

PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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This publication for child welfare professionals is produced four times a year by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the Jordan Institute for Families within the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.

Let us hear from you!

To comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, contact:

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ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES

In August 2002, our state launched a novel, multifaceted approach to working with families called the Multiple Response System, or MRS. With input from county DSS agencies, families, and other stakeholders, over the years MRS was refined and improved until it eventually was adopted as the standard for child welfare practice statewide in January 2006.

It's been a good thing—MRS has helped North Carolina improve its performance. For example, since MRS we have:

- Reduced the percentage of children who experience repeat maltreatment
- Reduced the percentage of children who are maltreated in foster care, and
- Increased the percentage of children adopted within 24 months of entering foster care (USDHHS, 2008).

MRS contributed to these and other achievements by making our child welfare system more family-centered at every level.

We should be proud. At the same time, there is still much to be done. The 2007 Child and Family Services Review made clear that child welfare agencies in North Carolina need to do a better job in many areas.

Among other things, our state's Program Improvement Plan (PIP) asks us to focus on:

- Strengthening supervision to ensure the use of family-centered practices and the implementation of policy regarding MRS and System of Care
- Making initial and continued contact with absent parents, particularly fathers
- Critically examining our Structured Decision Making Tools and completing a risk assessment validation study

This issue of *Practice Notes* describes some of things our state is doing to address these continuing challenges and to realize the full promise of family-centered practice. ♦

Being family-centered is the key to our past, current, and future success.

MRS & THE FAMILY-CENTERED APPROACH: A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

One DSS program manager from a large (Level III) agency recently told us what she thought of MRS:

What impact has MRS had on child welfare practice in my agency? Philosophically, it has meant moving to a place where we are genuinely trying to join with families in assessing what their needs are and what they think it will take to move them to a better place.

I think that being able to address issues/concerns without labeling someone as neglectful is very powerful—it helps us more quickly engage families in making change . . .

Personally, I feel that having the two tracks to address different levels of cases is a huge benefit to families and staff. As a worker, I hated that I had to address a "dirty house" case in the same manner/format as a sexual abuse or physical abuse case.

The ability to be much more family-centered is very important. I am honestly able, with our process now, to always encourage staff to visualize how they would want to be treated if DSS was knocking on their door. I think having an alternative to that "always forensic" model allows us to actually do social work from the start.

We really have moved beyond being "investigators," which sounds so police force to me, to being assessors of what the family's needs are and hooking the family up with appropriate resources.

With MRS, we are genuinely trying to join with families in assessing what their needs are and what they think it will take to move them to a better place.

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING AND RETAINING FAMILY-CENTERED STAFF

Child welfare work demands a high level of skill and often exacts an emotional toll. How can supervisors develop and retain child welfare workers who can meet the challenges and reap the rewards of family-centered practice?

COACHING

Supervisors can use coaching to enhance employee motivation, morale, performance, and retention. Family-centered, retention-oriented supervisors use coaching for growth as well as for remediation. After all, research shows that workers with higher job satisfaction want to do their best every day, want someone to encourage their development at work, and want to learn new skills (Buckingham et al., 1999).

The following sites can help supervisors assess their coaching skills:

- <http://unlockit.com/docs/performance-coaching-self-assessment.pdf>
- http://www.envisioninc.com/resources/Performance_Coaching_Worksheet.pdf

REWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Sometimes the pace of child welfare work makes it hard for agencies to adequately recognize the efforts of employees. The family-centered practice of adapting work hours and meeting times to families' schedules can make finding a common time to honor and recognize staff even harder.

Yet given the risk of burnout and the great responsibility they bear, child welfare staff are especially in need of validation. Following are some ways supervisors and their agencies can celebrate the efforts of child welfare staff.

Recognition should take place through small tokens (e.g., an e-mail or note recognizing hard work or an especially hard day) as well as larger gestures (e.g., a certificate at a public event). Rewards don't need to be monetary, but some types of rewards are more meaningful than others. Most people especially value rewards that are:

- Individualized—recognition for a personal contribution they made.



Helping Staff Share Power

Some child welfare staff agree with family-centered principles, but have trouble applying them. As one supervisor put it, "Workers are moving toward sharing power, but they were so used to having the answers." Supervisors can encourage family-centered practice by taking a "not knowing" stance and asking questions like those below.

- From someone they hold in high esteem—this will usually be someone familiar with their work on a day-to-day basis.
- Timely—the reward will be a better reinforcer if it comes close to the time of the good performance.
- Contingent—the reward should be related to a specific behavior or effort, rather than a generic thoughtful gesture. *cont. p. 3*

QUESTIONS FOR TAKING FAMILY-CENTERED PRACTICE TO THE NEXT LEVEL

One of the best ways supervisors can encourage social workers to respect, listen to, and involve family members is by exhibiting these attitudes in their discussions with workers about specific families. The following questions, which employ elements of scaling and strengths-based techniques, ask the supervisor to adopt a "not knowing" stance that will encourage workers to come up with their own family-centered solutions (Alderson & Jarvis, 2003).



- How can we reunify the family and build a safety net for the child?
- If you were _____ (birth father, foster parents, etc.), what would you want to see happen?
- Describe a resolution in which everyone wins.
- What has happened so far on this case?
- What information are we missing?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how ready is mom to parent?
- What are the birth mother's strengths? How can we build on her strengths?
- What would it take for dad to show he's overcome his substance abuse problem?
- How willing are the birth family and the foster parents to participate in a Child and Family Team meeting? What would such a meeting look like?
- How can I help you bring together the team?
- How can we help the child feel more connected to both the birth family and the foster parents?
- How do you (as worker) see your role in helping this plan come together?
- How do you think others (the grandmother, the mother, other agencies, the court) see their roles?

Source: Alderson, J. & Jarvis, S. (2003). *What's good for families is good for workers*. Raleigh, NC: NC Division of Social Services.

from p. 2

- Feasible—for example, it’s not a reward to offer time off if the person’s workload won’t allow her to take time off. Better to offer a non-monetary recognition than a reward the person can’t use (JIF, 2007).

PEER MENTORING

Supervisors aren’t expected to have all the answers. Even if they do, supervisors can still benefit from letting others serve as “expert consultants.” Peer supervision and mentoring can play an important role in developing workers’ skills and in modeling the principle that “partners share power” (CPPC, 2003).

To get peer mentoring started, supervisors can ask staff to present challenging cases in unit meetings or invite workers with special expertise to offer consultation to their colleagues. Such mentoring is probably already taking place unofficially—structuring it into your unit’s schedule can itself empower and recognize staff contributions.

Peer mentoring sessions can take place in groups and one-on-one, but they should focus on strengths-based successes and problem-solving—they should not just be a place to vent. While it is a challenge for supervisors and staff to fit such sessions into their schedules, peer mentoring is worth it for the way it increases staff members’ skills, knowledge, and self-esteem. ♦

NEW COURSE ON PREVENTING TURNOVER

The Division of Social Services is excited to announce *Staying Power! A Supervisor’s Guide to Retaining Child Welfare Staff*. This new three-day course for supervisors and managers explores why employees stay and why they leave, and teaches supervisory tools and practices that promote retention.

Staying Power! was originally developed as part of a federally-funded child welfare recruitment and retention project at UNC-Chapel Hill that partnered with 34 North Carolina county DSS agencies. Because of the success of this curriculum, it is now available to all North Carolina counties. For class times or to register, go to <www.ncswLearn.org>.

Staying Power!



A Supervisor’s Guide to Retaining Child Welfare Staff

A STRATEGIC PLAN TO SUPPORT NORTH CAROLINA’S SUPERVISORS

North Carolina’s Supervision Best Practice Work Group came out of our state’s 2007 federal Child and Family Services Review and the subsequent Program Improvement Plan. Strengthening supervision was recognized as a critical strategy for improving practice and, by extension, outcomes for children and families. The Work Group is busy on a number of fronts:

Training and Professional Development

- Supervisors and administrators increasingly use tools on www.ncswlearn.org to track and strategically plan training for their staff.
- Children’s Program Representatives (CPRs) regularly review staff training during consultations with counties. Also, they put a priority on quarterly supervisor meetings, and are asking counties how the Division can help develop staff at all levels.
- Over time, North Carolina’s Child Welfare Collaborative will increase the pool of bachelors and masters level social workers available to county DSS agencies. For a list of participating universities, go to <<http://sww.unc.edu/cwec/univs.htm>>.

Policy

- As a result of the Work Group’s efforts, specific days have been designated for the Division to transmit new or updated policy – the 15th and the last work day of each month.
- Policy viewed on the web shows recent changes in red, while policies in print show recent changes underlined. Each policy change includes a rationale for the change.
- There’s now a listserv to help county staff stay abreast of communications and changes related to child welfare. Visit <<http://lists.ncmail.net/mailman/listinfo/cwlistserv>>.

Sub-Work Groups

There are three sub-groups working to improve supervisory practice. One group is developing a *Supervisor Academy* for professional development tailored to the needs of supervisors. A *Time and Activity* group is gathering data on how supervisors currently spend their time and how they can maximize their time management to improve outcomes for families and worker retention. A third group is conducting an assessment of *Technology Needs* of supervisors across the state.

Best Practices Pilot

As efforts on these fronts continue, the Work Group is also conducting a pilot of Supervision Best Practices in 10 county DSS agencies. The goal is to implement key recommended supervisory practices and to gather feedback on how to refine and adapt these practices in county DSS settings. For more information on the work group, contact the pilot group leaders Kristy Perry (Person Co. DSS, Kristy.Perry@ncmail.net), Bridget Happney (Mecklenburg Co. DSS, bridget.happney@mecklenburgcountync.gov), or Candice Britt (NC Division of Social Services, 919/334-1138, candice.britt@ncmail.net).

BRINGING ABSENT RELATIVES INTO THE PICTURE

Adapted from ChildFocus (Oct. 2007). Making "Relative Search" Happen: A Guide to Finding and Involving Relatives At Every Stage of the Child Welfare Process. and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington and EMQ Children & Family Services. (2008). Family Search & Engagement: A Comprehensive Practice Guide.

Child welfare agencies in North Carolina and other parts of the country are moving in the right direction. Traditionally, agencies only began intensive relative searches for children who had been in care for a long time, and who had no remaining viable long-term placement options. Now we often diligently search for relatives **earlier** in a child's involvement with child welfare. However, when we find them, we don't always know what to do with them. Here are a few suggestions for engaging them in a more active role.

Expand your thinking about how absent parents and extended family can play an important part in a child's life. If we think anything less than permanent custody is a failure, then we will miss many opportunities to build a life-long support network for the child. We also miss potential resources that might prevent placement or hasten reunification. Can a father participate in planning at a Child and Family Team meeting? Can a grandparent provide respite child care to prevent placement? Can a former neighbor offer a home base for a youth aging out of foster care? Broadening the questions we ask and options we consider helps successful plans take shape.

Be patient. Don't give up if someone initially seems reluctant. Some families may have a history of negative interactions with child welfare, or they may have a general distrust of government agencies. Offering small but tangible ways to connect with a child can sometimes lead to more involved commitments: show pictures or letters from the child, ask for their input in a Child and Family Team meeting, or review ways they have helped the child or parent in the past.

Persevere. Even if an absent parent or family member hangs up after a few sentences, send them a note, thanking them for their time and acknowledging the surprise and difficulty they may have experienced in being contacted. Provide your contact information and invite the family member to call back if they might be able to share any information in order to help the child.

Dig deeper. We open up options if we look beyond traditional definitions of family. Digging deeper, beyond the first known relative, can help uncover a greater network of people who may step forward on behalf of a child. Extended family members in particular can be the most effective way to increase permanency and to stabilize youth stays in care, especially for older youth, minorities, and sibling groups.

NAVIGATING FAMILY DYNAMICS

Don't give up. Sometimes the custodial parent may be

Taking the time to build trust can help family members consider the role they might play for the child.

reluctant to identify absent parents, relatives, or other adults who care about their children. It can help to give parents time, and to gently remind them about the benefits for their child of permanent family connections, and the harm for children who don't have them. Having a staff member who is designated to do

family searches can help reduce resistance, as parents may view this person as more neutral than their own case-worker. Parents may become more open as they see that other family members are concerned and willing to participate in services. When all else fails, you may need to partner with the courts and attorneys to obtain court orders requiring that parents identify kin.

Ask the children. Most children will happily tell you who is important to them and who has helped them in the past. Throughout the life of a case, ask children about their supports, and be sure to include as much contact information as possible for the case record.

Focus on the child's needs. Continually bring attention back to what is best for the child, and to what specifically is needed to make that happen. This allows professionals to maintain a neutral stance and focus on joint problem-solving.

THE ROLE OF CULTURE

Respect and explore the role of family culture while engaging family members. Give the family the opportunity to educate and inform you about themselves. Talk with the family about their history and background, and their thoughts and feelings about foster care, adoption, and child welfare agencies. Remember that culture refers to much more than race, and that religion, region, extended family, and personal experiences can influence our beliefs about family. As always, it's important to use translators when a family cannot communicate easily in English, and to educate yourself on some of the common cultural groups in your county.

CONCLUSION

As North Carolina seeks to build on the family-centered foundation provided by MRS, child welfare professionals face new challenges. Most people would agree that enlarging a child's network of family support is a worthwhile goal. Yet figuring out how to find and partner with new support people can be complicated. With an open-minded approach, patience, and support from supervisors, practitioners can begin to add family search and engagement skills to their toolbox for improving outcomes for children. ♦

WHAT CAN CHILD WELFARE WORKERS DO TO INVOLVE FATHERS?

This article is adapted from an article that first appeared in *Best Practice/Next Practice* (Summer 2002), the newsletter of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice <www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcp>.

When it comes to including and serving the fathers of the children involved with child welfare, many child welfare agencies struggle. Though they think of themselves as family-centered, in truth their practice is really more “mother-and-child-centered.”

If you agree that the child welfare system falls short in this area, the next obvious question is: how can I and my agency improve our involvement of fathers? We hope the following suggestions will help you formulate an answer that ensures your practice truly includes all family members.

Engagement. Encourage mothers to identify fathers early in the case. When necessary, identify and locate fathers by interviewing relatives and family friends, accessing TANF and child support information, or using the courts.

Engage fathers in ways relevant to their situation and sensitive to their culture. Make every effort to gain the sup-

port of mothers and reduce any barriers the mother has established that prevents a father’s engagement, using mediation and negotiation if necessary.

Establish trust and honesty with the father by clearly explaining the current situation, his role, your role, agency expectations, and all relevant policies. Continually state your willingness and desire to establish and/or maintain the father-child relationship.

Use Child and Family Team meetings to bring all adults committed to the child together. Elements required for successful CFTs include strong community partnerships, appropriate meeting sites, and effective strategies for getting the right people to the table. CFTs should use an authentic family-centered decision making process in which professionals sincerely listen to the family’s ideas and patiently support them as they develop **their** plan rather than trying to convince them of the agency’s plan. Use of private

Suggestions for making sure your practice truly includes all family members.



Photo Illustration

family time is a great tool for this.

Assessment. Comprehensive assessments include all family members; therefore, fathers and paternal family members must be an active part in the ongoing assessment process. Initial assessments should include the strengths, needs, resources/assets, and supports of the father and the paternal family, as well as services and supports needed by the father. Explore the father’s and the paternal family’s willingness and ability to contribute to the well-being of the child. The assessment process should be ongoing, with information continually gathered and regularly updated. *cont. p. 6*



NORTH CAROLINA’S FAMILY FINDING PROJECT

Family Finding, developed by internationally known youth permanency expert Kevin Campbell, is a set of strategies being used throughout the U.S. to find lifelong supports for young people in foster care. Family Finding contends that, given the chance and with the passage of time—which includes personal maturation along with changes in family situations—appropriate biological family connections can be made or reestablished for youth in care. Family Finding acknowledges the family separation and loss that occurs when youth enter and remain in foster care.

Family Finding’s approach to connecting and reconnecting youth with their families includes an extensive search and discovery process to identify and engage family members. Internet-based search tools, such as US Search, are used to identify and locate family members we may not know. Strong efforts are made to connect/reconnect youth with family members or relative resources who live as close as next door or across the country.

The family leads the planning process to ensure they remain engaged and can potentially provide lifelong support for the young person. The support offered by newly found family members may include inviting the child to spend the holidays with them or, in some cases, providing a permanent home in which the child can grow and flourish (CFFYC, 2008).

In 2008 the Division of Social Services received a grant from The Duke Endowment to pilot Family Finding in six North Carolina counties: Buncombe, Catawba, Gaston, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, and Wake. Each site anticipates serving about 25-30 youths per year.

The grant includes training with Kevin Campbell, rigorous national evaluation by the Washington DC-based Child Trends, on-site coordinators for each county DSS, and a state consultant. The Division hopes the pilot will last between 2-5 years, depending on continued funding.

By November 2008 participating counties had hired coordinators to do Family Finding work, determined the youth/child eligibility and referral criteria, and begun practicing Family Finding techniques on sample cases. The pilot was fully implemented in January 2009. Kevin Campbell will continue to provide training for participating North Carolina counties throughout 2009. The goal of this project is to connect/reconnect youth with family members and to impact permanency and well-being outcomes for youth.

For more information about this project, contact Tamika Williams (Tamika.Williams@ncmail.net), Permanency Coordinator for the Division.

Given the chance and the passage of time, appropriate family connections can be made or reestablished for youth in care.

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Safety planning. Fathers and the paternal family should be actively involved in the development of a safety plan based on information and support of everyone serving the child and family. Fathers and paternal family members should be considered as informal service providers in the safety plan—for example, as kinship placement providers or to supervise visits.

Out-of-home placement. Before placing a child in an unrelated home, fathers' and paternal family members' homes should be assessed for placement. Include fathers in the discussion and in determining the best placement for the child. Foster parents, group home staff, residential treatment staff, hospital staff, and adoptive parents should be encouraged and supported to build and maintain partnerships with birth or adoptive fathers. Provide supports to establish and maintain father-child relations through phone and mail contact, visitation, and case planning.

Implementation of the service plan. Fathers should be actively involved in setting goals and encouraged to express their concerns or questions about services. Create and provide services to meet the individualized needs of the father and/or paternal family. Services must be accessible to working fathers. If they are used, father support groups should address issues such as empowering men to take an active role in parenting, emotional issues, child development, and developing key skills such as active listening, anger management, positive discipline, and basic parenting techniques.

Permanency planning. Fathers should be involved in all reviews of the service plan and in the development of the child's permanency plan. Workers must ensure that fathers understand the permanency plan and emphasize the importance of the fa-

ther's role in the development and implementation of the plan. Fathers must not only receive court notices regarding permanency hearing, but workers should contact them to discuss the hearing and the agency's recommendations to the court. During this discussion workers should encourage fathers to attend all hearings.

Re-evaluation of the service plan. Workers should include fathers in the sharing of information between other family members, children, support teams, and service providers to ensure that intervention strategies can be modified as needed to support positive outcomes. Fathers can help monitor service provision and provide feedback so progress and modifications to services are made. ♦

NC FATHERHOOD RESOURCES

- **National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning.** Their page on fatherhood contains many excellent resources on this topic and is a great place to start. <www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/fatherhood.html>
- **County DSS-based Programs.** Durham, Edgecombe, and other counties offer fatherhood programs through their departments of social services.
- **North Carolina Fatherhood Development Advisory Council Resource Directory** <www.ncfatherhood.zoomshare.com/files/Resource_Directory_06.pdf>
- **Triangle Men's Center** <www.trianglemenscenter.org>
- **Other Resources** can be found in the online version of this issue: www.practicenotes.org

ASSESSING FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN YOUR COUNTY

After reading about engaging fathers, a child welfare program manager in a smaller (Level I) agency in Eastern North Carolina was moved to take a closer look at her county's performance with fathers. She consulted her agency's information and found that there were 53 children in her agency's custody at that time. Of these children:

- 11 had fathers involved (to some extent) with the child and the agency
- 24 had fathers the agency classified as "father unknown," "unable to locate," or "never involved"
- 7 had fathers who were offered services and had been involved with the agency to some extent but now were no longer involved
- 4 had fathers who had relinquished custody of the child or whose parental rights had been terminated
- 5 had incarcerated fathers
- 1 child's father was deceased (paternal relatives not involved)
- 1 was placed with paternal relatives
- None of the children were placed with their fathers

Seeing these numbers encouraged this program manager to talk with her supervisors and case managers to see what the agency had done to engage the 24 fathers who were unknown/uninvolved.

Using data and asking questions in this way can lead to insights and positive practice changes, not to mention improved outcomes for fathers and their children. We hope you will consult your agency's data to get a clear picture of how your agency is performing now and how it might improve its ability to involve fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare.

ASSESSING RISK ASSESSMENT IN NORTH CAROLINA

One of the seven fundamental strategies of MRS is the re-design of in-home services and case management. Under this strategy, the families with the greatest needs receive the most intensive services, while those with fewer needs receive less intense services. Ideally, families at lower risk can still receive voluntary, preventive support services, while greater resources are available for families where children are at greater risk for maltreatment.

Of course, for this strategy to be realized, social workers have to be able to accurately assess the risks, strengths, and needs of each family that comes into contact with child protective services. In 2002, North Carolina adopted the Structured Decision Making (SDM®) tools statewide in the hopes of achieving accurate, consistent assessments.

Currently, the Division of Social Services is working with experts from the Children's Resource Center, a nonprofit research organization that developed the Structured Decision Making Tools, to evaluate how well SDM tools measure risk factors for families in North Carolina, and how our assessments can be improved.

A VALIDATION STUDY

To do this, the CRC conducted a validation study of one of the SDM tools, the Risk Assessment (the DSS-5230). What does this mean? Researchers attempted to determine whether the risk level families were assigned using the Risk Assessment (high, moderate, or low risk) actually correlated with how likely those families' children were to experience another episode of maltreatment.

In other words, the CRC and the Division asked: are families rated as "high risk" actually at the highest risk for experiencing repeat maltreatment? Likewise, are those families rated "low risk" during their assessment actually those least likely to experience repeat maltreatment?

To find out, CRC selected a random sample of approximately 2,000 family case files from 23 counties across the state. They reviewed all of the SDM tools completed for the selected families, then looked to see whether the families had any repeat episodes of maltreatment.

The SDM tools were originally developed in Michigan by looking at risk factors from a sample of families substantiated for maltreatment in the early 1990s. North Carolina's new validation study will help ensure that we base our tools on current data from a wider range of families in our own state, where demographics and child welfare practices are different than they are in Michigan.

This validation study demonstrates the Division's continuing commitment to family-centered MRS strategies and to

supporting high quality, evidence-based child welfare practice. It will also provide some important information for continued improvement. For example, the validation study should help us identify which specific risk factors put children in our state at the greatest risk for maltreatment. At the same time, it can help us identify which strengths and needs either increase or mitigate children's risk for maltreatment. This can help us more effectively target prevention and intervention efforts.

UPCOMING CHANGES

The CRC has completed its validation study and, based on what it learned, recommended changes to North Carolina's Risk Assessment (DSS-5230) and Risk Reassessment (DSS-5226) tools. These recommendations will soon be reviewed by the project's advisory group, the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services' Children's Services Committee, and the Division. If these changes are approved, revised Risk Assessment and Risk Reassessment tools should be available later in 2009.

As agencies seek to refine their family-centered child welfare practices, workers need practical, reliable tools to help make critical decisions about the service needs of families. This project's evidence-based information should serve as an important supplement to the family-centered assessment skills of workers in the field. ♦



This study will help to ensure workers have practical, reliable tools to help make critical decisions about the service needs of families.

REPEAT MALTREATMENT IN NC

Repeat maltreatment is an important measure the federal government uses to assess the ability of state child welfare systems to ensure the safety of children. The measure asks, "Among all the children with a substantiated report of abuse and/or neglect within the first 6 months of the reporting period, what percent of this total DOES NOT have another substantiated report within 6 months of the first report?"

The second round of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews concluded that North Carolina needs to improve in this area. Although no consistent problems could be identified in the cases reviewed, stakeholders interviewed during the CFSR seemed to think domestic violence and parental substance abuse contribute to most incidences of repeat maltreatment in North Carolina.

Our state is working to improve its ability to prevent repeat maltreatment by strengthening supervision and enhancing its SDM tools. Interested in how counties of different sizes perform when it comes to repeat maltreatment? Get the data at <<http://ssw.unc.edu/cw>>.

IN THIS ISSUE: ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES**NC'S CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM FOCUSES ON THE COURTS**

The court system has great influence on the child welfare system's ability to achieve the outcomes it seeks. This fact was underscored during North Carolina's most recent the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), which took place in 2007. During this review evaluators expressed concern with the slowness with which termination of parental rights (TPR)—an essential precondition of adoption—is achieved in our state. The main barriers to timely TPR cited by reviewers were court scheduling difficulties, a lengthy TPR appeals process, and the reluctance of some agency attorneys, caseworkers, and judges to seek TPR, particularly for older children. In response to the CFSR, North Carolina has dedicated a portion of its federal Program Improvement Plan (PIP) to court involvement. Under the PIP, we have three court-related goals:

1. To implement strategies to increase responsiveness to child safety issues by judges, attorneys, and other professionals.
2. To implement strategies to achieve permanency which address court delays at all stages of the court process.
3. To implement strategies that encourage efficiency, consistency, and child well-being for Juvenile Courts throughout North Carolina's 42 judicial districts.

In pursuit of these goals North Carolina is engaging in a variety of strategies, including the following:

- Cross-training judges, attorneys, court personnel, and child welfare staff to educate everyone about best practices for increasing child safety, well-being, and permanence.
- Increasing collaboration and communication among key systems at every level. As part of this, there is now a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Administrative Office of the Courts, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Office of Indigent Defense Services. In a letter to county DSS agencies on December 15, 2008 (CWS-67-2008), the Division also disseminated information to support the development of local level MOUs. To access this letter go to <<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/dcdl/2008.htm>>.
- Asking judicial districts to review existing local rules or create rules when none exist. Participating in this review/creation of rules is a concrete way DSS staff can be involved in working on court issues at the local level.
- Releasing a new chapter of child welfare policy related to the courts. Chapter 10, "The Juvenile Court and Child Welfare," can be found online at: <<http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-67/man/>>. ♦