

Overview of AFCARS Data Quality and Compliance

September 2024

Tribal child welfare programs have many things to consider when preparing to submit data for the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). It takes a lot of work to make sure all AFCARS data elements are being correctly captured in your case management system, extracted into the AFCARS submission files, and uploaded to the National Child Welfare Data Management System (NCWDMS).

However, submitting the data is only one part of the AFCARS journey. You also need to make sure that your AFCARS data is high quality. High quality data is complete, accurate, and timely. If data is not high quality, the data won't be useful or informative. ACF attempts to ensure high quality AFCARS data by checking every AFCARS submission for compliance and data quality issues. You may incur financial penalties if your AFCARS submissions are not compliant.

This resource answers some common questions about AFCARS compliance and data quality and offers tips from the federal AFCARS team to support your data quality efforts. This resource assumes some familiarity with the basics of AFCARS data collection. For further information on AFCARS, please visit the [AFCARS Technical Assistance Page](#). For more detailed information on compliance and penalties, please see [Technical Bulletin #23: Compliance and Penalties](#).

How will we know if our AFCARS files have compliance or data quality issues?

When you upload your Out-of-Home Care or Adoption and Guardianship Assistance file to NCWDMS, it will conduct the checks that will provide you with immediate feedback on any compliance and data quality issues that you can correct before officially submitting your files to the Children's Bureau. After uploading an AFCARS file to NCWDMS, you can review a report of any data errors. The compliance detail report will show whether the file is compliant or noncompliant and allows you to view all the errors down to the individual child record level.



How does ACF determine compliance?

Determining whether an AFCARS data file is compliant depends on three factors:

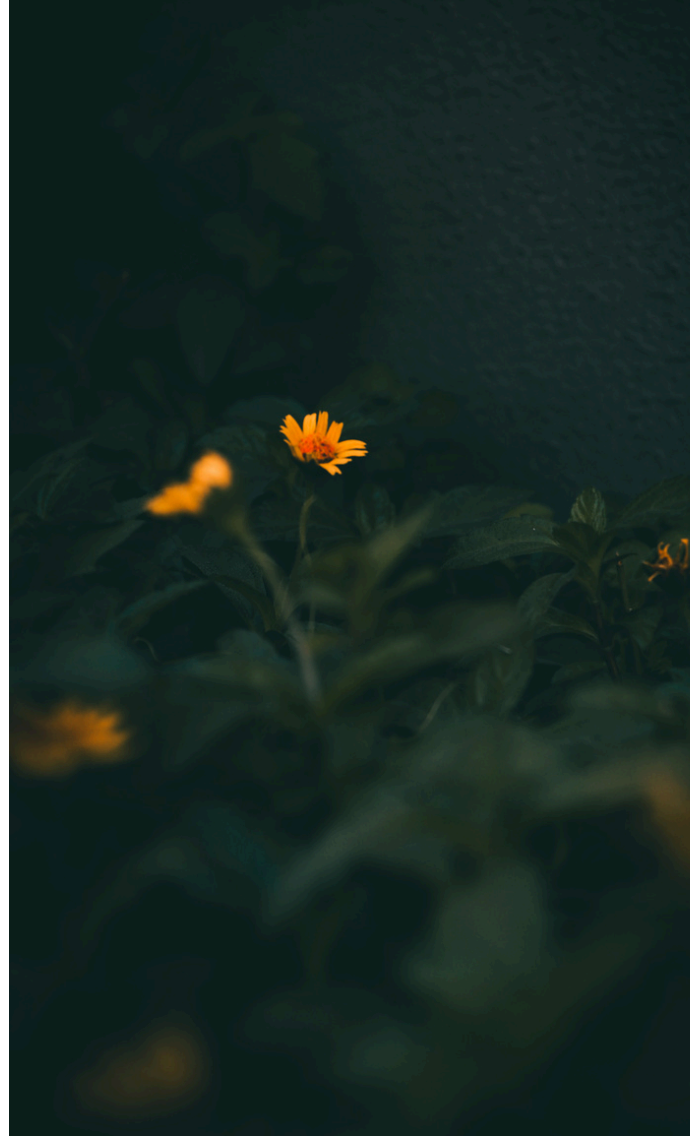
1. First, the file must be submitted on time. If you submit your AFCARS data file after the deadline, the file will never be compliant, regardless of data quality.
2. The file must also be in the correct XML format as described in [Technical Bulletin #21](#). If the format is not correct, you will not be able to upload the file to NCWDMS.
3. Finally, the data file can have no more than 10% total of missing or invalid data. This final point means it is especially important for tribes to have robust quality assurance. Because tribes often have smaller child populations, it can take only a few errors to become noncompliant.

If our file is noncompliant, can we fix it?

As long as the deadline for the current reporting period has not passed, you may go back and fix any errors and upload a new file to test. You may upload an unlimited number of files for compliance testing before officially submitting your data. If the file is compliant and you are satisfied with the level of data quality, you may officially submit the file to the Children's Bureau through NCWDMS.

Sometimes data errors take longer to fix and agencies choose to submit a noncompliant file in order to meet the deadline. In that case, you would have six months (until the deadline for the next submission period) to correct any errors. You would then upload your corrected file to NCWDMS and officially submit it before uploading the next semi-annual file.

If your file is noncompliant and it is not fixed and resubmitted, there is a risk of receiving a financial penalty. Penalties are calculated based on the amount of funds claimed during the current quarter. For the most current penalty calculations, please see [Technical Bulletin #23](#).



Tips and Lessons Learned from the AFCARS Team

The federal AFCARS team has provided technical assistance to many tribal child welfare programs in preparing and submitting AFCARS data files. Here are a few tips and lessons learned from the experiences of other tribes:

- Don't wait! The sooner you look at your data quality, the easier it will be to solve problems.
- Before your program officially implements IV-E, collecting all necessary IV-E data elements and doing data quality checks. Look at your historical data to see where you may have gaps in documentation.
- After your program is implementing IV-E, don't wait until the AFCARS submission deadline to check your data quality. Look at your data at least once a month to avoid compliance errors on time-sensitive data elements. Consider creating a report in your data system that will allow you to directly review the AFCARS data elements.
- Consistent staff training and feedback are a critical for ensuring data quality, especially when staff turnover.

Common errors often emerge in some sections of the data file. Here are some tips about what to look for to avoid data errors:

Reporting population – Make sure to include the right children in the file. Check for children who should not be included (e.g., are not in foster care) or missing children who should be included.

Financial and eligibility information – At least one funding source in elements 47-55 must be indicated.

Placements – Look for gaps in placement dates to see where data may be missing. In particular, trial home visits may get missed if there is confusion over whether they count as placements. Also check for any changes to the information about ongoing licensed placements.

Documentation of caseworker visits, periodic reviews, permanency plans – These items are critical to show compliance with title IV-E regulations, but can also be easy to miss, especially in times of staff turnover.

The federal AFCARS team can provide additional guidance and tools to support your tribal child welfare program in achieving high AFCARS data quality and avoiding financial penalties. Please contact them with questions at AFCARS@acf.hhs.gov.