

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 4
July 2004

Children's Services Practice Notes is a publication for child welfare workers 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 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!

To comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please 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
johncmahon@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>.

References for the articles in this issue can be found at <www.practicenotes.org>

DATA AND CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

As a woman walks down the beach one morning, she notices the sand is littered with starfish washed up by a storm the night before. Then she sees a child picking the starfish up and throwing them back into the sea.

When the child explains what she is doing the woman replies, "You can't make a difference. There are too many starfish!"

The child throws another starfish into the waves, turns to the woman and says, "I made a difference for that one."

Child welfare workers and supervisors like this story because it resonates with the way they see their work. As a group, they are people who believe it is possible to make a difference in the world. What's more, they believe that human interaction is the way to do it. They want to get out there, in person, and make that difference for children and their families.

Unfortunately, it is this very same desire to help others that causes many child welfare professionals to hesitate at the idea of working with data. For them, data is about numbers and computers, not helping people.

If they associate data with their work at all, often it is connected with daysheets and documentation, which take up lots of time—time most workers would rather spend serving families.

Imagine the reaction of the child in the story if you required her, in between rescues, to fill out forms on each starfish and you'll understand how some people in child welfare feel about data.

Despite these sentiments, few would deny that data is important.

We work in a system where, at the national, state, and local levels, the emphasis is increasingly on accountability and outcomes. Every day, legislators, advocates, and agency administrators use

data to help them set priorities and guide interventions. From their perspective, data is an essential part of doing good because it helps us understand whether we are fulfilling our mission and meeting our goals.

This issue of *Practice Notes* will describe the advantages of seeing data in this light. Specifically, we will explore ways data can be used to fine-tune the interventions you are making in your community, look at effective strategies for communicating with staff about performance outcomes, and discuss why the work you already do with data is so important.

In the process, data may lose some of the negative associations it has for you as a child welfare worker or supervisor. Indeed, we hope that eventually you will come to see data in the same way you see the other items in your professional repertoire—as a familiar tool you can use to make a difference for families. ♦



Photo Illustration

Does your agency use data to drive practice decisions?

USING DATA TO ENHANCE CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

Everyone who works in child welfare in North Carolina knows that there are people in Raleigh and Washington, D.C. who are paid to evaluate the effectiveness of our child welfare system and make decisions about policy and funding. We know these



Photo Illustration

Effective use of data benefits agencies and the families they serve.

professionals base their evaluations and decisions on **data**, which Webster's defines as "*information, especially information organized for analysis or used as the basis for decision-making.*"

Most child welfare workers also know that they themselves are the source of much of this data, and that they add to it every time they enter information such as a child's name, age, or grade in school on forms like the NCDSS's 5104, "Report to the Central Registry/CPS Application."

Though child welfare workers and their agencies put a lot of effort into collecting, entering, and passing on information, their role relative to data and evaluation is usually a passive

one: once data are collected, the people on the front lines tend to wait for outside experts to tell them what the data means, how they are doing relative to performance measures, and what they should do to improve. Traditionally,

child welfare agencies are data generators, not data consumers.

SELF-EVALUATION

In the eyes of some administrators and evaluation experts, this represents a missed opportunity. They argue that rather than relying solely on outside evaluators, child welfare agencies should engage in **self-evaluation**.

When an agency practices self-evaluation, it develops the capacity to use the information it has collected about itself and its community to enhance its work with families. The advantages of this approach include improvements in:

Documentation. When they feel ownership of outcomes, staff see how the data they collect affects the

agency's performance. In turn, they may take greater care to ensure documentation and data entry are accurate and comprehensive.

External Communication. Agencies that are confident they understand their strengths and weaknesses—and have the data to back up their claims—can deal more effectively with the media, DSS boards, county commissioners, and other stakeholders.

Agency Cohesion. Because self-evaluation underscores the contributions everyone in the agency makes toward the achievement of key performance outcomes, such as reducing the length of time children spend in foster care, it often promotes a sense of unity and working together as a team.

Timely, Targeted Interventions. Working with their data and outcomes enables agencies to identify gaps in their performance and develop interventions for closing those gaps. And, because they are less dependent upon others for data and assistance, agencies can do this in a more timely way.

For a glimpse how self-evaluating agencies use data to engage staff, see the article on page 4.

NC'S "EXPERIENCES" DATA

The N.C. Division of Social Services and its partners have been working to promote self-evaluation in North Carolina's child welfare agencies for about ten years. When Families for Kids came to the state in the early 1990's, the counties and the Division began to see the importance of ensuring agencies had access to data, especially **longitudinal data**.

Longitudinal data allows practitioners, evaluators, and administrators to look at complete and ac-

THE POWER OF DATA

Outcome and evaluative data affect our practice with families indirectly by influencing the opinion of lawmakers, the media, and the general public. Three recent influential, data-based publications are:

- **Evaluation of North Carolina's Multiple Response System** (April 2004). Evaluators found that MRS supports families without compromising child safety, a conclusion of considerable interest to state legislators considering expanding MRS to all 100 counties. For an article on this evaluation and a link to this report, see the online version of this issue of *Practice Notes*.
- **GAO Report on the Federal Reviews** (April 2004). This report highlights widespread problems in our national child welfare system and inspired articles in newspapers across the country. For a link to this report, see the online version of this issue of *Practice Notes*.
- **Child Welfare Outcomes Annual Reports.** These analyze States' efforts to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. <www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/cwo.htm>



continued from page 2

curate information about the experiences of all children in child welfare. Today, county DSS's are most familiar with the longitudinal data that the Division delivers in the form of the periodic "experiences reports." These reports provide counties with data that reflects their performance on certain child welfare indicators:

- Pattern of initial placements
- Length of time in custody
- Experiences of children placed in non-family settings
- Placement stability, and
- Re-entry into DSS custody

Experiences reports enable counties to compare their performance on these indicators over time to the state as a whole, to counties of similar size, and to their own past performance. County-specific and statewide experiences reports can be found at www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/childrenservices/stats/ctyexp.htm.

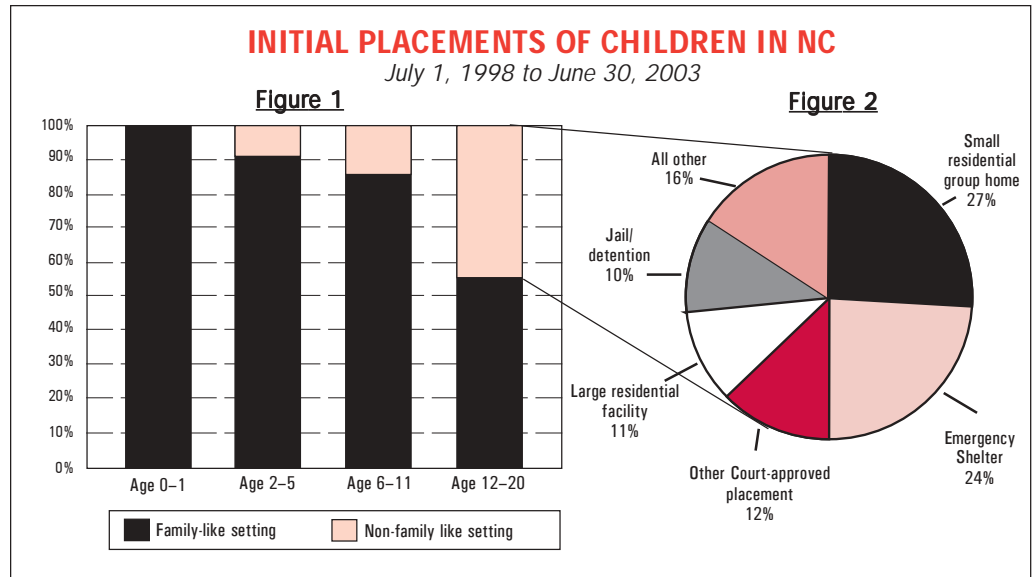
DEMONSTRATION

But can the outcome data in experiences reports really tell social workers anything about practice?

Judy Wildfire, a professor at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work, is convinced it can. To persuade us, Wildfire, who helps agencies build their capacity to work with longitudinal data, conducted an analysis of the longitudinal data file that was the basis for the most recent experiences report.

First, using data for the whole State, Wildfire selected information related to the goal of serving children in the least restrictive placement possible. Specifically, she examined the experiences of children who initially entered placement between July 1, 1998 and June 30, 2003.

The data (see fig. 1) tell us that



during this time most children were placed in a family-like setting, usually a foster home or kin home. However, they also tell us that older children were much more likely to be placed in non-family-like settings. About 50% of teens went to this type of placement.

Curious, Wildfire looked at where these teens were placed (see fig. 2). The numbers (not shown) reveal that each year slightly more than 300 teens were placed in congregate care facilities. This represents less than 10% of all the children who initially entered placement during this period.

YOUR TURN

That is what the data tell us. But what do they mean?

In self-evaluating agencies, this is where supervisors and frontline staff come in. They know where policy and practice meet. They see with their own eyes when interventions work.

So we invite you and your agency to look at the experiences report data for your county with regard to initial placements. How do the experiences of teens in your county fit with the experiences of teens statewide? Do you place 50% of your teens in congregate care?

Once you have answered this ques-

tion, your agency can decide whether the data have implications for practice. For example, if you find you do place 50% of teens in non-family-like settings, you must decide whether this is a good or bad thing. Perhaps all of these kids have needs that are best addressed by this type of placement. If so, your placement pattern may be appropriate. Then again, maybe teens are going to group care due to an inadequate number of foster homes for teens in your community. If so, you might consider a targeted foster parent recruitment campaign.

The point is, agencies must reach their own conclusions about what their data means and what to do about it.

NEXT STEPS

Though we have only scratched the surface of self-evaluation, we hope this article shows that data really can inform practice in a meaningful way.

To learn more about self-evaluation and working with longitudinal data, consult *Measuring Outcomes in Child Welfare*, a teaching manual developed by members of a Family to Family evaluation team from the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work. You can find it online at www.unc.edu/~lynnu/camp_manual.pdf. ♦

USING DATA-BASED NEWSLETTERS TO ENGAGE STAFF, OTHERS AROUND CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

It is hard for people to act on information they do not understand or value. Therefore, agencies that want outcomes data to have a positive influence on child welfare practice must put that data in the hands of frontline staff and other stakeholders, and they must do so in a way that is timely, relevant, and clear.

This can be a difficult task. Learning to do this in your agency can be easier when you have a good model to follow. For this reason, we present the following discussion of the data-based child welfare newsletters produced in connection with Family to Family initiative activities in Wake and Guilford Counties.

FROM RESISTANCE TO OWNERSHIP

CJ Harper was up against it. Early 2002, when she began her work with the child welfare division of Wake County Human Services, she was not well received. "I heard things like 'outsider,' 'spy,' and 'hotshot-know-it-all,'" she recalls.

Her problem was that, as a planner and data analyst with no background in children's services, Harper was seen as an outsider by frontline staff in her office. Child welfare workers saw her efforts to help them work with data as intrusions that would only lead to more work for them. They didn't see the connection between their work with families and capturing, analyzing, and talking about data.

Today, Harper says, it's a different story. "Now, if I'm a few days late with an outcomes report, people come up to me and ask, 'Where's **my** data?'"

What accounts for this transformation? Harper says that after meeting initial resistance, "I fell back and tried again." With the help of her agency's self-evaluation team (SET) she took an inventory to assess people's satisfaction and comprehension of data to see how they were using it. After looking at the results, she and the SET revised the way they presented data.

Harper also used a different interpersonal approach. "I approached people by saying, 'This is YOUR data. It is what you've been collecting all along, and we are not asking you to do anything different. We're just going to look at it in a different way.'"

After that, she found it wasn't a hard sell. "People want to see the impact of what they are doing."

WAKE COUNTY

Wake's data summary appears once a quarter. It is simple and unpretentious: two or three photocopied sheets featuring tables, bar charts, and line drawings (*to see a*

"We use our findings like a bathroom scale. When you step on, the scale doesn't say 'good weight' or 'bad weight.' It measures THE weight. YOU determine if the reading is acceptable."



CJ Harper

sample, go to the online version of this issue). Each deals with an important child welfare outcome, such as reducing racial disparities in the foster care population. There is minimal commentary on the figures.

The simplicity of the presentation is part of this data newsletter's accessibility. It is also part of what encourages people to use it: by not commenting on the information, it leaves the task of interpretation to readers.

The way the data summary is disseminated says a lot about Wake's commitment to self-evaluation, openness, and accountability. An electronic version is sent to all agency staff, who are encouraged to share it with anyone they wish. Hard copies are posted on bulletin boards in several spots throughout the agency—including the client waiting room—and mailed to vendors and community stakeholders, such as leaders in the faith community.

In addition, the agency's community outreach workers incorporate child welfare outcomes information from the newsletter into their quarterly presentations to partner agencies (e.g., the police). Copies of Wake's data summary are also shared with the agency's vendors, such as those who provide contract foster care services.

Harper and the SET create the newsletter using a variety of sources, including local placement data and longitudinal data from the NC Division of Social Services. Harper uses SPSS software for the statistical analysis and formats the newsletter using Powerpoint and Access.

GUILFORD COUNTY

Guilford County's newsletter is produced by Joy Stewart, the agency's evaluation coordinator. Like Harper, Stewart works closely with Guilford's self-evaluation team (SET), draws from local and statewide data for her analyses, and uses similar software. (*Please refer to the sidebar, page 5 for an example of the Guilford newsletter. A complete newsletter can also be found in the online version of this issue of Practice Notes*).

Despite the accessibility of Guilford's newsletter, Stewart concedes that it can still be a challenge *cont. p. 5*

continued from page 4

to get people to make connections between child welfare practices and outcomes. But she says that, based on the number of requests for data she receives from individual workers and supervisors, it is happening.

Stewart also notes that the newsletter is useful during difficult conversations. "When you start talking about sticky issues such as race, having something as objective as data takes some of the sting out of the discussions and gets people talking about the issue."

One of Guilford's next major goals is to begin tracking quality of life outcomes (such as educational attainment, employment, and general life skills) for former foster youth. "I am quite excited," Stewart says. "I believe this shows how far our agency has progressed in the self-evaluation process." ♦

If you are interested in creating a similar newsletter, contact Caroline.Harper@co.wake.nc.us or jstewar1@co.guilford.nc.us

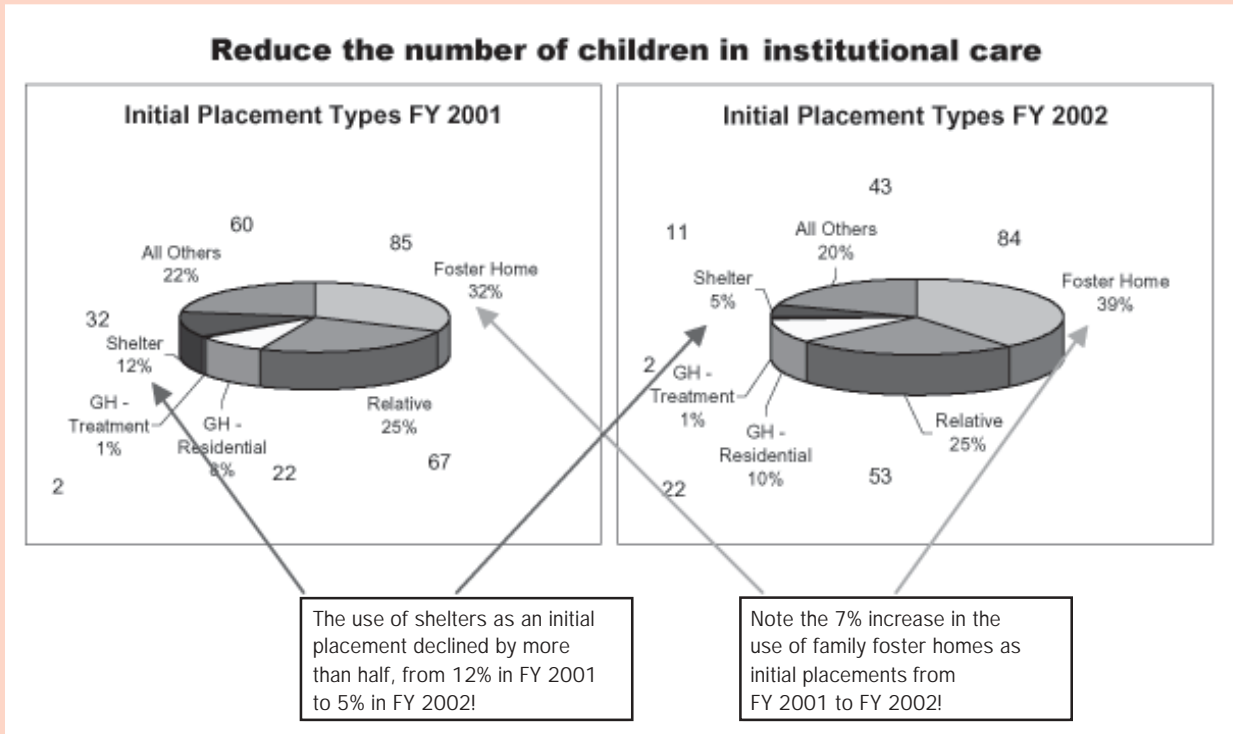
LESSONS LEARNED

Presenting data in a way that interests and engages frontline staff is no easy task. Here are some key ingredients you will need to succeed:

- **Buy-in from management.** Your overall organization—especially the director—needs to believe in using outcome data to assess and drive practice.
- **Reliable data.** You can't base decisions on unreliable data. To obtain reliability you need to share ownership of the self-evaluation process with ALL your data handlers.
- **A data translator.** To practice self-evaluation and work with data you need someone on staff with the desire and, if not the skills, at least the capacity to learn statistical analysis.
- **A Self-Evaluation Team** that includes child welfare supervisors and front line staff helps focus analyses, interprets data, and adds credibility to the process.

A MODEL OF CLEAR COMMUNICATION

One of the things that makes the data-based newsletters produced in Guilford and Wake Counties so helpful is the way they effectively communicate with frontline workers about progress toward agency goals. Take, for instance, the following example from the January 2003 issue of Guilford's newsletter, which looks at efforts to reduce the number of children in institutional care. Although the graphics convey a large amount of data about the types of placements made in FY 2001 and FY 2002, the newsletter creators use the arrows and comment boxes to clearly identify pertinent information. In this case, they highlight successful progress toward the goal of increasing the number of children placed in family-like settings.



AGENCY CULTURE: A BIG INFLUENCE ON THE USE OF OUTCOME DATA

Why do some agencies make active use of outcome information in their decision making, while others do not? Most of us would probably say it has something to do with *resources*. Especially North Carolina, where many of the child welfare agencies that seem furthest along in this area are in larger, wealthier counties, this seems like a reasonable answer.

Reasonable, perhaps, but not altogether correct, according to a recent study. Although technical, financial, and personnel resources are required to use outcome information in decision making, the single most important ingredient may not be money, but agency culture.

Is outcome data seen as relevant to the work of serving children in your agency?

THE STUDY

In 1999 researchers Hodges and Hernandez explored the relationship between organizational culture and the use of outcome information in four child-serving mental health agencies in Texas. All four agencies received training in the analysis and use of outcome information, periodic outcome information reports, and support from a state agency. However, two agencies were “high” users of outcome information and two were “low” users of outcome information.

When they looked at the culture in **high-use** agencies, researchers found:

- Long-standing partnerships with state-level staff and local child-serving agencies
- Problem-solving that focused on processes, not individuals. Data was viewed as feedback that enabled staff to see what worked and when to make corrections
- Appreciation of data. Staff could give examples of how outcome data had improved their responsiveness to families
- Communication that was bottom-up and top-down, and that supported team work and shared responsibility for outcomes
- Broad sharing of outcomes information throughout the agency
- A willingness to take calculated risks based on outcome data. This allowed agencies to pursue innovative approaches for reaching performance goals

By contrast, researchers found **low-use agencies** were characterized by:

- A lack of partnerships at the state and local levels. Agencies were

concerned with their autonomy and independence

- Disinterest in outcome information among direct service staff. Data was seen as the province and responsibility of managers and administrators
- Communication about outcomes was top-down and minimal
- High staff turnover
- A sense that serving children was overwhelming

The sidebar below highlights the cultural differences between two of the four agencies analyzed by the study.

CONNECTION TO PRACTICE

When thinking about this study, readers should not focus on the specific traits discussed: Hodges and Hernandez did not find a cause and effect link between specific cultural characteristics and an agency's ability to use outcome information.

Instead, readers should focus on the central role played by organizational culture. All of the agencies in this study had access to outcome information and the training and support needed to work with it. The defining difference was that in some of the agencies the organizational culture supported self-evaluation and the use of data. In the others it did not.

Thus, if an agency is serious about using data it should look first at whether its vision, mission, and values—as well as the training its workers receive—all support the idea that outcomes data can play a key role in creating better results for children and families. ♦

References can be found at <www.practicenotes.org>

A TALE OF TWO CULTURES

Cultural Aspects	High-Use Agency	Low-Use Agency
Vision/Mission	Strongly aligned with State's system	State vision/mission not widely held
Interest in outcome data	Uses local database as well as state system data	Interest in data not well-developed
Interaction with key participants	Well-developed partnerships with state Strong partnerships with local child-serving agencies	Isolation from state Adversarial relationships with local child-serving agencies
Communication style	Broad and open dialogue regarding outcome results Multi-directional, multi-modal information flow	Limited discussions of outcome results Top-down information flow
Attitude towards accomplishments	Proud of local achievements and use of outcomes to make service improvements	Frustrated by service delivery requirements of State
Source: Hodges, S. P. & Hernandez, M. (1999). How organizational culture influences outcome information utilization. <i>Evaluation and Program Planning</i> , 22, 183–197.		

THE CFSR, OUTCOME DATA, AND YOU

In child welfare change and the power to influence things often flows from above: congress makes laws, laws affect federal policy and funding, which affect the States, which affect counties, right on down to you.

Sometimes this top-down flow is so dominant we forget that influence also goes the other way: what we do has an impact not only on our corner of the world but on the child welfare system at the state and national levels.

As the following look at the federal Child and Family Services Review illustrates, this is especially true when it comes to the power and influence frontline workers and supervisors have as generators of data.

THE CFSR

In response to the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, the federal government created the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) to help it evaluate child welfare in all 50 States. Much of the CFSR looks at outcomes data and other sources to assess each State's ability to achieve safety, well-being, and permanency for children.

Since it began in 2001, no State has "passed" the CFSR. In fact, 16 States—including ours—failed to meet all seven outcomes measured by the CFSR's review of case records (GAO, 2004). (*Note: NC did pass every one of the state-level systemic factors assessed by the CFSR.*)

PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

States whose data do not meet the national standard in the CFSR are put on what is essentially a probationary status and required to develop a **Program Improvement Plan** (PIP) to address their shortcomings. The PIP allows the State to identify issues that contribute to nonconformity and plan steps to improve its performance on the data indicators in question.

North Carolina created its PIP in

August 2001. As part of this plan, it agreed to meet certain federal outcome benchmarks by a certain time, or face financial sanctions. Since then the NC Division of Social Services has made significant changes to child welfare policy and procedure in an effort to comply with our PIP. Changes that have directly affected county DSS's include:

Multiple Response System (MRS), an effort to make our child welfare system more consistent, effective, and family-centered.

Structured Decision-Making Tools. In April 2002 all county child welfare agencies began using a set of research-based assessment tools that enhanced their ability to evaluate child safety and to consistently assess families using a strengths-based approach.

Structured Intake. In April 2003 a mandatory tool was introduced to make screening of reports of child maltreatment more consistent across the state.

County-Level CFSRs. After the CFSR, the Division changed the way it reviews child welfare in North Carolina's 100 counties. It changed the name and the characteristics of what was once known as the "biennial review process" to reflect the emphases of the CFSR and our State's PIP. Now, just like the State, counties found to be out of compliance on the NC-CFSR must create their own PIP.

Data Support. The Division is providing support to county DSS's that do not meet federal and state benchmarks to help them address coding errors and problems with data entry.

WHERE WE STAND TODAY

When it created its PIP, North Carolina agreed to meet certain benchmarks in the statewide data indicators over the course of its PIP. The following figures reflect North Carolina's

"Filling out forms accurately helps us paint an accurate picture of the success we're having with families."



—Sara Anderson Mims,
NC Division of Social Services

performance as of September 30, 2003 with respect to a national set of child welfare outcomes:

1.1—Recurrence of maltreatment

NC's PIP Benchmark: 7.1%.

NC's Current Performance: 9.0%

Status: Needs Improvement

2.1—Incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care

NC's PIP Benchmark: 0.69%.

NC's Current Performance: 0.95%

Status: Needs Improvement

4.1—Length of time to achieve reunification

NC's PIP Benchmark: 60%.

NC's Current Performance: 60.2%

Status: Substantially Achieved

4.2—Foster care re-entries

NC's PIP Benchmark: 8.6%.

NC's Current Performance: 1.2%

Status: Substantially Achieved

5.1—Length of time to achieve adoption

NC's PIP Benchmark: 28.9%.

NC's Current Performance: 32%

Status: Substantially Achieved

6.1—Stable foster care placements

NC's PIP Benchmark: 63.2%.

NC's Current Performance: 58%

Status: Needs Improvement

YOUR ROLE IS VITAL

North Carolina's ability to get out of program improvement depends not only on its ability to correct the shortcomings identified in the federal review, but on its ability to document progress in these areas using valid outcomes data.

That's where you come in. As frontline workers, supervisors, and data entry people, you are the *cont. p. 8*

THE CFSR, OUTCOME DATA, AND YOU *continued from page 7*

ones who enter information into the county and State data systems. This information ultimately becomes part of AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System), NCANDS (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System), and other national datasets used to determine whether a State will emerge from program improvement or face financial sanctions. The data you generate is also used to guide other important funding and policy decisions.

The implications of this for practice are clear. Though the documentation connected to your work with families may sometimes seem like an unwanted and even pointless obligation, it actually gives you significant power in our child welfare system.

Thus, if you are ever filling out documentation and find yourself tempted to guess about the child's grade in school or to skip a field altogether, think twice. Though they might not be felt for some time, the consequences of "fudging" paperwork could negatively affect decisions about law, policy—and funding—that could have a major impact on you, your agency, and the families you serve. ♦

References for this article can be found at <www.practicenotes.org>

YOUR PART MATTERS

Providing complete, accurate, and timely case documentation:

- Helps capture family progress
- Ensures key data is available when caseworkers or supervisors change, become ill, or there is an emergency
- Provides documentation for court
- Verifies activities for which county DSS's can claim reimbursement
- Enables agencies to demonstrate their effectiveness to State and federal agencies, county and community representatives, and other stakeholders

Source: NCDSS, 2002; Muskie, 2001

OPPORTUNITY FOR INPUT!

If you are a North Carolina county DSS supervisor, director, or administrator we'd like to give you a chance to help shape "Working with Outcomes," a data-related training that will soon be offered to child welfare supervisors. The training will be designed to support counties in their efforts to use data to guide practice and enhance performance.

This is an opportunity to tell us what you would like to see in a course on this subject. We'd like to know:

- What are your learning needs with regard to the collection, analysis, and application of outcomes data to child welfare practice in your county?
- Would you be willing (and able) to engage in online learning as part of this course?

Please let us know your thoughts about the use of data and this curriculum.

E-mail your comments to:

johnmcmahon@mindspring.com

IN THIS ISSUE: USING DATA TO IMPROVE CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

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