

# PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

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

Volume 9, Number 3  
April 2004

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

*In summarizing recent 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!

If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Send your comments to:

John McMahon  
Jordan Institute for Families  
UNC-CH School of Social Work  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550  
State Courier: 17-61-04  
johnmcmahon@mindspring.com

## Newsletter Staff

Lane Cooke, MSW, Advisor  
Ray Kirk, PhD, Advisor  
John McMahon, MA, Writer

## Visit Our Website

To read this or past issues of *Practice Notes* online, go to <[www.practicenotes.org](http://www.practicenotes.org)>.

## ENHANCING COLLABORATION BETWEEN WORK FIRST AND CHILD WELFARE

From a common sense perspective, the connection between the self-sufficiency of families and the safety, permanence, and well-being of children is obvious. It stands to reason that if parents have jobs that enable them to have a home, transportation, and ample food, they are in a better position to resist the stresses of life and take better care of their children.

It's a perspective supported by research. According to a 1996 study, children living in families earning less than \$15,000 annually are more than 22 times more likely to experience maltreatment than children whose families earn at least \$30,000 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). We also know that more than half of all foster children come from families eligible for economic assistance (Committee on Ways and Means, 2000).

This makes it all the more puzzling that, historically, there has been a clear separation in social service agencies between efforts to prevent and address child abuse and neglect and efforts to promote economic self-sufficiency. Indeed, the separation has been so complete that families are sometimes pulled in different directions by the requirements of child welfare and economic programs, which may not even know of each other's involvement with the family.

When a family is already struggling, this lack of communication only makes it harder for them to stay together.

Today social service agencies across the country are trying to break down the wall between child welfare and other programs (Andrews, et al., 2002). As part of this effort, in May 2003 the Children's Services

Section of the North Carolina Division of Social Services merged with Family Support Services Section to become the "Family Support and Child Welfare Services Section."

This move is significant: it represents the coming together within the same administrative unit of the state's Work First (TANF) and child welfare programs. The name itself—"Family Support and Child Welfare Services Section"—signals a desire for greater understanding and collaboration.

Of course, an administrative change counts for only so much in a state-administered, county-run system. Because of the autonomy of county DSS's, it is really up to the people on the local level to make collaboration between these two programs a reality.

Fortunately, in many counties—particularly those implementing the Multiple Response System (MRS) and FamilyNet—this is just what's happening. For the sake of the families and children they serve, line workers, supervisors, and administrators in child welfare and Work First today are finding better ways to work together.

This process is not always easy or harmonious. But, as this issue of *Practice Notes* will make clear, the struggle is worth it. We are eager to share with you some of the lessons our counties have learned. ♦



Photo Illustration

**More than half of all foster children come from families eligible for public assistance.**

## THE BENEFITS OF WORK FIRST/CHILD WELFARE COLLABORATION

Webster's defines collaboration as "working together." Although technically this is accurate, the people we consulted in the writing of this issue helped us understand that collaboration in a DSS context also means:

**Walking Your Talk.** Especially in child welfare, we expect families to develop strong support networks and to be an active part of the team. Yet, as one person asked: "How can we ever expect families to develop strong support networks if we don't have these internally? If we can't play together on the same team, what right do we have to ask this of them?"

**Being Open** when someone questions our intentions, open to changing our ideas, and open to the possibility that stereotypes and assumptions we have about each other might be wrong.

Collaboration requires some degree of personal risk. It also takes guts and perseverance. But, given the potential benefits it offers, we owe it to our clients—and ourselves—to try.

### BENEFITS FOR FAMILIES

**The Right Service at the Right Time.** Nationally, Work First and child welfare serve many of the same families:

- Needell and colleagues (1999) found that in California, one in four new welfare recipients had been reported for abuse and neglect within the past five years.
- Goerge and colleagues (2000) found that 60% of the children in foster care came from families receiving cash assistance.
- Between 70% and 90% of families receiving in-home services through child welfare also receive welfare (Geen, et al., 2001).

The substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health concerns, low lev-



Photo illustration

**It enhances child safety and makes families economically stronger.**

els of education, and other issues these "dual-system" families struggle with often are barriers to securing employment and to effective parenting (Andrews, et al., 2002). By working together, Work First and child welfare can do a better job getting families the support they need it, thereby enhancing child safety and economic self-sufficiency.

**Fewer Conflicting Demands.** Anecdotal evidence suggests that dual-system families are often overwhelmed by the two systems' multiple, sometimes mutually exclusive, requirements (Geen et al., 2001). For example, Work First work requirements often conflict with services mandated by child welfare, such as attending court hearings or visiting children in foster care. Thus, it is not surprising that some dual-system families have difficulty meeting reunification case plans (Geen, 2002).

When workers from different programs communicate with each other and understand each others' roles and mandates, they can be sure all their efforts make it easier—not harder—for families to become safer and economically stronger.

**Better Experiences with DSS.** When workers are on the same page, families' interactions with the agency are less confusing. They get a clear and consistent idea of what is expected of them. If professionals manage to coordinate intake procedures, families may even be asked to tell their story fewer times, to fewer people.

The cumulative effect of collaboration is the message: we see your family as a unit and we care about its success. When this message is expressed through effective, supportive

services, families begin to see even involuntary services as valuable, and the agency as an important ally.

### BENEFITS FOR WORKERS

**Better Assessments.** When information about families is shared across program lines, workers may get a more accurate understanding of a family's strengths and needs.

**Better Use of Time.** Timely and coordinated provision of services helps families avoid protracted involvement with the agency. This saves families time and frees up workers to serve other clients. Collaborative strategies, such as including people from other programs in child and family team meetings, also give workers the opportunity to develop plans simultaneously, and to ensure their plans are not in conflict.

**Better Support.** When workers understand each other's needs and mandates they are better equipped to help and support each other.

**Better Solutions.** Workers from Work First and CPS sometimes see problems in very different ways. Strong collaborative relationships enable them to use this difference to develop better solutions with families.

### BENEFITS FOR AGENCIES

**Improved Relationships.** When people understand each other and work together across program lines, there is a greater sense of community among agency employees.

**Better Use of Resources.** Collaboration can translate into cost savings. For example, if programs can help families meet urgent material needs that might otherwise lead to their children coming into foster care, they may avoid the higher costs of out-of-home placement.

*For a discussion of how collaboration produces these benefits, see the other articles in this issue. ♦*

## COLLABORATION IN ACTION: A SUCCESS STORY

Collaboration between Work First and child welfare takes a variety of forms. Many of these are described on the following pages. However, to fully appreciate the power of collaboration, it helps to view it in terms of specific interventions with specific families. For this reason we present the following example. Although names and some details have been changed to protect confidentiality, this story is closely based on the success a real North Carolina family experienced when it was served by a collaborative department of social services.

### NATALIE'S STORY

When she came to town for a job six months ago, Natalie was excited by the prospect of a better life for herself and her eight-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. Unfortunately, her employer soon went under. Her family lived off her savings while she looked for work. By the time her money ran out she had no car, no job, and they were living in a homeless shelter.

One day Tiffany, her daughter, woke up after the shelter's kitchen stopped serving breakfast. After a long, hungry morning, the shelter staff refused to give Tiffany lunch because Natalie's son had taken two lunches with him when he left for school that day.

That was the last straw. When Tiffany began to cry, Natalie gave up. She had no job, no friends, no hope. She couldn't even feed her baby girl! Natalie called CPS and asked them to come for her kids. She imagined DSS would place them in a decent home that very same day. There, she thought, they could be together and get everything she could not give them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sandra was a Work First worker at the local DSS. By the time her supervisor told her about the situation, Natalie and Tiffany were already at the agency, talking with Sidney, a CPS worker. Sandra's supervisor suggested she join them.

Sandra saw right away that Natalie was distraught. Yet gradually Sandra and Sidney calmed and comforted her. Every time Natalie brought up an issue she thought couldn't be solved, Sandra or Sidney had an idea, and Natalie brightened. For example, Natalie was having trouble finding a job because she couldn't find daycare, in part because Tiffany had behavior problems. When Sandra explained her program could help find and pay for appropriate daycare for Tiffany, Natalie's whole outlook improved.

Sidney also dispelled Natalie's assumptions about foster care: in particular, he described the negative impact that separation and loss can have on children, and the fact that if they were placed in foster care, Natalie's access to her children would probably be limited to one visit a week. After this dose of reality—and some reflection—Natalie admitted her decision to give up her children had been a big mistake.

By the end of the meeting Natalie had signed a safety plan and agreed she could continue caring for her children. Over the course of the next few months, with support from the agency, Natalie overcame many of the concerns threatening her family:

**Child Safety.** The agency responded to Natalie's call using the Multiple Response System's family assessment approach. Due to low risk, CPS recommended services for the family, but did not require them.

**Education.** Natalie had been a licensed paraprofessional in another state. Work First helped her navigate the process of transferring that license to North Carolina. It also paid for a community college course that was part of the licensure process.

**Child Care.** DSS arranged for an evaluation of Tiffany. Because Natalie was enrolled in Work First, the agency provided daycare vouchers. Child welfare staff found her a place in a therapeutic daycare.

**Transportation.** Work First provided Natalie with transportation assistance so she could pursue employment and additional education, which she eagerly did.

**Speech Therapy.** Once in daycare, Tiffany, who had serious speech difficulties, had access to a speech pathologist. Her speech soon improved.

**Employment.** When Natalie could not find a job in her field, Work First helped her find a factory job.

**Housing.** With encouragement from the agency, Natalie and her family moved to a more family-friendly shelter. Both she and the agency believe it won't be long before she can afford an apartment.



Photo Illustration

**Natalie's family is stronger now, a fact that she and DSS recognize and celebrate.**

Collaboration is no magic cure. At the end of the story, Natalie and her kids are still living in a shelter and still economically at risk. But they are on the road to recovery. Natalie again sees herself as a good mother and as someone with a real future in the world of work. What's more, she readily acknowledges that she and her family are stronger and better off for having been involved with DSS. ♦

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION

Today, as North Carolina and other states strongly promote collaboration between Work First/TANF and child welfare, many agencies find that enhancing the working relationship of these programs can be difficult. Here we present suggestions for overcoming some of the most commonly cited barriers to collaboration.

### LACK OF RESPECT/TRUST

As with child welfare interventions with families, successful collaborations between different programs in an agency require mutual trust and respect. That's why, in many agencies, the biggest obstacle to collaboration between child welfare and Work First is the cultural divide that exists between the two programs.

The causes of this divide are uncertain. It may be due to a basic lack of contact between the programs: often the programs are located on separate floors or in separate buildings. Even when they are near each other, people can be too busy to really get to know one another. In some DSS's, agency policy and culture may discourage people from developing relationships across program lines. Resentment over very real differences—in salary, parking, or other perks—can exacerbate the problem.

Whatever the cause, many folks on the Work First side believe that child welfare workers see themselves as better and more important than economic services workers. In the worst situations, this perceived lack of respect leads Work First workers to suspect a request to “collaborate” is really a ploy to get them to do the less desirable parts of some child welfare worker's job.

**Answers/Solutions:** If an agency is to create true collaboration and the benefits it brings to families, it must address this issue and change “class” assumptions that exist in-house. Increasing the amount of direct, in-person contact workers from different programs have with each other is one approach. Agencies have done this through:

Regular, cross-program supervisory contact. This helps ensure that supervisors understand one another's programs and have good relationships. From this basis they can develop protocols/strategies for information sharing, referral, cross-training, troubleshooting, etc. It also sets a precedent for collaboration that staff can imitate.

Involving Work First supervisors and staff in meetings. Involving Work First personnel in child welfare staffings helps build connections and opens lines of communication. Having them there at the table for child and family team meetings makes it easier for families to access the services they need in a more timely way. It gives everyone

### A KEY TO SUCCESS

**“Want to know how collaboration really takes hold? It happens when a Work First worker or a child welfare worker goes to a meeting in the other's program area. Just by being there, they can open up a whole world of services that can benefit a family that the other worker didn't know about. Once these workers see what their counterparts in other programs can bring to families, they will call upon each other and work together from that point on.”**

— Tim Rhodes, Economic Services, Buncombe DSS



an opportunity to hear at the same time what the family thinks it needs and wants, and it gives the family a chance to ask questions of everyone.

Be prepared, however: getting Work First people to attend meetings may not be easy at first. Initially they may feel child welfare staff do not understand or value what economic services has to offer; they may also view attending child welfare meetings as additional work that does not benefit them. When inviting them to meetings, clearly express your belief that their presence will benefit families and the Work First workers themselves.

Joint visits. By giving workers from different programs the opportunity to see what they each have to offer families, joint visits go a long way toward building understanding and teamwork. They also demonstrate the agency's concern for and desire to support the family in a very tangible way. For these reasons, every agency should consider using joint visits. It should be noted, however, that joint visits are not always possible. For example, many Work First programs lack the funds and staff needed to support this activity. Nor are joint visits appropriate for every family, especially when the investigative assessment response is being used.

### DIFFERENT ORIENTATIONS/MANDATES

At the end of the day, Work First and child welfare are in the same business—helping families and children. Yet it is also true that opportunities for conflict present themselves almost daily. Some of these are caused by differences in mandates. One supervisor expressed it this way: “Work First is charged with keeping people off the system. Child welfare wants the family to have the resources needed to provide for its children. At the same time, child welfare will sometimes say parents must stay *cont. p. 5*



continued from page 4

home to be with the children. Obviously this conflicts with Work First's desire to get them out and working."

Differing practice models can also be a source of friction between the two programs: Work First and other economic services tend to be structured around a case management model, while many in child welfare approach their work from the perspective of the social work model (Kakuska & Hercik, 2002).

**Answers/Solutions:** When program goals seem to conflict, collaboration requires both parties to sit down and work out the problem. For example, it may be possible in some cases to allow activities on a family's child welfare plan, such as parenting classes, to count toward the participation requirements of the Work First plan. Problems with differing practice models can often be overcome through clear communication of respect and by focusing on what families need, rather than on limitations of different departments (Kakuska & Hercik, 2002).

## CONFIDENTIALITY

In the early phases of collaboration between Work First and child welfare people are often uncertain what they can ethically and legally share with workers in other programs within the same agency. This uncertainty can block the flow of useful information, leading to less effective responses to family needs.

**Answer/Solution:** We consulted representatives from the N.C. Attorney General's office and the N.C. Division of Social Services about this matter, and they said that because they all work for the same agency, the employees of a county DSS can share most information with one another without violating confidentiality. This includes items such as names, addresses, collateral information, case

histories from Work First, and a general overview of a family's CPS history. The only qualifier to this is that child welfare programs can disclose case-specific information regarding a CPS matter only when there is a compelling need from the CPS perspective. Sharing information outside the agency is still prohibited.

## LACK OF BASIC INFORMATION

A lack of basic information about how other programs work and what they have to offer undermines workers' ability to support families and each other. Without this foundation, workers are more likely to make inappropriate or delayed referrals, or to fail to make referrals at all, inadvertently depriving families of the help they need.

**Answer/Solution:** Cross-training is an excellent way to ensure people in different programs understand each other's roles enough to work together for the good of the client. For example, during a child welfare staff meeting, someone from Work First could present economic services scenarios and engage child welfare workers in a dialogue about their views of welfare. These discussions would educate workers about the different perspectives and challenges that Work First workers face and what their ultimate responsibilities are. A similar training could then be offered to Work First staff about child welfare.

## POOR INFORMATION FLOW

Sometimes one program will have detailed information about a family, but that information never makes it to another program working with the family. This lack

**"Collaboration can make it clear that we are all people of great dignity, and that we all have a part to play in supporting and strengthening families."**

—Sybil Wheeler, Work First Representative, NC Division of Social Services

cont. p. 8

## MRS AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN WORK FIRST AND CHILD WELFARE

It is not hard to see why collaboration between Work First and child welfare programs is a key strategy of the Multiple Response System (MRS), North Carolina's effort to enhance its child welfare system. Especially when used in combination with other MRS strategies, Work First/child welfare collaboration can make an agency's response to families more family-centered and effective. For example:

**Family Assessment Response.** Work First/child welfare collaboration fits naturally with MRS's second strategy, the family assessment response. This strategy gives MRS counties the opportunity to respond to some child maltreatment reports with a less adversarial approach, one that looks at the family holistically. As part of this response, agencies often try to front-load a wide range of services to families to meet their needs, reduce their stress, and increase child safety. A closer working relationship with economic services programs is a key element to this effort.

### Child and Family Team Meetings

**(CFTs).** Kara Allen-Eckard, a trainer with NC State University's Family-Centered Meetings Project, says including Work First staff in CFTs benefits everyone: "It helps get rid of infighting and makes paperwork better for Work First, the family, and child welfare case managers. It also creates cross-pollination and education between programs.

She advises: "Invite Work First to CFTs as often as possible so they experience it as the powerfully collaborative, joint process it can be."



Photo Illustration

## WHAT CHILD WELFARE WORKERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WORK FIRST

Successful collaboration doesn't happen on its own. Rather, it develops over time as people build relationships and learn to trust and respect one another. Listening and learning play big roles in this process. As a contribution to this process in your county, here are some of the things we heard Work First workers say they wanted child welfare workers to know about them:

**Work First gives families a chance to protect their kids so that child welfare doesn't have to become involved.**

**We respect you.** Some of those working in economic services have attended child welfare training courses, and they have learned about your work in other ways. One economic services worker says, "We have great empathy for you and know how tough your work is."

**We deserve your respect.** Work First workers want you to know that there are people in economic services who have advanced degrees and years of experience in human services. Work First workers are qualified professionals who take pride in themselves and what they do for families.

**Economic services help keep children safe.** A Work First worker puts it this way: "I really believe that Work First services help stabilize families before economic stress can contribute to child abuse and neglect. It gives families a chance to protect their own kids so that child welfare doesn't have to become involved."

**Economic services are voluntary.** This means that a family can decline or drop out of one of our supportive programs at any time. The flip side of this is that . . .

**Our relationships with clients can be very positive.** Jennifer Abshire, a Work First supervisor from Jackson County DSS, says clients build such a strong relationship with Work First workers because, "They literally spend hours in their office sharing information about their relationships, criminal history, drug use, their childhoods, and their current family situations, including parenting issues." Because they know so much about their clients, economic services workers can be tremendous resources for child welfare workers seeking to learn about a family.

**We can support you by:**

- Linking your clients to supportive community services. These include summer camp, afterschool, daycare, Food Stamps, Medicaid, food and clothing banks, job coaching, housing, and emergency assistance. This is a very time-consuming task, and the time you spend doing this could be spent preparing court reports,

updating your documentation and case plans, etc.

- Conducting additional home visits. When time and resources permit, Work First workers can make home visits to clients. If these families are also your clients, the Work First worker can share with you: the issues discussed; number of home visits completed, missed, or rescheduled; services provided; family's willingness to cooperate, etc. This information could be useful to you in developing reports for court.
- Providing families with educational/occupational resources. If clients are participating in work-related activities, we have many resources to help them obtain a GED and to help them receive job training.
- Providing transportation to eliminate a family's barriers to services. We do this by providing eligible clients with travel reimbursements or stipends that help them pay for bus tickets, taxis, and even car repairs.

**What We Want from You.** To avoid confusion and delay and to ensure families get the maximum benefit of what the agency has to offer, we would like you to have a good working knowledge of economic services basics. For example, you should know about:

- *Programs.* Understand the purposes of and differences between programs such as Work First, Emergency Assistance, Benefit Diversion, Job Bonus, etc.
- *Eligibility.* For example, there must be a child in the home to apply for Work First or Emergency Assistance.
- *When to Contact Us.* Always inform us when there is a change in family composition (e.g., child enters foster care) and when family members find employment.
- *The Limits of Your Expertise.* It can be very unpleasant for families when someone outside of Work First assures them they will qualify for economic benefits and then we find they are ineligible. Please be careful what you say to families about eligibility.

### WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- Talk to someone in your agency. Ask someone from Work First to make a presentation to your work unit
- Ask people in Work First what else they think you should know about their work and how your programs can improve their collaboration.
- Visit North Carolina's Work First website <[www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/ei/ei\\_hm.htm](http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/ei/ei_hm.htm)>
- Visit "Management Assistance for the Work First Program." Provides county-specific Work First data, updated monthly. <[ssw.unc.edu/workfirst](http://ssw.unc.edu/workfirst)>

## FAMILYNET: A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION

As we hope this issue of *Practice Notes* has made clear, you don't need special tools or funding to work effectively across program lines: all you need is the desire and energy to collaborate. That said, it is hard to talk about collaboration in social services agencies in North Carolina without talking about FamilyNet.

### THE FAMILYNET STORY

In February 2000, the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services was awarded a Work First pilot grant from the NC Division of Social Services. The grant supported nine counties to engage their county departments of social services in a system reform initiative that would unify services for children and families in a more holistic, family-centered manner.

Although it started out as a collaborative initiative between Work First (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and child welfare programs, FamilyNet quickly became an agency-wide system reform effort grounded in the beliefs that:

- Partnerships within and across agencies, with families, and with the community lead to success.
- Improving communication about families, programs, and resources can help create more comprehensive services and facilitate a focus on prevention.
- Establishing a unifying vision and mission for an agency's work helps staff in all program areas understand how they work together toward a common goal.
- Collaboration across program lines leads to stronger, safer, more prosperous families.

FamilyNet emerged into an unconventional philosophy for change that continues to be developed by and applied

in 14 counties: Alamance, Buncombe, Cabarrus, Caldwell, Durham, Edgecombe, Guilford, Halifax, Lincoln, Rockingham, Swain, Union, Wilson, Yadkin.

### VISION INTO ACTION

Lisa Eby, a human services planner with Buncombe County DSS and the point person for FamilyNet in her agency, says one of the best things about FamilyNet is the way it helps an agency understand what it wants to be and where it wants to go.

Thus, although the FamilyNet counties share a common vision—*communities where families achieve well-being*—and a common mission—*to partner with families and communities to achieve well-being through prosperity, permanence, support, and safety*—individual counties are free to articulate and pursue their own unique visions.

"In Buncombe," Eby says, "we're trying to build a culture in our agency where strengths are acknowledged, and where there is a real sense of community among our employees. We're doing this because we are convinced that if we have respectful, strong relationships among ourselves, we'll do a better job of developing these kinds of relationships with families."

This FamilyNet vision has reinforced Buncombe's preexisting collaborative efforts and inspired new ones. For example, the agency is developing infrastructure that will make safety plans and other information available to all DSS employees working with a family.

FamilyNet enhances a county's ability to respond not just to individual families, but to crises faced by entire communities. For instance, when the Pillowtex plant in Cabarrus County

closed down in July 2003, it laid off 4,300 people.

As the Pillowtex crisis unfolded, the collaborative lessons Cabarrus DSS learned through its participation in FamilyNet paid off. Staff responded to families by putting aside narrow programmatic definitions of need, eligibility, and job function and focused on mitigating the crisis at hand and getting families back on a path to economic self-sufficiency and well-being.

### COLLABORATING INITIATIVES

FamilyNet also hopes to bring more collaboration to child welfare system reform at the state level. Today in North Carolina there are many active reform initiatives—Family to Family, System of Care, the Multiple Response System, Leading by Results, the Title IV-E Waiver, and more.

Our traditional default setting—despite protestations to the contrary—often sees reform efforts as "dueling initiatives." Choose one or the other, not both or all.

FamilyNet would have us recognize that, just as a county DSS cannot single-handedly guarantee child safety, no single initiative can achieve all the reform we need. In the FamilyNet vision, no one initiative has all the answers, but together they point us in a new and better direction. ♦

### TO LEARN MORE

To learn more about FamilyNet, visit: [www.ncacdss.org/ncacdss/TANFdocs/](http://www.ncacdss.org/ncacdss/TANFdocs/)



Photo Illustration

**"When we put our differences aside and work together . . . children and families benefit tremendously."**

—Tunya Dowdell,  
Economic Services  
Worker, Buncombe DSS

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION *continued from page 5*

of communication, which occurs by default rather than out of concern for confidentiality, can lead to inappropriate or insufficient interventions.

**Answers/Solutions:** To overcome this obstacle, agencies must develop strategies for sharing information within the agency, such as:

**Intake protocols.** Buncombe DSS has addressed this issue with a new agency policy requiring child welfare workers to see whether a family reported for suspected abuse/neglect is involved with another worker in another program within the agency. If the answer is yes, child welfare must make a collateral contact with that worker.

**Coordinated case plans.** Coordinating case plans for families served by both programs prevents families from being caught in the middle by conflicting demands. It also helps ensure agency professionals working with the family have a clear picture of its strengths, needs, and the services they are receiving.

**Child and family team meetings.** As already mentioned, this is an excellent strategy for making sure everyone is on the same page, preventing duplication and meeting the family's needs in a more timely way.

### CONCLUSION

In addition to the strategies mentioned here, it is also impor-

tant to note that North Carolina has statewide strategies for enhancing collaboration between Work First and child welfare. To learn about two of these strategies, refer to the sidebar on the Multiple Response System (page 5) and the article on FamilyNet (page 7). ♦

### KEY POINTS

- Collaboration between Work First and child welfare offers many potential benefits to families, workers, and agencies.
- Successful collaboration often requires overcoming various interpersonal, historical, and programmatic barriers.
- Confidentiality is not a legitimate barrier to collaboration between Work First and child welfare because both programs are housed within the same agency.
- Increasing the amount of time professionals from different programs actually spend working with each other—attending the same meetings, visiting families together, and co-developing plans—may be the single most effective strategy for promoting collaboration.
- Other strategies agencies have used to overcome barriers to collaboration include child and family team meetings, cross-training, and innovative intra-program protocols.



## IN THIS ISSUE: ENHANCING COLLABORATION WITH WORK FIRST

Family & Children's Resource Program  
Jordan Institute for Families  
UNC-School of Social Work  
Campus Box 3550  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3550  
State Courier # 17-61-04