<sup>1</sup> Fuller, T.L., Nieto, M., & Chiu, Y. (2016). *Illinois Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol: FY2016 Annual Evaluation*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center.

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



Similarly, results from the FY2016 evaluation indicated that slightly more than 50% of the children who were reunified in FY2014 had a safety assessment completed within 10 days after reunification and almost one third never had an assessment completed for this milestone (see Figure 2, reproduced from the FY2016 evaluation report).

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



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. The advisory committee decided that it would be helpful to gather additional information about how the professionals involved in reunification decision-making (judges, attorneys, and placement workers) used the information contained within the CERAP to inform their recommendations and decisions about whether to return a child home from substitute care. In order to obtain this information, the CFRC designed three surveys to gather information from juvenile court judges, attorneys, and child welfare placement workers.

## **2. Methods**

Three surveys were designed – one for judges, attorneys, and placement workers. The surveys were very brief (around 10 questions) and included questions about how often CERAP information was reviewed when making recommendations or decisions about reunification, the importance of that information in making recommendations or decisions, and which information in the CERAP was most and least useful when making decisions. The surveys were reviewed by members of the CERAP Advisory Committee prior to finalization.

Once the surveys were finalized, participant recruitment emails that contained a link to the online surveys were sent to placement workers (both DCFS and POS) and juvenile court attorneys. Emails to placement workers were sent by DCFS regional administrators and private agency supervisors and emails to attorneys were sent by the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts (AOIC). As of May 4, 2017, the judge survey was being reviewed by the AOIC and had not yet been distributed to judges.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Placement Worker Survey Results**

As of May 4, 2017, 185 placement workers had completed the survey. Of those, 72% were employed by private agencies and 28% were employed by DCFS. On average, these workers had been at their current jobs for 5.8 years ( $sd=6.9$ ,  $min = 0$ ,  $max = 28$ ). The distribution of survey respondents by region is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Regional distribution of placement worker respondents**

Region	N	%
1A (Rockford sub-region)	27	14.8
1B (Peoria sub-region)	19	10.4
2A (Aurora sub-region)	32	17.5
3A (Springfield sub-region)	18	9.8
3B (Champaign sub-region)	35	19.1
4A (East St. Louis sub-region)	12	6.6
5A (Marion sub-region)	10	5.5
6A (Cook region – other)	1	0.5
6B (Cook North sub-region)	9	4.9
6C (Cook Central sub-region)	10	5.5
6D (Cook South sub-region)	10	5.5
Total	183	100

Placement workers were asked to estimate how often they submitted a CERAP safety assessment as part of their juvenile court case reports. The majority of placement workers (66%) said that they *never* submit a CERAP as part of their juvenile case report and another 20% reported that they do so for less than a quarter of the case reports that they submit. Only 3% of the workers said that they *always* submit a CERAP safety assessment as part of their case reports. When asked how often their supervisor verified that the CERAP was submitted as part of the juvenile court case record, 69% reported that their supervisor *never* verified it, 22% reported that they *sometimes* verified it, and 9% reported that they *always* verified it.

Placement workers were asked how important the information in the CERAP was when they were making a recommendation regarding returning a child home from substitute care. Of the 184 workers who answered this question, 45% said that the CERAP was *very important*, 37% said it was *somewhat important*, and 18% said it was *not at all important*.

Placement workers were asked a series of open-ended questions related to their use of the CERAP. Responses to these questions were reviewed and categorized by the research team. Responses to these open-ended questions could be included in more than one category. Categorized responses to the question “What information in the CERAP is most helpful to you?” are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. What information in the CERAP is most useful to you?**

Responses	n
The entire CERAP is useful	10
Safety threat identification and description	71
Family strengths or mitigating circumstances	7
Safety decision	17
Documentation (general)	5
Safety planning	1

Other	6
Not required or N/A	6
Nothing about it is useful	33

About half of the workers who responded felt that the safety threat identification and narrative description were the most useful information contained in the CERAP. One worker wrote: “each safety factor identified has an explanation or evidence drop down box so that the worker can list supporting facts/evidence to justify why that safety factor was marked “yes” or “no.” The supporting facts help to better understand the risks and are a form of documentation of the areas of concern that need to be addressed.”

Some placement workers, however, felt that the CERAP was not useful in their work, primarily because it contained information that was redundant with other information in the case file:

- “Honestly, CERAPs are only used for ACR (administrative case review) purposes. It is just another document to get done right before an ACR as part of requirements. We don’t use the physical documents to determine safety or appropriateness.”
- “I do not find the CERAP useful. Majority of the time we know the safety issues and we are the ones who are answering the questions. I feel that for placement it should only be used to assess when things are safe, but not have to do them every 90 days. If we do them it will be either to close the case or move toward unsupervised visitation.”
- “None of it. The safety threats are stated in the Integrated Assessment and the investigation notes. Services are court-ordered based off of the threats to the child's safety as stated in the Investigation and IA. The service plan has all of the services and parents are evaluated to see if they are being corrected. If corrected, the parent is rated satisfactory and get closer to the child being returned home because it is safe. If not, the parent is rated unsatisfactory and can proceed towards termination of rights. In the CERAP, workers have to take valuable time to state what the threats are (stated in the investigation and IA) and if the threats are corrected (evaluated in the service plan). Based on the status of the threats, we have to say if a child is safe or unsafe in that home (a conclusion the worker already comes to based off of the service plan). Therefore, I do not see any value in the CERAP.”
- “The CERAP is not useful. It is completed every 90 days when it is a return home case, however is redundant to the home-safety check and the parent-worker visits that are completed.”

A similar pattern of responses emerged when workers responded to the question “What information in the CERAP is least useful to you?” (Table 3). Although a few workers felt that each section of the CERAP was useful (n=19), a larger number of workers responded that the entire CERAP was not useful (n = 39).

**Table 3. What information in the CERAP is least useful to you?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>n</b>
The entire CERAP is useful	19
Safety threat identification and description	5
Safety threat description	2
Family strengths or mitigating circumstances	1
Safety decision	0
Safety planning	0
Other	12
Not required or N/A	18
Nothing about it is useful	39

Many of the workers listed specific reasons why they felt the CERAP was not useful:

- “Returning a child home is very nuanced and varies so greatly from case to case that it cannot be captured by a "yes" or "no" form.”
- “nothing about the CERAP is useful to me - it is repetitive of other documents (court reports, service plans, integrated assessments, CANS, home safety checklists)”
- “Once the child is removed from the home of parent. There is no longer a need for a safety assessment. Child no longer at risk of harm.”
- “CERAPs are required too frequently and I believe that they should only be used during certain points in a case such as when a case first opens, supervised visits in the home, unsupervised visits in the home, overnight visits, and before returning home.”
- “It is not useful when done on an every 90 days basis in placement. Change does not generally occur in those time frames and the other requirements would cover when CERAPs are actually pertinent in placement cases, whenever safety has changed or significant event time frames. Also, it is difficult to complete CERAP as safe and reflect that it may be only one parent that is safe. There is not really a way to delineate that only ONE parent is being assessed as safe.”
- “All of it. It is just a documentation of safety concerns, which we already document in case notes and reports”
- “It doesn't really help determine safety or risk. It seems as though it is just another piece of paper. While the risk and safety factors are helpful, I often use my supervisor to help determine what is best to do.”
- “The CERAP is not incredibly helpful as they are things we assess for consistently when we visits homes. Furthermore the court seems to have a different understanding regarding the CERAP and appear to believe it is mostly a physical assessment not all the factors involved.”

Table 4 lists worker responses to the question “What information do you wish was in the CERAP”.

**Table 4. What information do you wish was in the CERAP?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>n</b>
Clearer instructions	12
Ability to provide more information	8
Additional safety factors	8
Shorter form	2
Other	16
N/A worker unfamiliar with CERAP	9
Nothing or not sure	38

Some of the suggestions that fell into the “other” category included:

- A link that comes up to remind us when a CERAP is due.
- CANS info strength based mitigating factors.
- Home safety checklist
- I wish there were in person trainings of the CERAP to make it a more uniform rating scale; as every supervisor views rating differently.
- I would format the CERAP different as how the actual document is completed in SACWIS is not an easy read.
- It might be more helpful if the CERAP was a tab included in service plans (or some other way more directly tied to service plans) so it is more easily tied into the development of the service plan, which is always brought to permanency hearings, and seem to be relied upon more for decisions regarding return home.
- Progress rating
- Pull information from previous CERAPs that were unsafe and why.
- When previous safety threats were removed
- Who they associate with and who comes in the home on a regular basis.

When asked “what information do you believe attorneys rely on the most to support a recommendation to return home?” most placement workers responded that they thought attorneys relied on a combination of information from the caseworker’s court report and/or testimony, service completion and/or service providers’ reports of progress, the parents’ progress toward their case goals, and information related to the safety of the home (see Table 5). Several workers commented that although information related to safety is included in the court report, the CERAP itself is not included, so attorneys do not rely on it to make recommendations regarding returning a child home:

- “CERAPS are not tendered to the court and are not part of court reports. They are done per policy at certain time frames. Critical decisions such as return home are made between workers and supervisors, GALs and the court looking at safety/risk, and best interest. Not a report filled out at the required time frames.”



- “Although I do not submit a copy of the CERAP, I do submit a list of case opening concerns that comes directly from the CERAP, and then a list of current safety concerns that also come directly from the CERAP, so it is heavily relied on by the attorneys.”
- “They have never seen it [the CERAP]. They rely on the narrative that I write about the parent's cooperation in services, and service reports. These are more accurate observations of how parents are doing.”
- “Safety and stability. However these CERAP's don't get turned into court. No one sees these documents besides ACR reviewer. Caseworkers don't use these documents to determine safety.”

**Table 5. What information do you believe attorneys rely on the most to support a recommendation to return home?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>n</b>
CERAP information	3
Safety information other than CERAP	39
Caseworker court report	54
Caseworker testimony	21
Service completion/progress/service provider report	78
Case progress	20
Don't know	4

Workers were asked “what information do you believe judges rely on the most to make a decision to return home?” and their responses to this question are provided in Table 6.

**Table 6. What information do you believe judges rely on the most to make a decision to return home?**

<b>Responses</b>	<b>n</b>
CERAP information	1
Safety information other than CERAP	37
Caseworker court report	56
Caseworker testimony	21
Service completion/progress/service provider report	69
Case progress	15
Parent testimony	5
Attorney opinion/testimony	9
CASA/GAL recommendation	5
Don't know	3

### 3.2 Attorney Survey Results

As of May 4, 2017, 20 attorneys completed the survey. On average, these attorneys had been at their current jobs for 17.8 years (sd=11.4, min = 3, max = 37). The distribution of survey respondents by judicial district is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7. Judicial district of attorney respondents**

Judicial District	N	%
1	2	10
2	1	5
3	8	40
4	5	25
5	4	20
Total	20	100%

Attorneys were asked how many cases per month (on average) that they see where return home was anticipated within the next 30 days, and their responses are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8. Average number of return home cases seen per month**

Number of cases	N	%
0	3	15
1-2	12	60
3-5	2	10
6 or more	3	15
Total	20	100%

The next survey question asked attorneys what percentage of the cases that they see each month that have a CERAP assessment completed within 30 days of the return home motion date, and their responses are shown in Table 9.

**Table 9. Percentage of return home cases with a CERAP completed within 30 days of return home**

Percentage of cases with CERAP	N	%
0	8	42.1
1-25%	3	15.8
26-50%	3	15.8
51-75%	0	0
76-100%	5	26.3
Total	19	100%

Attorneys were asked how important the information in the CERAP was when they were making a recommendation regarding returning a child home from substitute care. Of the 19 attorneys who answered this question, 32% said that the CERAP was *very important*, 37% said it was *somewhat important*, and 32% said it was *not at all important*. When asked if they would recommend returning a child home if there was no CERAP assessment in the case file, 58% of the attorney respondents said yes and 42% said no.

Attorneys were asked a series of open-ended questions related to their use of the CERAP. Since the number of attorney respondents was much smaller, all responses to the open ended questions are listed below.

What information in the CERAP is most useful to you? (n=11)

- DCFS does not provide us with a copy of the CERAP
- I do not receive this
- I have never seen one
- If they are done, they never tell us about them.
- I have never seen a CERAP or at least any report labeled CERAP
- Since there is no CERAP done within 30 days of return home the answer does not compute
- The only time we are provided CERAP on a case is during the initial investigation. I do not recall ever seeing a CERAP during any other part of the case.
- They do not use these in the counties I work in.
- A list of problems that need to be addressed before completing return home
- Reasons for removal
- Safety risk factors
- Substance abuse use and treatment history

What information in the CERAP is least useful to you? (n=9)

- Repetition of information
- The rest (other than safety risk factors)
- DCFS does not provide us with a copy of the CERAP.
- I don't get that info.
- I have never seen one.
- Same as above: I do not receive this.
- See answer to question 5: The only time we are provided CERAP on a case is during the initial investigation. I do not recall ever seeing a CERAP during any other part of the case.
- Since there is no CERAP done within 30 days of return home the answer does not compute.
- N/A

What information do you wish was in the CERAP? (n=9)

- Dates of prior incidents whether resulting in a founded or unfounded report by DCFS.
- Employment status of the parties, family income, rent or own home, etc. Whether the parties are on public assistance or not.
- Information concerning risk evaluations.
- Risk of re-injury, further abuse.
- Whether the children are actually safe in the home based on objective measures and not on the falsehoods told by the parents and accepted as true by the caseworkers/investigators.
- Might be nice to get one. I am the normal GAL attorney for 3 counties.
- Less information.
- DCFS does not provide us with a copy of the CERAP.
- Since there is no CERAP done within 30 days of return home the answer does not compute.

What information do you consider to be most important when making a recommendation to return a child home from foster care? (n=10)

- DCFS report and service plan
- Have services been successfully completed
- Support and services
- Transition home with a staggered visitation schedule has been implemented and has been successful
- Parents' compliance with DCFS and assigns recommendation.
- Rehabilitation of parent
- Correction of situation that brought the child into care
- Safety, not only from abuse but also from risk of harm
- Whether the children are actually safe in the home based on objective measures and not on the falsehoods told by the parents and accepted as true by the caseworkers/investigators
- DCFS does not provide us with a copy of the CERAP. We rely on reports and testimony from the caseworkers.

Would you return a child home if there was no current CERAP assessment in the court report? If yes, under what circumstances? (n=9)

- Based upon completion of the plan.
- Detailed report from case worker reporting first hand observations of the parents.
- When the parents have completed their service plan and integrated what they learned into their lives.
- When a parent/parents have shown they are capable, prepared and ready to parent their child/children.
- If no risk.

- Under the circumstances where the Guardian Ad Litem had inspected the parents' home and found it safe and appropriate with no signs of abuse or neglect, or corporal punishment.
- Unfortunately we often do not have documents filed on a timely basis by DCFS or its contract agencies. Therefore we have to make the best decisions possible with the information available to us. This is very frustrating, and we complain, but there is always an excuse given for why the reports are not filed or not available.
- DCFS does not provide us with a copy of the CERAP. If the Court had to depend on a CERAP, the Court could never return a child home. We have to rely on evidence and court reports.
- We don't get the CERAP in our court reports.

#### **4. Discussion and Recommendations**

The Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP) was initially designed to be used throughout the life of a child welfare case to assess child safety. For children who are placed in substitute care, the CERAP is used to assess the safety in the child's return home environment and document the conditions or behaviors which continue to prevent return home. The CERAP is intended to be completed at several critical milestones in a placement case, including immediately prior to returning a child home and within 5 days after return home. The goal of the current study was to gain a better understanding of how placement workers, attorneys, and judges use the information contained within the CERAP to make recommendations and decisions about whether or not it is safe to return a child home from substitute care. Three surveys were developed to gather information from each group of individuals, and two of the surveys (the placement worker and attorney surveys) were distributed in April 2017.

The results of the surveys indicate that the CERAP is rarely included in the court reports that are shared with attorneys prior to making decisions regarding returning a child home. Over 80% of the placement workers surveyed indicated that they never or rarely included the CERAP as part of the court report, and most attorneys who responded to the survey agreed that they never or rarely see one. Instead, attorneys reported that they relied on information included in the court report, placing a lot of emphasis on completion of services when making their recommendations.

Placement workers had mixed views regarding the usefulness of the CERAP for informing decision-making about returning a child home from substitute care: 45% felt that the CERAP was *very important*, 37% felt that it was *somewhat important*, and 18% felt that it was *not at all important*. Responses to the open-ended questions revealed that many placement workers felt that the information included in the CERAP was redundant with information available in other documents they completed at reunification, which may explain why the CERAP is not completed by about a third of the workers either before or after reunification.

Based on the results of this year's CERAP evaluation, the CERAP Advisory Committee makes the following recommendations:

1. The DCFS Office of Child and Family Policy should review existing policies on court report requirements and determine what information from the CERAP, if any, is required.
2. The Advisory Committee recommends that all court reports include information from the most recent CERAP, including the date of completion, the person who completed the assessment, and the result of the safety determination (safe or unsafe).