

## 2020 Foster Care Redesign Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs): Level of Need (LON)



### Overview:

Since 2016, The Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) has been working to improve its foster care system. The Department's vision for Rhode Island's family-based foster care system includes a robust, diverse, and culturally appropriate array of services and foster families who can care for children and youth when they are not safe at home.

The DCYF has successfully renegotiated contracts with all its private foster care agencies. The core of renegotiation ensures all foster families will have access to the same level of services and supports, based on the needs of the child(ren) or youth in their care, so *all* foster families can be successful.

New private agency contracts began August 1, 2020.

### Level of Need:

The Level of Need (or, "LON") is an assessment tool The Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) uses for all children and youth requiring out-of-home care. The goal of the LON assessment is to clearly identify what each child's needs are, what type of homes would be a best fit for their needs, and what services might be needed for that child. The LON assessment tool is the cornerstone of the foster care system.

Questions in this FAQ are related to the LON assessment tool and how it is utilized.

### What is a Level of Need (LON) assessment?

A Level of Need (LON) is an assessment tool sometimes referred to as an "LON." The goal of this tool is to determine what level of care a child or youth needs when the following areas are assessed:

- Medical needs
- Clinical needs
- Educational needs
- Developmental needs
- Risk behaviors

The questions in the LON come from the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS), a widely used instrument that has demonstrated reliability and validity in many states. The responses to each question in the LON are scored, and each child receives a Tier Score (a number between 1 and 5). A child with the highest needs is Tier Score 5 and a child with the lowest needs is a Tier Score 1. Most children and youth who are placed with foster families score at a 1, 2 or 3.

## What is a Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment?

The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment is a multi-purpose tool developed for children's services. Versions of the CANS are currently used in all 50 states in not only child welfare, but also, mental health, juvenile justice, and early intervention applications.

The tool is used to support decision making. It helps to identify the level of care and service planning a child or youth might need.

## How was the LON tool developed?

DCYF worked closely with the developer of the CANS, John Lyons, PhD.

Additionally, the Department collaborated with stakeholders in the Rhode Island foster care system and the Consultation Center at Yale University of Medicine.

The team worked together to identify which items from the CANS would be useful in the development of the LON assessment tool. They were also instrumental in developing the algorithm used to determine a child or youth's Tier Score.

## Does an algorithm mean the LON assessment tool is a just a form a caseworker completes?

The LON tool is a structured assessment that demands critical thinking from the user. The LON is designed to capture primary sources of information provided by the child/youth's family, the referral source, treatment providers, the child/youth's school – in addition to, the observations of the caseworker and perspective of the foster family.

## Is the LON assessment tool reliable?

A "reliable tool" is meant to describe the consistency which a tool will measure something. If the tool produces the same result over-and-over again (when it is applied using the same methods under the same circumstances) the tool is considered "reliable."

The Level of Need (LON) assessment uses questions from the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment. The CANS has demonstrated both reliability and validity. With training, anyone with a bachelor's degree can learn to complete the tool reliably.

## When will the LON assessment be completed?

There are three general times when a LON assessment is completed for a child in care:

1. The first LON assessment is completed at the time of placement:
  - For non-emergency placements, the LON will be completed within 30 days prior to the placement.
  - For emergency placements, the LON will be completed within 24 hours following placement.
2. The next LON assessment will be completed at seven (7) months after initial placement.
3. Then, a LON assessment will be done every six (6) months thereafter.

A LON reassessment can be requested at any time as changes arise.

## How do I request a LON reassessment? And, how long will the process take?

There are two times a LON reassessment can be requested outside the established cadence outlined above:

1. DCYF foster and kinship families and Private Foster Care Agencies (PFCA) can request a redetermination of the LON Tier Score via their primary service worker within 30 days after the child's placement in the foster home.

- For example, if a child or youth is placed as the result of an emergency, it is sometimes impossible to understand all their needs immediately. But, by the nature of entering care, we know they are not safe at home and need to be with a foster family.

The child's DCYF caseworker will complete a LON assessment with the known and available information at the time.

A foster family can request a redetermination of the LON Tier Score within 30 days after the child's placement in their home if the belief is that the initial LON assessment does not adequately reflect the child's needs.

2. If at any time during the child or youth's placement in foster care, their needs change indicating they are not assessed at the appropriate level of care, the DCYF foster and kinship family or PFCA may request an adjustment in the LON Tier Score.

After a LON reassessment request has been received, the DCYF has three (3) business days to acknowledge receipt of the request and ten (10) days to deliver a decision. If DCYF disagrees with the suggested inaccuracies identified in the LON, a Team Meeting will be scheduled.

### Can a foster family request to attend a Team Meeting? How can foster families have their input directly considered in the LON assessment?

For DCYF families, the primary caseworker will work directly with the foster family to document updated information concerning the child's needs after the first seven (7) months in placement. Then, the worker will make updates again every six (6) months thereafter.

For PFCA families, a request to attend a Team Meeting can be made through the agency.

### Who conducts the LON assessments?

The initial LON assessment is completed by the DCYF primary caseworker using multiple sources of primary information (e.g., child/youth and family, referral source, treatment providers, school, and direct observation). Then, the LON assessment is reviewed by the DCYF primary caseworker's supervisor and Chief of Practice Standards. Finally, a clinical review is completed by a DCYF clinical social worker to ensure it is accurate.

For DCYF families, the primary caseworker will again gather information from primary sources for all LON assessments conducted following the first assessment.

For PFCA families, LON assessments completed after the initial placement will be completed through the regularly scheduled Treatment Team Meetings. During these meetings, the team will review the child's progress and functioning to reach consensus on each dimension of the tool.

### How are LON assessments valid when no one other than the caseworker has met or observed the child?

The LON is designed to capture primary sources of information provided by the child/youth's family, the referral source, treatment providers, the child/youth's school – in addition to, the observations of the caseworker and perspective of the foster family.

### How are subtleties captured in the LON assessment tool? Needs are not always as straightforward as we would like.

This is true. Children and youth are dynamic, their needs vary from one child to another and over time. The LON assessment is intended to support decision making but not replace professional judgement. Occasionally, all parties agree the Tier Score does not sufficiently reflect the level of care a child requires.

The Department or PFCA staff will work with the foster family to collect the necessary information to inform this decision.

### What Tier Score would a teenager/child with developmental delays/baby born substance exposed, etc. be?

The five levels of care (tiers) are not categorical. For example, a child with autism who is not presenting with behavioral challenges will have a lower Tier Score than another child with autism who does present with challenges. Autism is not the determining factor when identifying the level of care a baby, child or youth requires. The goal of the tool is to determine the right level of care required when *all* needs are assessed.

### How will we address LON Tier Scores with children/teens who may feel the LON is being used to judge them?

It is important to be sensitive to the youth's understanding of the tool. Be consistent in communicating the LON assessment is not meant to judge them. It is meant to identify the care they need to meet their needs.

Some youth might be familiar with other evaluations that help adults determine what they need. Many children and teens are familiar with assessments at school, for example. Communicate this is another tool adults use to make sure we are doing everything we can to help them succeed.

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For more information, please visit: <http://www.dcyf.ri.gov/be-an-anchor/>



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