



PARTNERS  
FOR OHIO'S FAMILIES

**OFC policies and supports should be strength-based and recognize the uniqueness of each community and agency.**

**OFFICE OF FAMILIES & CHILDREN**

### **A Message from OFC Deputy Director Jennifer Justice**

As deputy director of the Office of Families and Children (OFC), I try to spend much of my time with stakeholders: visiting public and private county agencies, speaking at state-level membership association meetings, and participating in cross-representational work groups. I find that these conversations help me understand the complexities of our work and the obstacles that challenge Ohio's vulnerable families and children.

As we work to support public and private agencies within the confines of staff reductions, fiscal cutbacks and myriad regulation, I hope that I am equally able to convey the challenges faced by OFC staff. When state, county and private agency staff trust that we all share the same values, that we all act with the best intentions, and that we have different but not contradictory roles and perspectives, children and families benefit.

Of course, this isn't always easy. Partnership is a process that requires effort, interest and personal interaction. The past year's increases in staff responsibilities, reductions in travel budgets and our ever-increasing reliance on email have tended to support one-way communication.

The 'Solutions Through Empowerment and Partnership' (STEP) team, which includes a cross-section of staff representing all OFC bureaus, believes that this lack of connection has contributed to the interpersonal detachment. Others apparently agree, as we learned in the regional forums, survey results and OFC organizational assessment.

To remedy that, our new technical assistance approach supports face-to-face interaction that "seeks first to understand." The early results of this have been very positive. The obstacles have not disappeared – resources continue to present barriers – but we feel better equipped to tackle those obstacles, even within the confines of budget and staffing challenges. We may not always achieve the perfect solution. As many of our staff has proven, however – such as Susan Halter in the story below – much still can be accomplished. All it takes is a desire to work as a partner, a willingness to match the partner's style, an acceptance of the partner's expertise and need, and some creative thinking. I am excited to see where STEP's planning leads and the improvements it brings for children and families.

### **Spotlight on OFC's Guiding Principles in Action: Susan Halter**

Susan Halter, a Technical Assistance Specialist in the Cincinnati office of OFC's Bureau of Child and Adult Technical Assistance (BCATA), puts this month's guiding principle '*OFC policies and supports should be strength-based and recognize the uniqueness of each community and agency*' into daily practice.

Susan's job requires her to visit local public children services agencies to monitor their compliance with rules and procedures and give them suggestions for ways to improve. How this happens can vary, depending on the needs of the agency. Sometimes she takes a more straightforward approach. Other times, when the agencies are open to it, she lets herself be more creative.

For example, last summer Susan conducted a CPOE (Child Protection Oversight and Evaluation) review at Warren County Children's Services. At the end of the review, as a teaching tool to spotlight areas needing improvement, she designed a "CPOE Jeopardy" game. The first part of the game was a computer challenge, in which teams gathered around a computer and competed with each other to find answers to rule-related questions. The second part of the game was a PowerPoint "Jeopardy" competition, with questions flashing on the screen about different areas of concern.

"Susan encouraged each team to bring a creative method of notification," said Patricia Jacobs, Warren County Children's Services director, in a letter to OFC Deputy Director Jennifer Justice commending Susan for the idea. "After the questions were read aloud by Susan, teams rang, clanked, honked and buzzed to let us know they were prepared to answer. We had some interesting items, but the one that seemed to cut through the noise of the competition was a rubber duck! It was a riot!"

"I will have to admit, when Susan approached me with the 'Jeopardy' idea, I couldn't understand exactly how the information presented could help staff with CPOE requirements," Director Jacobs added. "In the past few years we have lost several positions and have experienced, for us, quite a bit of a turnover. I have been searching for ways to engage staff, keep folks focused, relieve stress, and create an atmosphere of teamwork while motivating them to maintain high standards.

"The 'CPOE Jeopardy' was just what we needed. As we began our QIP (Quality Improvement Plan), we have had many discussions with staff about how we can make CPOE meaningful for them. Staff members have raved about and asked for 'Jeopardy' again next year."

Susan kindly agreed to answer some questions about the 'Jeopardy' game, the CPOE process and her thoughts about how state staff can best help local agencies.

**Q. For those who don't know, what is CPOE?**

A. Child Protection Oversight and Evaluation. It is a general overview of how a public children services agency is functioning in its various child welfare areas. CPOE blends compliance and program improvement. There is a monitoring aspect to it – *Is the agency in compliance with specific rules and required procedures?*—but I prefer to focus more on the strengths aspect: *What is the agency doing well, and what can we improve upon?* The end result is a Quality Improvement Plan, a jointly developed plan for how the agency will move forward to achieve safety, permanency and well-being for children. Some agencies regard CPOE as the state's opportunity to tell an agency what it does wrong, but field staff (OFC's Bureau of Child and Adult Technical Assistance) have been working hard to develop a new approach that will be meaningful. CPOE is here to stay; we want to make it a process that is helpful, not punitive. Staff is excited to work with counties through the new CPOE. No one wants to be the bad guy; we're social workers!

**Q. "Jeopardy" still seems to be an atypical approach. What made you think of working with the agency in this way?**

A. Luck had it during one Warren County CPOE review that almost all the cases drawn for review had brand new caseworkers. The director was concerned that reconciliation – the process when State staff validates the case findings with county staff — would seem threatening to caseworkers new to the job. We worked together to develop an approach that met both of our needs. It just required some creative thinking. We used a modified version of 'Who wants to be a Millionaire?' This way, all the caseworkers were involved without being on the spot. Everyone would have a learning experience, everyone had a "lifeline" to eliminate the intimidation factor, and it was fun. The expectation was set, so when the next CPOE rolled around, the first question to me was, "What are you going to do now?"

**Q. Have you done "Jeopardy" in other counties?**

A. The piece that made this work is that it met the needs and culture of Warren County for the time that we did this. I try to be sensitive to counties' unique character and find the right fit, something special to them. For example, I suggested 'Jeopardy' to another county, and the administrator did not see staff as responding well.

**Q. What did you do?**

A. We decided to do a SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats — review for reconciliation. I think staff responded well because before that event, I was “the State Lady.” (Afterward) I became Susan.

**Q. It sounds like you see relationships as a part of your job.**

A. Oh, yes. children services agency staff should be able to call me and feel like they can ask a question without judgment or penalty. That’s my job, but if you don’t have that relationship, all kinds of other factors and fears stand in the way.

**Q. Any tips on establishing a relationship?**

A. The first thing I do is go out to an agency just to say “hey.” I want to meet staff, know the staff, understand a little of what is going on and leave some opportunity for questions they might have. I also do that with all of my title IV-E courts. The IV-E courts right now are not under a CPOE review, but affording them the opportunity for technical assistance and voluntary case reviews helps prepare them for when there is a formal review.

**Q. What’s most important to local agencies when they ask for help?**

A. Timeliness. When people call me, they need an answer now. They can’t wait six days.

**Q. What’s your social style?**

A. Expressive analytical.



**Susan Halter,  
Technical Assistance Specialist**

**New Technical Assistance Model: Pilot Teams**

The January 2012 issue of *First Friday* discussed the team model that STEP is piloting in four volunteer counties: Allen, Licking, Ross and Vinton. Since January, pilot teams representing the various areas of OFC have been formed and have had introductory on-site meetings with counties. Establishing a personal connection early in the planning was considered important, even though OFC staff is still exploring what “team” means from a practical and logistical sense.

The purpose of the first on-site meetings was to help county and state staff begin to build a better understanding of the issues that each regards as most important. Site visits varied a bit in format and local participation, but visitors agreed that the host counties did a terrific job of “rolling out the welcome mat,” as well as describing their communities and the values and factors that currently drive their practice. A portion of the day was spent

discussing the types of technical assistance that county staff would find most helpful in addressing their critical issues and priorities.

“I like to say, “None of us is as smart as all of us,” said Lisa Purdy, a team member and OFC Technical Assistance Specialist. “If child welfare answers were simple, we wouldn’t need each other for solutions. But these are very complex challenges, and working in partnership can only help advance the shared interests of both the state and counties.”

OFC’s ‘Six Principles of Partnership’ were discussed at each meeting. Dan Comer of Barium Springs, who facilitated a three-day professional development workshop about the principles for OFC staff, facilitated conversations about what the principles might look like between partners. This was an opportunity to establish common language and ground rules.

Pilot teams still are developing, and many details and decisions have yet to be determined. Regardless of how the post-pilot team model is constructed, however, OFC is committed to better understanding our stakeholders’ unique dynamics and to better appreciating our impact upon one another.

Bruce Anderson, children’s services administrator for the Licking County Department of Job and Family Services, remarked: “If ultimately our goal is to perform better, and we can to do it in the style that we talked about together, outcomes for families and children will improve.”

I want to express my sincere appreciation to Allen, Licking and Ross/Vinton county agencies and the following OFC staff for pioneering this approach, for investing the time to establish protocols and processes for team operations, and for being willing to try something new:

**Allen County – Scott Ferris, Director**

**David Thomas:** Child Protection Services Policy

**Elaine Hall:** Substitute Care Policy

**Rob Bruni:** Technical Assistance Specialist

**Michael Sopkovich:** Licensing Specialist

**Cathy Ghering:** SACWIS

**Licking County – Bruce Anderson, Administrator**

**Catherine Lawhorn:** Child Protection Services Policy

**Kristen Burgess:** Substitute Care Policy

**Lisa Purdy:** Technical Assistance Specialist

**Renee Williams:** Licensing Specialist

**Missy Cromwell:** SACWIS

**Ross/Vinton County – Helen Lehman, Administrator**

**Dorothy Striker:** Child Protection Services Policy

**Chante Slacum:** Substitute Care Policy

**Justin Abel:** Technical Assistance Specialist

**Daisy Anetor:** Licensing Specialist

**Betty Lee:** SACWIS

**March 2012 Global Emails**

The following emails were sent in March from Jennifer Justice to PCSA directors and/or private agency directors. They are organized below by mailing date and key word.

**3/13/12** – MEPA Cycle IV Introduction

**3/20/12** – IRS Adoption Credit Phone Forum

**Principle of the Month:**

**'OFC policies and supports** should be **strength-based** and recognize the uniqueness of each community and agency.'



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