
New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee

SIXTH ANNUAL REPORT

To Governor Chris Christie
and the New Jersey Legislature

Proceedings and Findings for the period of
July 1, 2011 - June 30, 2012



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NEW JERSEY TASK FORCE ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT STAFFING OVERSIGHT AND REVIEW SUBCOMMITTEE

SIXTH ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE PERIOD JULY 1, 2011 - JUNE 30, 2012

Introduction

On July 11, 2006, P.L. 2006, Chapter 47 was enabled which established the Department of Children and Families (DCF). This law amended numerous statutes in order to transfer a number of functions from the Department of Human Services to this new department, including the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect (“Task Force”). The bill also expanded the responsibilities and membership of the Task Force. Further, the law included provisions whereby the Division of Youth and Family Services Staffing and Outcome Review Panel established under N.J.S.A. 30:4C-3.1 was dissolved and its roles and functions were assumed by the Task Force through the creation of a Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee (SORS).

The charge of the SORS is to review staffing levels of the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) in order to develop recommendations regarding staffing levels and the most effective methods of recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff within the DYFS. In addition, the subcommittee was mandated to review the DYFS’s performance in the achievement of management and client outcomes and prepare a report of its findings to the Governor and the Legislature.

Subcommittee Proceedings

The Staffing Oversight and Review Subcommittee met on the following dates: September 13, 2011, November 8, 2011, January 10, 2012, March 13, 2012, and May 24, 2012. These meetings provided the SORS with the opportunity to discuss and assess items associated with their statutorily mandated work. The meeting minutes provide a record of the activities of the SORS during the past year.

Summary of Activities – 2011 to 2012

The charge of the Staffing and Oversight Review Subcommittee (SORS) is outlined in the New Jersey Task Force statute and includes the following:

- Reviewing staffing levels of the Division of Youth and Family Services;
- Developing recommendations regarding staffing levels;
- Developing recommendations around the most effective methods of recruiting, hiring, and retaining staff within the division;
- Reviewing the Division’s performance in the achievement of management and client outcomes; and
- Reporting annually the Subcommittee’s findings to the Governor and the Legislature.

SORS, which is also a subcommittee of the NJTFCAN, attended to this charge by the following actions in 2011-2012. The subcommittee received comprehensive presentations and updates from DCF executive staff around the scope, work, strategic priorities and initiatives from the following offices:

- Offices of Child and Family Health
- NJ Child Welfare Training Academy
- Office of Adolescent Services
- Office of Performance Management & Accountability
- Office of Educational Support and Programs.

SORS FOCUSES ON TRAINING CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS

As the state Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) has embarked on an ambitious reform plan aimed at better protecting children and keeping families safely together, the training of child welfare workers and supervisors has been a critical focus.

Over the past few years, DYFS' training program has been restructured and expanded, as thousands of workers were trained on the new "case practice model" – a guide to how DYFS staff should work with families to achieve the best possible results. From frontline workers to upper-level supervisors, this training is essential to improving their ability to meet the needs of New Jersey's most vulnerable children and their families.

In 2011, the SORS undertook a survey of frontline DYFS workers and their supervisors to identify areas of strength upon which DCF could continue to build, as well as target areas that require additional attention. The survey covered a range of topics, but some of the most interesting results emerged from the training portion of the survey.

Essentially, respondents said the Department of Children and Families (DCF) values and promote training. They also said, however, that they need training that is more relevant to the difficult issues they face in the field, especially with regard to engaging families. They also said that many trainers lack direct experience in the child welfare field and that this was a short-coming in making the training relate to their work experiences.

In response, SORS requested and received a presentation from Robert Ring, director of DCF's Families' Child Welfare Training Academy. Following is a summary of the information presented, as well as additional information collected by the SORS. Based on this information, the SORS makes specific recommendations for continuing improvements to child welfare training in New Jersey.

Training Requirements

New frontline caseworkers are required to complete "pre-service training." This "pre-service training" is two and a half months long of 28 classroom days and 26 field days interspersed throughout the curriculum that occurs before they begin handling cases. All workers are enrolled within two weeks of their start date. Trainees take competency exams after completing each course. Starting July 2012, DCF will also administer pre-testing to measure knowledge gained.

This pre-service training centers on the new case practice model that includes family and community engagement. This training also includes simulation exercises that provide trainees with a setting to conduct interviews with parents, medical staff and other child welfare professionals. The training addresses referral to services, preparation for and participation in court proceedings, placement of a child outside the family home, case plan development, case reviews, case management and supervision.

In addition to this pre-service training, the division requires all workers and supervisors to complete 40 hours of continuing staff training each year. These trainings cover a broad range of topics, from substance abuse and domestic violence issues to dealing with families with mental health needs. DCF is working on implementing pre- and post-testing for these trainings, as well.

Child Welfare Training Academy

These training requirements are met through DCF's Child Welfare Training Academy in partnership with three universities -- Rutgers University, Montclair State University and the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

In calendar year 2011, the training academy provided more than 1,000 class days, while the partnership provided roughly 1,100 days of training. In addition, 350 days were provided in local offices by outside trainers. These trainings were provided to all DYFS workers.

For FY 2013 the funding amount allocated to fund training through the three universities and the Training Academy has remained level.

Training Locations

The issue of training locations was another concern raised by survey respondents, with some saying locations were far from their home offices. According to DCF officials, trainings are offered at locations across the state and online training is now offered for 20 courses. In addition, mandatory trainings are offered at the local offices, including case practice model training.

Pre-service training, however, is offered only in Trenton because the same group of new workers is kept together for the entire training cycle. State officials do acknowledge that elective courses may not be available in a particular location, if workers wait too long in to begin fulfilling their 40 hour requirement.

Course Selection and Development

Currently, approximately 110 courses in the DCF training catalogue can be offered from several times a week to once a quarter depending on demand and purpose with additional trainings being developed on an ongoing basis. A committee consisting of the DYFS Deputy Director, university representatives, the Training Academy Director and invited guests meets every two weeks to discuss potential training topics. The committee also solicits input from community stakeholders; DYFS field offices, DCF's quality review office and administrative staff, the public and from DYFS staff evaluations of current trainings.

Once the committee decides on a potential course, it conducts focus groups with workers to ensure the training is relevant to their work and that it covers appropriate topics and issues.

Once topics are agreed upon, DCF contracts with a curriculum developer to write and pilot the curriculum. This process has resulted in an expansion of available courses, with seven new courses introduced in FY 2011 and 40 new courses in FY 2012.

For the mandatory 40 hours of continuing worker training, each DYFS staff member identifies his/her own training priorities through the state's annual job performance evaluation process (PES/PAR), through conferencing with supervisors and talking to his/her colleagues about the available trainings.

Evaluation

While trainees are required to complete an evaluation after each course, these evaluations differed, depending on which institution was administering the training. The academy is in the process of standardizing the evaluations and expects to have more consistent data by the fall 2012. The evaluation data that does exist, however, suggest that most participants benefit from the trainings, with pre- and post-tests showing significant gains in knowledge.

The Trainers

One of the major themes that emerged from SORS survey was the lack of child welfare experience among the trainers responsible for educating new and veteran workers. While many courses are more academic in nature and do not require frontline child welfare experience, other areas, such as family engagement, would benefit from having a trainer who has actually faced the challenges of working with families in a child protective services agency.

The training academy employs 19 trainers, nine of whom have worked for DYFS in the past. The three universities contract with 50 trainers on a per diem basis and 12 of those trainers have former DYFS experience, according to state officials.

According to Robert Ring, Director of the Training Academy, many workers have extensive experience in various child welfare fields, even if they have never worked for a protective services agency.

Supervisory Training

DCF leadership also identified a need for increased supervisory training, especially with respect to supervising child abuse investigative practices. The need for supervisory training was also raised by some SORS survey respondents, who said they would return to their office after training, eager to begin putting their new skills to use, only to encounter resistance from their supervisors to the “new way.”

To address this issue, DCF Commissioner Allison Blake is piloting new supervisory training based on the “grand rounds” model. Casework supervisors, who manage frontline supervisors, are paired with a clinician during a 2-day training in which specific cases are examined. A team “conferences” the case, identifying both strengths and areas that need improvement. The team can consist of experts in domestic violence, child health, substance abuse and mental health, among other areas.

The detailed results are shared with the individual workers involved in the case and then later in more general terms with the rest of the staff of that local office.

This approach is being piloted in five offices: Mercer North, Gloucester West, Essex Central, Bergen Central and Burlington East. In July 2012, DCF plans to expand “grand rounds training” to 10 more offices: Mercer South, Cumberland West, Bergen South, Camden North, Atlantic West, Cape May, Morris West, Union East, Burlington West and Passaic North.

In addition, DCF is working on training the 47 managers of the DYFS local offices, who have never received leadership training. The plan is to provide these managers with a “management fellows” program that begins with a self-assessment, from which each manager would develop his/her own 18-month training plan. A manager could, for example, choose a particular issue to work on, such as reducing absenteeism or improving moral. Commissioner Blake estimates that it will take two years to complete this new training.

SORS Recommendations

Based on its discussion in 2011-12, the SORS is making the following recommendations for action by DCF:

- Increase the number of trainers with direct child protective services experience and deploy them in training areas that benefit most from a trainer with this work experience, including courses on family engagement.
- Expand the “grand rounds” training more rapidly to reach more local offices around the state.

Issues for Follow-Up in 2012-2013

The subcommittee identified the following activities and issues as priorities for action next year:

- **CHILD/PARENT VISITATION** - While the reports from the court monitor show consistent improvement in many areas, engaging families in a way that enables them to successfully reunite continues to be a challenge. One of the most important aspects of family reunification is quality, consistent visitation between parents and children and siblings while children are in out-of-home placement. The monitor’s data, however, show that New Jersey’s visitation practices are not meeting this goal. As a result, SORS will delve deeper into this issue in the coming year to look more closely at ways DCF can improve both the quantity and quality of visitation among family members in the child welfare system.
- **SERVICES** - Another issue identified through SORS’ survey last year was a lack of services that are effective in meeting families’ needs and that are available at times convenient to working parents and school children. DCF is working on several initiatives to improve service quality and access. SORS will examine these efforts more closely and report on areas of progress, as well as areas that may require more attention.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY** - While DYFS is now subject to regular reviews by the court-appointed monitor, it is anticipated that, at some point, the monitor will cease its oversight in New Jersey. DCF has put in place an internal review process that includes input from outside stakeholders. It is uncertain, however, whether this process will provide a sufficient level of oversight once the court-appointed monitor is no longer conducting its six-month reviews of reforms.
- **DYFS SURVEY** – continued discussion around administering an abbreviated survey to current DYFS staff based on specific issues raised in the March 2011 survey.

- DCF PRESENTATIONS – Schedule updates and presentation from DCF staff to help provide point-in-time progress report; specifically, Service Mapping.
- EDUCATIONAL STABILITY FOR FOSTER CHILDREN - The SORS also received presentations from DCF about efforts to provide children in foster care with educational stability. In September 2010, New Jersey enacted a law that gave children in foster homes the right to remain in their home school, if that was in the child's best interest. DCF, working with schools across New Jersey, has made great progress in providing children with this critical stability that can help reduce the stress these children are already experiencing and help them to succeed in school. According to statistics provided by DCF, from September 2, 2010 to Sept. 2, 2011, 2,366 school-age children either entered placement or changed placements. Of those entering for the first time, 77 percent stayed in their school of origin. Of the children who changed placements, 71 percent stayed in the same school. School changes were more common for kids 6 to 10 years old. In April, DCF began collecting more education-related data about children in care. The SORS looks forward to reviewing that data in detail in the coming year to determine if there are other areas that require attention to improve the academic achievement for children in foster care.

The SORS will explore these issues to determine what oversight will be necessary to ensure that the improvements being achieved now are sustained for years to come to ensure the safety of our most vulnerable children.

Meeting Minutes

For more information about meeting minutes please visit the website at <http://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/commissions/njtfcán/reports.html>