Challenges & Solutions

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STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CHILD SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING IN NYS

Permanency Bill Streamlines Proceedings for Children in Foster Care

On August 23, Governor George E. Pataki signed legislation to enact comprehensive reforms in the foster care system. The legislation is commonly known as the "Permanency Bill."

According to New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Commissioner John A. Johnson, "These important reforms will give all interested parties involved—the family courts, caseworkers, advocates, and caregivers—powerful new tools to help children in foster care make their way out of the system and into permanent, stable, and loving family environments more quickly."

The permanency bill will dramatically improve and streamline the child welfare system from the beginning of the process to the end. At the beginning, the bill provides procedures to immediately review cases where a child has been removed inappropriately from his or her home, returning the child to his or her parents with appropriate services, thus avoiding unnecessary foster care placements. When foster care placement is deemed appropriate, the bill requires speedier service planning at the critical stage when a child is first placed in foster care, and then throughout the child's duration in care.

The bill also provides continuing jurisdiction and case calendaring dates that allow the court to review earlier the child's and family's progress toward accomplishing the goals set forth in their plan. It frees the courts from repeated adjournments, giving them the ability to focus on important permanency

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Making Decisions As a Family

. . . with the help of Family Meetings

"How would you handle a family meeting when the grandmother shows up unexpectedly? What if the father is late? Or the teenage daughter refuses to say a word?"

These are all situations that Family Engagement Specialists may encounter in real family meetings—and typical of situations they *did* encounter when interviewing for their positions. Asked to demonstrate how they would facilitate a meeting and handle difficult scenarios, the prospective specialists revealed their skills by interacting with regional office staff who played the roles of children, parents, relatives, caregivers, and staff.

At the June training in Albany, facilitator Frank Petrus with Cathy Kinder, William Henry, and Laura Turner, Family Engagement Specialists.

Five highly qualified and experienced Family Engagement Specialists have been hired by the Center for the Development of Human Services (CDHS) to work in conjunction with the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) in providing support and training to county departments of social services and voluntary agencies in implementing family engagement practices, including family meetings. The hiring was both the culmination of a process of creative thinking and the beginning of the strategy to expand the use of family meetings and other family-focused practices throughout New York State's child welfare system.

The family meeting activity is a major aspect of the overall effort to engage families in actively participating in planning for their children's future. According to Linda Kurtz, Director, Rochester Regional Office, and strategy coordinator, OCFS is "committed to family engagement as a central underpinning of our strength-based, family-focused practice." Family engagement includes five major applications: family meetings; visitation; locating absent fathers

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Concurrent Planning Practice
Best Practices & Barriers

The goal of the Child and Family Services Review Strategy #2, Concurrent Planning Implementation, is to articulate a clear message to all participants and stakeholders in the child welfare system about the role, values, philosophy, and practice of concurrent planning in permanency-focused child welfare practice. The intended impact—that local districts, voluntary agencies, and stakeholders, such as the Family Court, will use concurrent planning to achieve timely permanency for many children—would result in shortening the time children spend in foster care and enhancing a child's sense of emotional security and well-being.

To determine the extent to which concurrent planning was being used across the state—and to fill in the gaps where needed—it was necessary to first assess the use of the practice. Using a self-assessment survey and focus groups, research staff conducted an assessment in 10 representative local departments of social services—Broome, Chenango, Cortland, Herkimer, Lewis, Onondaga, Putnam, Rockland, Sullivan, and Tompkins.

What did the assessment find? Best practices as well as barriers were apparent throughout the local districts. Two consistent **best practices** were present for those districts that had made good progress with concurrent planning practice:

- Creation and use of an internal implementation team composed of different levels of staff (caseworkers, supervisors, and administrators) representing all child welfare program areas. The team assists in ongoing needs assessment in the district and development of local policies and procedures necessary for implementation of concurrent planning.
- Clear expectations by the district's administration to use concurrent planning, including establishing a process for deciding which cases would be concurrent planning cases and subsequent tracking of the cases' progress; and to use a more structured family engagement approach, such as family meetings.

Several **barriers** to implementing concurrent planning effectively were identified, including:

- Lack of clear policies and procedures to both guide and monitor caseworkers' and supervisors' practice, coupled with the absence of specific expectations from the district's administration to use concurrent planning.
- Struggle of caseworkers to engage families, including difficulties in identifying family strengths, developing service plans with the family's participation, and identifying and using extended family as resources. Similar issues were reported in engaging and using foster parents to support birth families.
- Time constraints associated with caseload size as barriers to family engagement. Caseworkers felt they did not have enough time to spend with families to successfully engage them in the process.
- Need for better understanding of how and when to use "full disclosure," which is informing birth parents about the purpose of foster care, the permanency options being considered, and the parents' rights and responsibilities. Caseworkers felt they needed more support from supervisors and more training in using full disclosure with members of the birth family (including children), and the alternative permanency placement resource (foster parent or relative). Difficult subjects to broach included the negative impact of foster care on children and asking parents to identify an alternative resource.

Based on the results of the assessment, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has continued efforts to revise the core training for caseworkers. In addition, a new module on Family Reunification and Permanency, with a strong concurrent planning focus, has been developed. MAPP-GPS training for foster/adoptive parents has been revised to also include this focus. In addition, OCFS has developed a supervisors' training package (DVD and Supervisor's Guide) that will support supervisors in coaching various aspects of concurrent planning practice. See the Intranet site: http://ocfs.state.nyenet/ohrd/distance learning/ccp/default.asp.

OCFS will continue to work with local districts and agencies to understand best practices and barriers regarding concurrent planning implementation and to develop supports to implement this practice statewide. For more information, contact Jack Klump, (315) 423-1200; jack.klump@dfa.state.ny.us.

Challenges & Solutions

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John A. Johnson, *Commissioner*

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Send comments or suggestions for future articles to Lee Lounsbury, NYS OCFS, 52 Washington St., Rensselaer, NY 12144; (518) 474-9406; lee.lounsbury@dfa.state.ny.us.

Tribal Strategies Update — Native American Specialist Kim Thomas and Associate Commissioner Christine Heywood began their fourth year of formal Tribal Consultation meetings with Tribal Leaders. Kim noted that continuing the " Open Door" policy of listening to Tribal concerns has worked well. In May 2005, the US Department of Health and Human Services held a Federal Tribal Consultation meeting at the New York State Capitol. St Regis Mohawk Tribe and Oneida Nation of Indians commended OCFS for its efforts during that meeting.

On the Tribal Strategies agenda for this year is the development of a DVD and training manual on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). ICWA remains a top priority identified by Tribal leaders. For more information, contact Kim Thomas, (716) 847-3123; kim.thomas@dfa.state.ny.us.

Local solutions

Keeping & Attracting Workers In Schoharie County

When 50 percent of workers in 7 out of 13 counties say that organizational changes would encourage worker retention; when 43 percent of workers who have considered leaving their jobs say they would stay if their caseload were smaller;* and when 3 out of 4 CPS workers in one county leave within a week—it is time to do something.

Thanks to a partnership between the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), local districts, the Social Work Education Consortium, and others, OCFS and local districts have gained a better understanding of the complex factors contributing to caseworker turnover and have taken steps to address them. Surveys of caseworkers and supervisors in 13 local districts, conducted by the Consortium, yielded valuable data on why workers leave and why they stay. Simply put, participants in the study cited four main reasons why they would consider leaving: pay/benefits, organizational/administrative issues, burnout, and caseload size.

Schoharie County was one of the original 13 counties experiencing high turnover of casework staff. Commissioner Paul Brady says, "The survey data was very useful but also a little hard to take as an administrator. It forced us to look at how we operate. We asked ourselves, what do we do that affects turnover?"

With assistance from Mary McCarthy from the Consortium and Hal Lawson, SUNY School of Social Welfare, the county created a self-directed work team consisting of 8-10 staff members who examine policies, procedures, and practice issues that affect staff resources. Facilitators Jessica Strolin and James Caringi helped the team focus on problems affecting recruitment and turnover, identify root causes, and design potential solutions.

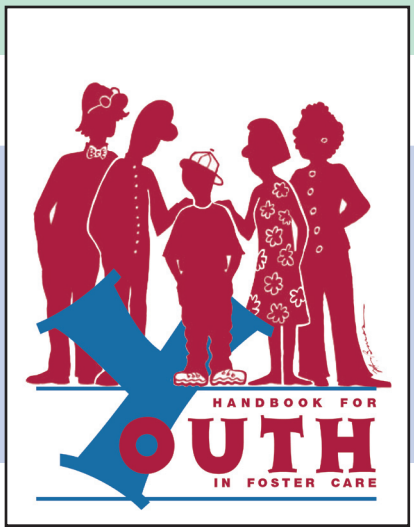
"I am astonished at the work the staff are doing," says Paul Brady. He had some "trepidation" in the beginning but has been pleasantly surprised by their willingness to deal with difficult problems and their dedication to finding workable solutions. When they make a presentation of their ideas, they state, "This is how we want to change our practice. Here's why we think it is important." They are also good at anticipating naysayers and doubters.

Tackling a range of issues, the team has made changes in the on-call system, addressed the transfer of cases between units, and designed a flow chart on preparing petitions. They also examine case practice issues such as "vicarious trauma," i.e., the trauma experienced by caseworkers when encountering difficult situations in the field.

Schoharie County had significant turnover in the years 2001-03. In 2004, there was no turnover. So far in 2005, one CPS worker left but to go back to school for her MSW. As far as recruitment goes, the caseworker exam is offered more frequently, and the district now has an adequate pool of prospective workers.

"We are on a journey to nurture a positive work environment with active participation from staff. Our challenge now is how to sustain it." Given the effectiveness of the team, the Commissioner is optimistic. For more information on Schoharie County's workforce development initiative, contact Paul Brady, (518) 295-8379; paul.brady@dfa.state.ny.us. For more information on the OCFS workforce development strategy, contact Peter Miraglia, (518) 474-9645; peter.miraglia@ dfa.state.ny.us.

** Workforce Retention Study, Executive Summary (Summer 2002), Social Work Education Consortium, University at Albany School of Social Work*



The updated *Handbook for Youth in Foster Care* is now available. The July 2005 edition includes the Youth in Progress logo and mission statement, a brand new cover, and a pull-out receipt for agencies to make sure that youth have received a copy.

Family Meetings from page 1

and their extended families; service plan reviews; and use of parent advocates.

What Are Family Meetings?

Family meetings bring families together to identify, discuss, and solve critical problems; they offer support, guidance, and resources to families. As a result, families are empowered to shape their own plans, and staff are encouraged by the use and effectiveness of positive, creative ways of working with families.

Conducting a family meeting is not easy, however. How to plan and prepare for the meeting, invite participants, facilitate the meeting, communicate with families in a group setting, provide appropriate information, listen, and come to decisions—these are all elements of family meetings that need to be learned and acquired. The Family Engagement Specialists will help counties and agencies do just that.

But even choosing which model of family meetings to use can be time-consuming and challenging. The specialists will help counties and agencies choose the model—or a hybrid—that fits their own situations. For example, some models provide private time for the family during the meeting, while others do not.

Several counties already are familiar with Family Group Conferences; the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York City has been using its own model, the Family Team Conference. Other models include Family Decision-Making, Family Unity Meeting, Family-to-Family; and Community Partnership–Family Team Conference.

How to Request Assistance

As OCFS canvassed the local districts about their needs around developing family engagement practices, including family meetings, it became clear that technical assistance and training would be necessary. Using National Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds, OCFS provided counties with the opportunity to apply for assistance in enhancing the use of family engagement practices, including family meetings.

"I am thrilled that 39 counties applied for these funds," says Linda Kurtz, "This was a tremendous response, which speaks very highly to New York State's progress in moving forward with family engagement." Ultimately, 24 counties were approved for funding.

These counties will request assistance through their regional office; a CDHS Family Engagement Specialist is assigned to each region (with Buffalo and Rochester combined). The specialist and regional office staff together will work with the county/agency to assess current practice, develop a strategy to create the practice improvement, deliver the strategy, and assess the impact.

The First Step

On June 7-8, 2005, the five Family Engagement Specialists met for the first time with OCFS staff in an orientation and training at the ACA Center for Prevention and Professional Development in Albany.

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issues that must be addressed in a timely manner.

The new law also provides for judges' discretion to order nonjudicial problem-solving alternatives, such as mediation and/or conferencing, when appropriate. Use of alternative dispute resolution procedures such as mediation is a key strategy of New York State's Child and Family Services Review Program Improvement Plan. In addition, the new law facilitates use of concurrent planning by districts for children deemed "unlikely" to return home, with court approval of alternative plans required.

The new law improves the family court process in a number of ways, as shown below.

When a child first enters the foster care system, the new law:

- Requires the courts to hold hearings immediately after the child is removed from home to determine whether the removal is appropriate and to get the child back home when it is not.
- Keeps the child's case on the court calendar and before the judge.
- Requires local social services districts to develop a permanency plan for the child as soon as possible after placement into foster care.

When a child is in the foster care system, the new law:

- Provides parents who cannot afford an attorney with representation while their child remains in foster care and also provides for the same law guardian to stay with the child's case throughout the duration of the foster care placement.
- Requires that local districts provide the courts with the information they need to determine whether the child should remain in foster care; whether appropriate services have been provided to the family; and what efforts have been made to achieve the child's permanency goal.
- Requires that the courts revisit the case every 6 months if a child remains in foster care.

When it is clear that a child cannot go home, the new law:

- Permits the local district to ask the court permission to end efforts to send a child home when (1) a child has been abused after being returned home from foster care as a result of neglect; (2) the parent(s) have refused to engage in services designed to provide a safe and stable home to the child; or (3) a parent abandons a very young infant.
- Expedites processing of appeals in child welfare cases to assure quick and final resolution of a child's case.
- Eliminates the requirement that a child remain in foster care needlessly for 12 consecutive months where the court has determined that the child has been severely or repeatedly abused, thereby allowing the child to be freed for adoption sooner.

Key provisions will go into effect on November 21 and December 21, 2005. Training of attorneys, directors of services, supervisors, and caseworkers is under way so that they will be familiar with the new procedures on a day-to-day basis.

Strategy Coordinators . . .

Who they are and how to contact them.

OCFS's Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which addresses the federal Child & Family Services Review (CFSR), contains 13 strategies to improve child safety, permanency, and well-being. The strategies — and eight specific areas under #1 — are listed here along with the OCFS coordinator for each strategy.

For general information about implementation of the CFSR PIP, contact Lee Lounsbury at (518) 474-9406; lee.lounsbury@dfa.state.ny.us.

1 Support for Strength-Based, Family-Focused Practice

- **A.** Enhancing initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584
- **B.** Family conferencing and early engagement. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- **C.** Enhancing family supports. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- **D.** Strengthening Case Planning and Service Plan Review processes. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
- **E.** Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care). Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- **F.** Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children's behavioral and mental health needs. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106
- **G.** Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being. Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726
- **H.** Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice. Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

2 Concurrent Planning Implementation
Jack Klump (315) 423-1200; Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

3 Safety and Well-Being of Children in Congregate Care
Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080; Shelley Murphy (518) 402-6546

4 Permanency Options: Mediation
Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

5 Adolescent Services and Outcomes
Linda Brown (716) 847-3145; Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

6 Development and Piloting of a Differentiated Protective Services Response to Allegations of Child Maltreatment
Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

7 Workforce Development: Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Development
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879; Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645
Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

8 Workload Management Support
William McLaughlin (518) 474-9465

9 Improving the Statewide Information Systems
Lillian Denton (518) 474-6947

10 Tribal Consultation
Christine Heywood (518) 474-9465; Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

11 Improve Relationships and Interface between the Family Court and the Child Welfare System
Gail Gordon (518) 473-8418; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

12 Improve Cross-Systems Collaboration and Increase Service Array and Access
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

13 Adoption
Lee Lounsbury (518) 474-9406; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805;
Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743

E-mail addresses for coordinators consist of the firstname.lastname@dfa.state.ny.us (as in jane.doe@dfa.state.ny.us).

Family Meetings from page 4

Frank Petrus, of the Center for the Support of Families, facilitated the sessions.

William Henry, NYC specialist, appreciated hearing that longstanding OCFS staff are willing to step out and make a change; they know that "the system needs to be altered." He looks forward to helping agencies sort out roles—who does what and how—in running a family meeting. Laura Turner, Region 4 specialist, valued most the tie-in with the framework of practice of Common CORE training: "The concepts of family engagement build on what's already being promoted and at the core of practice in New York State." She sees her role as informative and supportive—to "be present and tuned-in" to individual counties as they tailor the models to what they need.

The goal is to effectively integrate family meetings into ongoing casework practice in a locally responsive manner. For more information on family meetings, contact Linda Kurtz, (585) 238-8200; linda.kurtz@dfa.state.ny.us.

Family Engagement Specialists

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Albany Regional Office

Cathy Kinder
Buffalo/Rochester Regional Offices

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