

MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

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October 2007

What Should You Know about Our Recent Federal Review?

This spring the federal government assessed our state's child welfare system using the Child and Family Services Review, a formal assessment process that occurs every five years or so. Because it can influence the focus and direction of a state's child welfare system for years, this review is a pretty big deal.



The CFSR Process

When it conducts the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), the federal government assesses a state child welfare system's ability to achieve positive outcomes for children and families in three broad areas: safety, permanency, and well-being. It does so using a three-part process.

The first part, the statewide assessment, which is developed with local and state stakeholders, allows the state to make a candid self-evaluation of its strengths and areas needing improvement.

This is followed by an on-site review during which federal and state reviewers examine 65 case files from three counties. Reviewing these cases helps reviewers determine to what extent North Carolina is meeting federal benchmarks on more than 20 indicators. Catawba, Mecklenburg, and Nash counties were the three that participated in our 2007 on-site review. Reviewers also use quantitative statewide data and interviews with a wide range of stakeholders to help them assess a state child welfare system's performance.

The third part of the CFSR process is the Program Improvement Plan (PIP), a two-year plan to deepen system reform efforts, which we will discuss in more detail in a moment.

Positive Performance

Federal reviewers identified many strengths in our state's child welfare system, including:

- **Education.** Reviewers said North Carolina does a good job providing services to meet children's educational needs.

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MRS Meetings

Meetings will be held from 10 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

East

Oct. 25
Wilson County DSS
Wilson

Nov. 28
Hertford County DSS
Winton

Central

Oct. 17
Alamance County DSS
Burlington

Nov. 27
Cabarrus County DSS
Kannapolis

West

Oct. 31
AB Tech (Enka)
Candler

Nov. 30
AB Tech (Enka)
Candler

For details about meeting locations and directions, contact Holly McNeill 828/757-5672 holly.mcneill@ncmail.net or consult the MRS Calendar on Google at <http://www.google.com/calendar/embed?src=multipleresponsesystem%40gmail.com>

Training Dates

Shared Parenting

Oct. 31-Nov. 2
Greensboro
Contact: Elaine Highsmith
336/954-1747
(fax) 336/954-1750

Dec. 17-19
Fayetteville
Contact: Amy Campbell
910/677-0460
(fax) 910/677-0468

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Comments?

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Online

www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs

The CFSR *continued from page 1*

- **Training.** Reviewers praised our training programs for agency social workers, supervisors, and foster parents.
- **Multiple Response System and System of Care.** Reviewers were particularly impressed by our family-centered principles and use of child and family team meetings. In cases where these were consistently applied we achieved better outcomes for families and children.

Concerns

Although these findings are good, federal reviewers also identified areas where the performance of our system needs improvement. Some of the most significant concerns pertain to:

- Inadequate provision of services during in-home services
- Insufficient involvement of fathers and paternal relatives
- Delays and barriers related to termination of parental rights
- Lack of the substance abuse treatment, mental health, and domestic violence services
- Independent living services: reviewers found these services to be of very high quality, but there are not enough of them.

Program Improvement Plan

In response to the CFSR findings and in consultation with the federal government, North Carolina is developing a Program Improvement Plan to make its child welfare system even better.

The PIP gives us the opportunity to further enhance MRS and System of Care, to emphasize the importance of coaching and mentoring in the supervision of line workers, and to re-evaluate our structured decision making tools. Using the PIP, our state will also seek to:

- Enhance court collaboration to address delays
- Reduce placement moves for children in foster care
- Strengthen the child and family team meeting process
- Improve targeted recruitment of foster parents
- Redesign North Carolina's quality assurance system (i.e., the state-level CFSRs the Division conducts every two years with county DSS agencies)
- Address the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the system.

As a state, we have made great strides in practice and we have a strong framework in place. We are confident the PIP and the CFSR will prove to be useful tools as we continue to build a system that achieves the best possible outcomes for North Carolina's families and children.

To Learn More

- To read the CFSR, go to <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/stats/docs/NC%20CFSR%202007%20Final%20Report.pdf>

Blended Caseloads are Alive and Kicking in North Carolina

by Holly McNeill

In August 2007 hundreds of child welfare professionals from across the state traveled to Asheville to attend the 2007 MRS Learning Institute. What an event! I was truly amazed by the variety and depth of the sessions. It's no accident they call this a "learning institute!"



The Benefits of Blended Caseloads

One of the best workshops I attended was about **blended caseloads**, which is an agency approach that facilitates best practice by keeping one worker throughout the life of the CPS case, from assessment through in-home services.

This was a panel workshop where supervisors and line staff from Alexander, Caldwell, and Guilford counties talked about their implementation of this strategy. The panelists were very straightforward and conveyed not only the challenges involved in using this strategy, but also the way it benefits both social workers and families.

Laura, from Caldwell County, recalled being one of the first workers to move to blended caseloads and how difficult it was learning how to make them work. However, she says she now sees the benefit to families, in that the family does not have to build a new relationship with a new worker after the assessment phase ends. Peter, also from Caldwell, agrees that blended caseloads makes the transition from assessment to in-home much smoother.

Lauren and John, from Guilford County, say they've reached the conclusion, after **five years** of using blended caseloads, that this strategy empowers families to become partners in the process. Another county present at the workshop stated that since they have begun using blended caseloads, a family whose case had been closed called in to request help, which prevented a new report from being made.

Although there were certainly people who felt that blended caseloads wouldn't work, there was generally a positive feeling from both participants and the panel.

While we are thrilled that counties using blended caseloads are finding it to be positive for families, I was equally as excited to hear from folks such as Hillary, from Alexander County, that workers find they have **more time** and **less stress** since using blended caseloads. No one on the panel said that making this change in how they work was easy, but all felt it is the best way to serve families. All agree that caseload size is key to making it work, and that flexibility in assigning cases is just as important.

The bottom line? While blended caseloads are not statewide practice yet, counties of all sizes are making it work and finding it to be effective. Thanks to all of you for being willing to try a strategy that, although neither easy nor ordinary, is truly extraordinary!

Training Dates

Child Forensic Interviewing

To register contact:

Clarence Lamb
919/733-7672
(fax) 919/733-9204

Oct. 29-Nov. 2
Fayetteville

Nov. 26-30
Greensboro

Dec. 10-14
Charlotte

CPS Assessments in Child Welfare Services

Oct. 30-Nov. 2
Fayetteville
Contact: Amy Campbell
910/677-0460
(fax) 910/677-0468

Nov. 27-30
Kinston
Contact: Betty Williford
252/520-2413
(fax) 252/520-2417

Dec. 4-7
Charlotte
Contact: Bonnie English
704/395-2110
(fax) 704/395-2101

Training Dates

Step by Step: An Introduction to Child and Family Teams

Unless otherwise noted, to register contact:

Ashley Duncan
919/513-0488
(fax) 919/513-7980

Oct. 8-9

Charlotte
Contact: Donna Pearson

Oct. 11-12

Jacksonville

Nov. 6-7

Louisburg

Widening the Circle: Family-Centered Meetings and Safety Issues

To register contact:

Ashley Duncan
919/513-0488
(fax) 919/513-7980

Oct. 3-4

Jacksonville

Dec. 12-13

Raleigh

Facilitation Is the Fulcrum

Reflections on Child and Family Team Meetings

by Billy Poindexter, NC Family-Centered Meetings Project



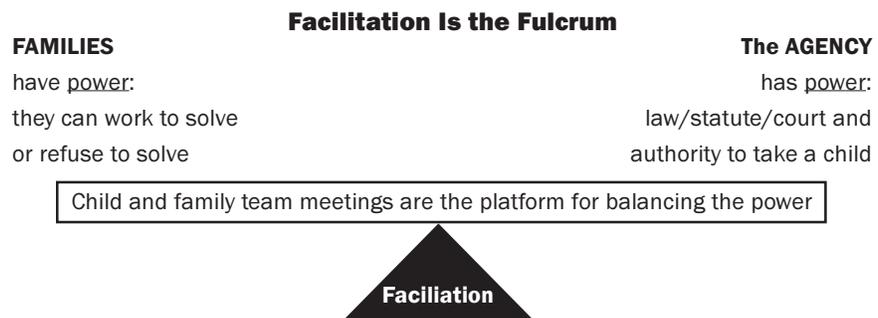
I recently held a CFT with a family. It was their fifth in four months. Issues at the first meeting included family violence, substance abuse, and improper care, resulting in failure to thrive for an infant. The extended family was nearing the “bridges burned” state and there was frustration that the parents just were not involved. At the first meeting the parents couldn’t even be in the same room due to risk of violence.

It was a long process, but at this fifth meeting all the providers involved noted either completion or positive progress. A petition that had been filed for compliance was going to be dissolved. Social Services planned to close their services by the end of the month.

What I Learned

There are a lot of lessons to glean from the experience of meeting with this family. For this article I will focus on a statement made by the husband/father and his family. They said that even though they didn’t like having to come to CFTs, this process had helped them work with each other and with the agency. They noted it took the petition/court threat to draw their attention to the seriousness of the children’s situation.

CFTs are a great platform for getting all parties together to hear and plan for a common outcome that they all value. However, a successful CFT requires balancing the forces involved (families, agencies, history, attitudes, etc.). This is where a neutral facilitator comes in. As the figure below suggests, if they do their jobs right, facilitators work from the center, acting just like a *fulcrum*—the point or support on which the whole process pivots.



Implications

How do we as facilitators manage the interplay of the MANDATED power of the agency/provider and the INHERENT power of individuals?

Demonstrate who you are. In our guidelines we say that we believe families are their own best experts on their situation; that we are neutral

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managers of the meeting process; that CFTs are not about blame, shame, or finger-pointing; that all are to be heard and respected. Demonstrate these values in the meeting process!

Acknowledge what is present. This family says it took action (a petition) by the agency for them to realize their situation was serious. So in this sense the agency “stick” was appropriate. But a good facilitator will always ask the agency to explain the “carrot,” too. This requires communication with workers PRIOR to the meeting. Remember, *if there are NO options, don't have a CFT—it isn't a family meeting.*

Balance presentation of information. Make sure information shared by the agency is fact-driven. If there are reports, findings, court orders, medical records, etc., *have copies brought* to the CFT. Ensure the family can voice and validate their statements *as legitimately theirs.*

As facilitator, my job was to allow both sides to share, not decide who was right or wrong. But I encouraged the agency to explain their responsibility to have documentation to drive their action. The family didn't like this, but they accepted it.

Don't be afraid of bottom lines. In preparation for the meeting I discussed what was negotiable and what wasn't. During preparation I often ask workers, “If the family tells you to ‘stuff it,’ what are you going to do?” If there is no legal recourse (court), how will the worker help the family to want to act? I ask, “If the family option is different than yours, isn't that OK?”

Make sure the family voice is heard and respected. During our third CFT this family stated that they had been misled by the agency. Hearing “behind” their words, I reframed their statement: “I hear you saying that you feel you can't trust the agency.” They said that was right. They were scared to say, “We're afraid of DSS power.” As facilitator, I said it for them.

If the family raises a question, desire, or fear, don't let that go. By frequently summarizing the discussion you can bring the voice of the family back without appearing to “side” with the family.

Stay consistent in your role. Over the course of five CFTs (about 10-12 hours of meetings) it is easy to form your own opinions and allow that internal thinking to seep into your facilitation style. Don't let this happen.

To help me stay neutral, I always read aloud from the portions of the guidelines about confidentiality and evaluation at every meeting. I want everyone there to have a clear expectation of the process and I want it voiced every time.

* * * * *

At the end of the meeting the family was encouraged to use the CFT format for working among themselves, schools, and in other situations. They had learned a skill while participating in a skilled resource.

As facilitator, you have to be that one consistent point. Without you, the fragile balancing and blending of power will become one-sided, which helps no one.

Training Dates

Coaching in the Kitchen: Guiding Parents through Teachable Moments

To register contact:
Donna Walters-Pearson
828/433-7187
(fax) 828/430-8762

Oct. 16-18
Marion

Dec. 11-13
Raleigh

Supervisors Strengthening Staff Performance: Managing Transfer of Learning in the Work Place

Asheville Class
Oct. 22-23
Nov. 20
Dec. 20
Contact: Lou Decker
828/670-5050
(fax) 828/670-5053