



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 – December 6, 2013

I was fortunate to attend last month's Adoption Advocacy Day, hosted by the Ohio Adoption Planning Group in the Statehouse Atrium. I believe we should take every opportunity to remind ourselves (and others) that the work we do is important, and that it is about much more than the paperwork, policies, contracts or other peripheral topics that we often focus on. The day's featured speakers included Rob and Kelli Viscount, who are adopting their third child; Amanda Davis, who was adopted from foster care at age 13 and is now a social worker and trainer for the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program; and Jamole Callahan, a Franklin County foster care alumnus. All of them highlighted the reason we all work so hard: We change people's lives.

With the holidays approaching, many speakers talked about the importance of family traditions to children. In my small-town Kentucky family, we have lots of traditions, such as who brings what dish to dinner (my Aunt Kathy's cheese grits are a must!), where we sit at the table and many other quirky rituals unique to our family. I am sure that you, like me, look forward to these traditions. As silly as some are, they bring a sense of connection, predictability and ease. I wish this for each of the children and families we interact with.

Our organizations are no different. We have traditional patterns for completing tasks, viewing issues and approaching our work with others. The challenge is to avoid being mired in tradition and to evaluate whether "the way we've always done it" still is the most effective. OFC has a role in this: "Helping agencies to self-assess" is a vital piece of the Partners for Ohio's Families' five-point plan.

This edition of First Friday highlights a few of the many agencies evaluating their current practices. It's not easy, and the changes that sometimes result aren't always readily embraced. Thanks to all the staff, agencies and organizations that regularly dedicate resources and personal time to ensuring that they effectively meet the needs of their clients.

This edition of First Friday also focuses on the OFC Bureau of Automated Systems, which supports local self-assessment and decision-making by making meaningful data more accessible. The usefulness of what we can learn depends on the quality of the entered data. Our joint responsibility – at the state and local levels – is to remember that this time investment has the potential to make a difference in the lives of those we serve.

This is the 24th issue of First Friday. I hope that, over the last two years, it has become a monthly tradition that you anticipate and welcome. I look at it as a way to better connect the ongoing efforts of OFC with the valuable work our partners do each and every day on behalf of Ohio's children and families. I appreciate you taking the time to read First Friday, and I welcome your input about topics to cover or ways that First Friday could be more useful. Past issues can be found at http://jfs.ohio.gov/PFOF/OFC_First_Friday_Updates.stm.

Spotlight on OFC's Guiding Principles: The Bureau of Automated Systems

As 2013 comes to an end, the Bureau of Automated Systems would like to thank local children's services staff and leaders for their active involvement in SACWIS development and testing throughout the year. We appreciate those who take the time to help improve system functionality, data accuracy and report

availability. We expect our federal partners to complete a full SACWIS review next year, which will include visits to some public and private agencies and IV-E courts.

More importantly, we know local, state and federal agencies increasingly depend on SACWIS data to inform practice, policy and funding decisions. We look forward to opportunities for continued collaboration as we move forward with expanded home-study functionality, private agency access, IV-E court implementation, and the child support and integrated eligibility exchanges. We know these projects will be successful, thanks to the shared commitment and talent of those who ensure that our technology supports good child welfare outcomes. The following are examples of how counties use SACWIS data to improve child welfare practice.

Child Welfare and Juvenile Court Quality Improvement: Athens County pulls court information (timeliness of complaints, court hearings, case reviews) from SACWIS to identify strengths and weaknesses in the permanency planning process.

Data Accuracy and County Recurrence and Visitation Performance: Huron County routinely uses the Results Oriented Management and Business Intelligence Reporting tools to ensure SACWIS data accuracy. The tools also measure local performance issues that affect Ohio's results on federal measures such as caseworker visits with children and parents and recurrence of maltreatment.

Supervisory Management Reports: Hamilton County proactively uses data to help child welfare managers build quality assurance steps into their daily work, rather than using data measurement after the fact. The managers routinely use data to review voluntary agreements, visitation compliance, federal mandates, and child placement and custody data accuracy. They've also developed supervisory reports to ensure timely completion of family and safety assessments, case plans, and other day-to-day activities.

Data Reviews to Understand Outcomes: Champaign County has created extensive tools and processes to better understand risk factors and patterns that affect case outcomes. Staff use SACWIS data to examine cases and trends to improve overall agency performance. Recently, they've partnered with SACWIS staff to better understand child abuse and neglect screening decision patterns and duplicate data. They also routinely review data, make caseload assignments based on that data and identify performance issues that could affect child welfare outcomes. Likewise, Montgomery County routinely ensures there is no duplicate person data in SACWIS and shares a variety of placement, recurrence, long-staying youth and visitation data reports with leadership and staff to improve practice.

Pattern Identification and Efficiency Tools: Cuyahoga County uses recidivism data to better understand screening decision patterns and to ensure that intakes are not duplicated in the system. They've developed more specialized "tickler" reports that target data integrity and difficult task items to better assist staff. They also use SACWIS data to ensure case plans and investigations are completed in a timely manner.

Federal Child Welfare Demonstrations and Grants: SACWIS data support the ProtectOHIO demonstration project, which will show whether allowing participating counties to use federal Title IV-E foster care dollars more flexibly results in better outcomes for children and families. SACWIS data also has been used to evaluate the impact of Alternative Response in Ohio and to demonstrate the need for a federal grant to help prevent homelessness for youth transitioning from foster care to independent living.

We know SACWIS is a work in progress, and child welfare casework will always be challenging, but please emphasize to your staff how much we appreciate their commitment to providing meaningful data to support our mission of protecting children.

Supreme Court of Ohio Workgroups

In November 2002, then-Chief Justice Thomas J. Moyer announced the formation of the Supreme Court of Ohio's Advisory Committee on Children, Families and the Courts. The 20-member standing committee was comprised of judges, magistrates and various professionals who specialize in child and family issues. In a unique arrangement that demonstrated the court's commitment to collaboration, the committee was cochaired by Judge David Basinski (Lorain) and the executive director of a public children services agency (PCSA), Helen Jones-Kelley (Montgomery).

At the time, Moyer said: “The committee will make recommendations on how best to implement various family-law initiatives. [Members’] input will help determine how the court system can best serve children and families.”

During its 11-year run, the committee has served three chief justices and generated a range of significant changes. To name just a few: the establishment of Ohio’s standards and training for guardians ad litem, the statewide Differential Response system for handling reports of suspected child maltreatment, the use of uniform court forms, expanded access to legal counsel for youth accused of felony offenses, summits on children and aging, and recommended standards for adult guardians.

It is an accomplishment in itself that the committee has remained vibrant, productive and well-attended for so long and through several leadership changes. Steve Hanson, manager of the Supreme Court of Ohio, credited both the commitment of court leadership and the committee’s track record.

“It goes without saying that the members of the committee and its various workgroups have a lot of demands on their time and expertise, but they also are leaders who want to make a difference and are open to exploring beyond ‘how things are done.’” Hanson said. “I think the court has demonstrated its good faith in considering the committee’s guidance, and participation has shown itself to be a credible opportunity to change the system for the better.”

Current committee cochairs are Judge Deborah Alspach (Marion) and OFC Deputy Director Jennifer Justice. More than 100 members donate their time to the Advisory Committee and its various workgroups and subcommittees, which include the following:

- The ***Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect and Dependency*** aims to improve the consistency and effectiveness of Ohio’s child welfare system through collaboration with many partners. Among other things, members are developing recommendations regarding kinship care and establishing a service provider network for child victims of human trafficking. The subcommittee also has three workgroups. They have the following purposes:
 - To oversee the statewide implementation of Differential Response.
 - To promote youth engagement in court proceedings.
 - To ensure that substitute caregivers receive notice of all court hearings for children in their care, and that they are given the opportunity to voice their opinions at hearings.
- The ***Subcommittee on Adult Guardianship*** provides an interdisciplinary forum to discuss issues related to adult wards of the probate court and to make recommendations for improving services to them.
- The ***Subcommittee on Family Law Reform Implementation*** is putting into practice recommendations made in a 2006 report that sought to develop a more child-centered approach to custody and visitation proceedings. Members also are crafting proposed rules related to confidential family files.

Ohio Family Care Association Meetings

The Ohio Family Care Association (OFCA) – which serves as a statewide voice for adoptive, foster, kinship and respite families – has embarked on a wide-ranging planning effort to develop a new strategic plan. As part of this process, it has solicited feedback from many diverse partners.

In early October, OFCA brought together foster, adoptive and kinship families, parents who had been the subject of child maltreatment allegations, and staff from OFC, the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, the Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies, the Institute for Human Services, the Ohio Department of Aging, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the Ohio Primary Parent Advisory Council, the Parent Advocacy Connection, the Ohio Grandparent/Kinship Coalition, and the Ohio State Bar Association. Participants were asked to identify families’ most urgent needs, as well as ideas about how OFCA could best meet those needs.

Although the process is not yet complete, the following ideas were proposed:

- Peer support networks for adoptive, foster, kinship and respite parents, which OFCA collectively calls “resource parents.”
- Training for resource parents who need help meeting caregiver and parent needs.

- Giving resource families a stronger voice– for example, by helping them better understand their roles and rights and by allowing them to provide input during rule and policy development.
- Encouraging resource families to remain engaged with children’s biological parents and families of origin.
- Family-oriented social events.

The information-gathering stage will conclude with a final constituent meeting on Dec. 7. To add your voice to the process or to learn more about the Dec. 7 event, email office@ofcaonline.org.

What Have We Learned About Family Team Meetings?

Child welfare workers often struggle to distinguish between activities and supports that make a difference in the lives of children and families and those that sound like a good idea but have no significant impact. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and 34 Ohio counties are helping us identify some answers.

Federal Title IV-E funds for child welfare activities traditionally have been limited to placement and administrative costs for children in out-of-home settings. But since 1997, Ohio has participated in a competitively awarded waiver of some of these restrictions. The flexibility of this waiver, known as ProtectOHIO, allows decision-makers in 17 counties to alter their purchasing decisions in ways that are more favorable to families and children. Outcomes in these counties are compared to outcomes in counties without waivers, to see whether this flexibility makes a difference for families. This unique opportunity for comparison lets us experiment with service interventions to learn what strategies work best. Thanks to ProtectOHIO, counties have developed a variety of strategies.

One strategy is family team meetings (FTMs). FTMs aim to increase the likelihood that families have achievable plans leading to lasting outcomes for their children. FTMs use a trained facilitator to guide collaborative discussion among parents, relatives, substitute caregivers, PCSA staff and other supportive parties. They empower participants to jointly make decisions that strengthen families and keep children safe long-term. Facilitators help ensure that planning respects families and their cultures.

Statistics show that FTMs have positive results, especially when they follow a “high-fidelity model.” An FTM has high fidelity when three conditions are met: The initial FTM is held within 35 days of the case opening; subsequent FTMs are held at least quarterly; and the FTM participants include, at least one parent or primary caregiver, one PCSA staff person, and one other support person or advocate.

Evaluations show that FTMs reduce the length of time cases are open. This finding makes sense because FTMs give families a solid support system when dealing with difficult issues. Researchers have found that high-fidelity FTMs result in children spending less time in foster care. It is important to note that when FTMs are implemented with a lower degree of model fidelity, outcomes were not as strong. In short, greater adherence to the FTM model appears to yield better results.

We are very grateful to the county staff who have helped design ProtectOHIO’s FTM strategy and the FTM practice manual. To view the FTM practice manual, learn more about FTMs or review current evaluation outcomes, please see the ProtectOHIO Phase III Interim Evaluation Report at <http://jfs.ohio.gov/Ocf/index.stm>. Final evaluation results will be available in autumn 2015.

What Do Counties Have to Say About Family Team Meetings?

We know that positive outcomes result when FTMs are held with high fidelity to the practice model, but are there other benefits that make it a useful intervention? We asked county child welfare professionals to describe what they like about FTMs. Their responses follow.

Candace Derry (Portage): “I love the FTMs...they open the door for workers to build a whole new relationship with families.”

David Henwood (Fairfield): “The FTM strategy provides families and protective service agencies an opportunity to work together to promote the best interest of children. It gives all parties a voice at the table when plans are being made, ensuring the safety and well-being of children while emphasizing the importance of families.”

Christine Parker (Belmont): “Caseworkers see the benefits of having family team meetings, as it helps the case move along faster. By having regular meetings, it gets everyone together on the same page, because there is a plan of action that is going to be reviewed at least every 90 days with adjustments being made as necessary. It is a chance to get case participants together...to express ideas and give input.”

Tina Rutherford (Franklin): “We believe partnering with families is a critical factor to ensuring the safety, well-being and permanency of their children. We believe families are the experts of their experiences and situations. Their input is paramount to our work and planning. To have a meaningful plan to help a family successfully achieve their goals, we must actively and sincerely include them in identifying, planning and implementing needed services. We stress ‘nothing about them without them.’ Family Team Meetings are one of the most significant methods to providing families with an avenue to offer their input and be heard.”

David Boyer (Muskingum): “Family Team Meetings are an extremely essential tool that allows our agency and the entire community to serve the child’s best interests, as well as provide support to families. FTMs are timely, taking place at critical decision points during the history of a case; they are empowering, by giving a voice to the child, the family, and all stakeholders; and FTMs are certainly comprehensive, because all issues are dealt with by all parties.”

Louise Brown (Medina): “We appreciate partnering with families and service providers to achieve permanency for children. The FTMs are a great tool to assist with that effort. The social workers appreciate the meetings, as they help to keep the case ‘on track’ and moving while offering opportunity for ongoing engagement with the family. We had some initial resistance to the model, but most – if not all – of our social workers are fully committed to this strategy and like that it is a team effort on cases versus ‘being in it alone.’ ”

Tim Harless (Richland): “FTMs allow our agency to engage the family with a support system in place. This gives the family the opportunity to communicate their needs and provide solutions that will improve their family’s functioning. In addition, the collaboration with other service providers gives the family a toolbox that can be utilized when they are in need of assistance. FTMs also move a case forward and ensure that the family has received appropriate and [all] possible ongoing services prior to a case being closed.”



Representatives from OFC and ProtectOHIO counties (left to right): Cochair David Boyer (Muskingum), Jim Lacks (OFC), Patricia Harrelson (Richland), Christine Parker (Belmont), Tina Rutherford (Franklin), Cochair Louise Brown (Medina), Tim Harless (Richland) and David Henwood. (Fairfield).

A Special Thank-You

Jim Lacks has been OFC's lead for the ProtectOHIO waiver in Ohio since 2005. He is retiring on Dec. 31, and his departure will be keenly felt. ProtectOHIO has been a critical piece of OFC's work, positively affecting thousands of children and families and helping guide a range of practice improvements.

Jim has been a steady force throughout all aspects of ProtectOHIO. He has worked closely with both county and state staff and the various evaluators, including the Human Services Research Institute, Westat, and the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. His kindness, positive spirit and gentle persistence have been critical to keeping the many pieces moving forward. Thank you, Jim. We will miss you and wish you well.

November 2013 Global Emails

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

11/5/13 - Differential Response Implementation Funds

11/22/13 - Recruitment Plan, MEPA Biennial Self-Assessment, Letter of Assurance and Memorandum of Understanding

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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