

# 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 11, Number 3  
June 2006

*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!

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## OUTCOMES AND CHILD WELFARE

What do the words "outcomes" and "accountability" mean to you?

Your answer may depend a lot on your job. If you work as a director or program manager in a county department of social services, these words are probably all too familiar, since you are regularly asked by county commissioners, state and federal reviewers, and others to prove your agency is functioning as it should.

If you're a supervisor or a frontline child welfare worker, however, the connection may be less clear. And yet, as the fictitious memo below illustrates, outcomes and accountability are concepts that drive the decisions that shape all of human services, including child welfare.

Could you respond to such a memo? Could you or your supervisor describe in a quantifiable way how your unit makes a positive difference for families and children?

This issue of *Practice Notes* will tell you about Cornerstone IV, a new MRS-focused course that teaches supervisors in all DSS programs how to analyze data and, using that data, to measure progress toward successful outcomes. We will also explore the language of outcomes and provide you with information about some outcome-focused federal and state review processes that impact child welfare agencies. ♦



Photo illustration

**What do outcomes have to do with me?**

### AN URGENT MEMO

*You are the supervisor of a service unit within your county DSS. You and your unit just attended an agency-wide meeting called by the Director. This memo was handed out as you walked into the meeting.*

To: All unit supervisors

From: K.C. Canum, DSS Director

Re: Organizational changes

Our agency is facing unprecedented challenges and changes due to the fiscal crisis in our county and state. I have met with our Board, our fiscal management team, and the county commissioners to develop a feasible plan that will enable our agency to exist within this unstable fiscal environment, meet our legal mandates, and serve our clients to the best of our ability. To this end, an organizational priority will be to undertake a results-based management style. We want to be able to quantify the benefits of our services and programs, improve where necessary, and clearly communicate the value of our work to our stakeholders.

Together, we need to approach these challenges head-on and with a commitment to our mission. We also need to be cost-effective and make decisions that are well informed. I ask that all supervisors provide me with a report 6 months from today that answers the question, "What kind of positive difference are you making for your clients, and to what extent are your program's goals attained?" I will need to eliminate any unit that cannot demonstrate this and contract out their services and programs to another agency. This necessary action will be painful, but in the end it will enable our agency to survive.

## NC REVIEWS FOCUS ON OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

As you undoubtedly know, every two years North Carolina reviews the performance of the child welfare unit in every county department of social services. These reviews, formerly called the biennial reviews but now called Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), have long been known for the emotions they inspire. But they are also increasingly being recognized for how they can help county agencies and the state as a whole improve child welfare practice and enhance outcomes for families and children.

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The first statewide reviews of child welfare services in North Carolina began in 1992 with biennial reviews of child protective services. In 1996 the review expanded to include all mandated children's services. In 2001 the federal government reviewed North Carolina's child welfare system, and our state—like every other state in the country—entered federal Program Improvement status.

To enhance our ability to address the issues identified by federal reviewers and to help us prepare for future federal reviews, the NC Division of Social Services redesigned its county-level review protocol, process, and instruments to mirror the federal review process. It began using this new process in October 2001.

Thanks in part to this new review process, by June 2005 North Carolina had successfully rectified all areas that were in nonconformity on the federal review and met all requirements of the federal Program Improvement Plan. Our state will probably participate in its next federal review within the next year.

### PURPOSE OF THE REVIEWS

North Carolina's Child and Family Services Review process helps counties achieve the goals, mission, vision, and desired outcomes for the state's Family Support and Child Welfare Services system. The reviews provide a mechanism for:

- Evaluating the child welfare system's response to children and families
- Identifying management, training, and policy issues
- Recognizing strengths in practice
- Making recommendations to strengthen the delivery of all children's services programs statewide

Because it is based on the federal process, these reviews assess each county's performance relative to the federal outcomes and indicators described in the box on page 3. By measuring outcomes and the practices behind them, the reviews provide public accountability for all 100 county departments of social services and for the child welfare system statewide.

**I spent a long time as a CPS investigator. I can honestly say that when I was in that role I didn't do the job workers do today. That's not because I didn't have the skills, but because today we have standards in place to guide us through a more thorough process. The CFSRs monitor those standards and help us improve our level of practice.**



—Cindy Holman, Children's Program Rep., NCDSS

### THE REVIEW PROCESS

North Carolina's Child and Family Services Review process follows these general steps:

**Notification.** Three months prior to the review, the Division informs the county DSS director when the site review will take place.

**Data submission and analysis.** Within 10 days of notification, the county agency must submit certain data to the Division for analysis. The county must also provide reviewers with names and contact information for individuals who will be involved in the survey of community stakeholders.

**Survey of community stakeholders.** In the period leading up to the review a survey is sent to social services board members, the guardian ad litem administrator, and other community stakeholders to help reviewers assess the strengths and needs of the agency.

**County self-report and self-survey.** In the period leading up to the review the agency completes a self-report and self-survey. This survey gives the agency an opportunity to talk about its use and understanding of its data, its strengths, areas needing improvement, and relevant community issues.

**Site review.** A review team from the Division visits the agency. During this visit they:

(a) Select and review case records. Case records are randomly selected for the areas of placement and case planning/case management. A sample of cases that were either unsubstantiated or substantiated and closed, and a sample of reports that were not accepted (i.e., "screened out") are also reviewed. The number of records reviewed depends on county size.

(b) Conduct interviews. In addition to the records themselves, the review of selected cases involves interviews with social workers, age-appropriate children, family members, foster parents, GALs, and others involved.

An important aspect of the CFSR is that each site visit is conducted using a partnership model. In this *cont. p. 4*

**NORTH CAROLINA'S COUNTY-LEVEL CFSR: OUTCOMES AND PERFORMANCE**  
**Dec. 1, 2003 – June 30, 2005**

Eighty-one counties were reviewed during this time period. As directed by its federal Program Improvement Plan, North Carolina reviewed Mecklenburg County four times during this time span.

**Safety Outcome 1:** Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect.

- Item 1. Timeliness of initiating reports of maltreatment
- Item 2. Repeat maltreatment

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 55%*

**Safety Outcome 2:** Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

- Item 3. Services to the family to protect children in the home and prevent removal
- Item 4. Risk of harm to children

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 43%*

**Permanency Outcome 1:** Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.

- Item 5. Foster care re-entries
- Item 6. Stability of foster care placement
- Item 7. Permanency goal for child
- Item 8. Reunification, guardianship, or permanent placement with relatives
- Item 9. Adoption
- Item 10. Permanency goal of other planned permanent living arrangement

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 76%*

**Permanency Outcome 2:** The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

- Item 11. Proximity of foster care placement
- Item 12. Placement with siblings
- Item 13. Visiting with parents and siblings in foster care
- Item 14. Preserving connections
- Item 15. Relative placement
- Item 16. Relationship of child in care with parents

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 98%*

**Well-Being Outcome 1:** Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

- Item 17. Needs and services of child, parents, and foster parents
- Item 18. Child and family involvement in case planning
- Item 19. Worker visits with child
- Item 20. Worker visits with parent(s)

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 63%*

**Well-Being Outcome 2:** Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.

- Item 21. Educational needs of the child

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 94%*

**Well-Being Outcome 3:** Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

- Item 22. Physical health of the child
- Item 23. Mental health of the child

*Counties in substantial conformity for this outcome: 86%*

## NC REVIEWS *continued from page 3*

approach reviewers work in pairs—one person from the county and one person representing the Division—for reviewing records, conducting interviews, and rating the items and outcomes.

Historically, being reviewed was often nerve-wracking for counties simply because it involved scrutiny from outside evaluators. Cindy Holman, a children’s program representative (CPR) for the Division, says she has seen a lessening of this effect since the Division moved to the partnership model. She says this approach has helped counties understand the Division’s motivations, and that “We are truly focused on outcomes for families, service quality, and supporting counties.”

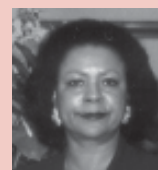
(c) **Debriefing.** When the case review instrument, appropriate interviews, and the case rating summary have been completed, each state/county review team makes a presentation to the entire review team. These debriefings often occur several times during the course of the on-site review. After all of the cases have been debriefed, the entire review team completes the county rating summary in preparation for the exit conference.

**Exit conference.** An exit conference is held at the conclusion of the review to present general findings from the review process and provide closure. At this meeting there is an opportunity for questions about the review team’s findings, comments about the findings, and identification of anything that the county would like reflected in the review report. The director is also given the opportunity to complete a form evaluating the review process itself.

**CFSR final report.** Within 30 days of the site visit the Division shares with the director a draft copy of the county’s Child and Family Services Review Report. This report includes analysis of all outcomes of the review and relevant data. It focuses on broad program issues and identifies strengths and areas for improvement. Information provided by the county DSS in the agency self-report is incorporated into the final report. After considering any requests from the county for changes, the Division sends a final version of the CFSR report to the agency director, the chair of the social services board, the chair of the county commissioners, and the county manager.

**Follow-up visit.** The agency’s CPR contacts the county within 30 days after the agency receives the draft report. This visit provides an opportunity for the agency and the CPR to discuss the issues and recommendations contained in the report. During this visit the CPR also shares positive feedback regarding practice issues.

**If we expect agencies to use the family-centered approach with families, we at the Division should do the same with counties. It is our goal to apply the six principles of partnership to all our interactions with county staff, including the reviews.**



— Beverly Monk Daniel, Program Manager  
North Carolina Division of Social Services

**Program Improvement.** A formal Program Improvement Plan (PIP) is required from each county for any outcome area that does not meet substantial conformity. The PIP is developed by the county with assistance from its CPR. The process for developing the PIP is much like the process of developing a case plan with families—it is done collaboratively and realistically, with a focus on the county’s strengths.

After the PIP is drawn up, supervisors and others within the agency monitor performance in the area(s) of concern. When the county believes it is ready, it asks the CPR to review its progress. When the CPR believes the county is ready, she or he recommends to the Division that the county be released from program improvement status.

More detailed information about North Carolina’s Child and Family Services Review process is described in the CFSR protocol (<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/stats/docs/protocol.pdf>).

The intent of the Child and Family Services Review process is to enhance the quality of practice in North Carolina’s children’s services system. The reviews give the Division and county departments of social services a structural assessment of their programs and allow them to direct energy to the areas most needing improvement. Counties can use the results of their review to document their compliance with accreditation requirements for child welfare services. Counties that do well have the opportunity to use the review process to provide their community with documentation of their successes.

The reviews also identify needs for training and technical assistance from the Division, and fulfill the need for public reporting of children’s services issues. At the end of each two-year review cycle the Division of Social Services publishes a summary report containing an analysis of the findings from the Child and Family Services reviews. The summary report for the 2003-2005 biennium is available at <http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/stats/docs/2003-2005%20CFSR%20Report-v4.pdf>. ♦

## SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF OUTCOMES

We work in a system where, at the national, state, and local levels, the emphasis is increasingly on accountability and outcomes. This emphasis is often communicated using terms such as “indicator,” “goal,” “baseline,” and of course, “outcome.” Unfortunately, not everyone working in North Carolina’s county departments

of social services have been formally introduced to these terms. Even for those who have, it can still be a struggle to connect these words to the work you do every day. We hope the following will make the language of outcomes a little more accessible and useful to you. ♦

Term	Definition	In NC’s Family Support and Child Welfare Services System	Connection to You
<b>Goal</b>	The general aim of a person, organization, or system	Our goal is to help families achieve a state of safety, self-sufficiency, permanence, and well-being through a family-centered approach.	System goals and missions guide and focus the missions and goals of the agency where you work. Misalignment between system and agency goals can create difficulties.
<b>Mission</b>	A statement that helps an agency or system focus on its goals	Our mission is to ensure safe, permanent, and nurturing families for children.	Your work in your agency supports pursuit of this mission in some way. Job satisfaction and effectiveness depend in part on whether your personal goals fit with system goals.
<b>Outcome</b>	An event, occurrence, or condition <u>AFTER</u> services have been provided	Our system has 7 outcomes, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect.</li> <li>· Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.</li> <li>· Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children’s needs.</li> <li>· Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs.</li> <li>· Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.</li> </ul>	Your work in the agency contributes in some way to one or more of these outcomes. These outcomes are also the ones evaluated by North Carolina’s county-level Child and Family Review Process (formerly known as the biennial review).
<b>Outcome Measurement</b>	The regular, systematic tracking of the extent to which participants in a program experience benefits or make the intended change	The federal-level Child and Family Services Reviews, the county-level child and family services reviews, the experiences reports—these and many other regular, systematic reviews and reports help us assess the effectiveness of the work we do. Your agency and your unit probably also track specific client outcomes.	Virtually everyone in your agency contributes to the collection of data used in outcome measurement. Everyone is also affected when agency decision makers revise policies or request practice changes in response to outcome measurement information.
<b>Baseline</b>	Information about past performance used as a point of reference or comparison to assess future performance	Baselines are used widely in North Carolina’s child welfare system. For example, an agency may use its substantiation rate from last year as the basis of comparison for its future performance. Baselines help us identify trends.	As someone involved in services to families, you contribute to your agency’s baseline data and to the current performance that is being compared to that baseline.
<b>Outcome Indicator</b>	Statements that identify, with numerical values, progress toward desired results	For example, to assess the recurrence of child maltreatment in a state, the federal government uses the following benchmark: A state is said to be doing a good job preventing the recurrence of child maltreatment if 6.1% or fewer of children who were victims of abuse and/or neglect experience another incident of abuse and/or neglect within six months.	Outcome data can tell us when our performance fails to meet standards, but they cannot tell us why or what to do. To fully understand a problem and how to solve it agencies should solicit the insights and experience of those who work on the front lines of child welfare.



# HOW THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT USES OUTCOMES FOR PROGRAM ACCOUNTABILITY: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SCARY

by Ray Kirk, PhD

This issue of *Practice Notes* focuses on outcomes. Although our local program or agency budgets normally reflect the activities that we engage in during service delivery, those activities should result in observable or measurable outcomes for service recipients. Generally, we want to observe or measure some positive change in skills, resources, circumstances, safety, or well-being among the service recipients. Outcomes observed at the level of the service recipients are essential to knowing whether we are achieving the desired results, and can be used to improve individual case practice or even entire programs. These are good uses of outcome measures.

But outcome measures are also being used at the systems level by federal offices and agencies for purposes of accountability. It is important to be aware of these activities as future federal funding of human service programs may well depend on systems-level performance on global and sometimes arbitrary outcome measures.

## THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEW

One of the federal outcome accountability efforts that most readers of *Practice Notes* will be aware of is the Child and Family Service Reviews, or CFSRs. Under the federal CFSR process, states' child welfare data are analyzed and compared to standards set by the Children's Bureau. Outcomes that are on the list for review include, among others, the out-of-home placement rate, the reunification rate, and the adoption rate.

During the first round of CFSRs the standards were set very high, and not a single state passed its initial review. As a result, each state developed a program improvement plan, or PIP, that had to be approved by the Children's Bureau. The PIPs are intended to improve each state's performance on the specified outcome measures so that states come closer to the standards during subsequent CFSRs. This sounds like straightforward accountability, and no one would argue against accountability. But, there are subtle problems with the process, and states will struggle to overcome those problems in order to improve their CFSR scores.

For example, if a state has a higher than normal child removal rate, it is probably removing some children who really don't need to be removed from their homes. Therefore, that state is likely to have a reunification rate that is higher than usual. On its face, a high reunification rate is a good thing, but if the state in question focuses on lowering its child removal rate, and succeeds, it will also likely lower its reunification rate. Thus, improvement on one of the CFSR standards may have the unintended consequence

of lowering performance on another standard. In a sense, the outcome measures in question compete with one another, and simultaneous improvement on all of the CFSR outcome measures and their companion standards is unlikely. State agencies will struggle to accommodate their PIPs, and chasing those CFSR standards may have programmatic and policy consequences that, in turn, affect local program funding and service priorities. At some point in the future, as yet unknown, states' individual funding from the federal government may be linked to CFSR performance. Thus, the stakes are high with respect to outcome accountability.



## THE PROGRAM ASSESSMENT REVIEW TOOL

Another federal outcome accountability initiative that is quite recent and potentially even more important with respect to future funding is the Program Assessment Review Tool (PART) process developed by the President's Office of Management and Budget, or OMB. According to OMB, "The PART was developed to assess and improve program performance so that the federal government can achieve better results. A PART review helps identify a program's strengths and weaknesses to inform funding and management decisions aimed at making the program more effective."

A full explanation of how PART works, as well as results of the nearly 800 PART reviews completed to date, can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/expectmore>. But for the purpose of this discussion, it is enough to know that the basics of PART include answering 25 questions on the PART instrument, and then receiving an overall rating of program performance. A program may be rated as effective, moderately effective, adequate, ineffective, or results not demonstrated. The different ratings relate to the degree to which the program sets and achieves ambitious goals, and the degree to which the program is well managed and efficient.

Like the CFSRs, the PART process sounds like straightforward accountability based in part on outcomes, and in part on efficiency. And, as with the CFSRs, few would argue that effectiveness and efficiency are not desirable. But, there are potential pitfalls in the PART process when it is applied to child and family service programs.

These pitfalls in the PART process relate to the degree to which outcomes are known and measurable, and how efficiency is defined by OMB. For example, the Office of Child Support Enforcement received a rating *cont. p. 7*

continued from page 6

of “effective,” the highest rating possible. Examination of the components of the program reveals that they are well specified in the program’s legislation (e.g., “locate non-custodial parents, obtain child and spousal support”). Further, although government information systems are often poor at tracking vulnerable or disadvantaged service recipients, they are usually very good at tracking money, and child support enforcement is all about getting the money and providing it to the intended recipients.

For Child Support Enforcement, the outcomes are clear, and the measurement of the outcomes is fairly easy, both conceptually and in fact. Efficiency is also easy to address simply by dividing the amount of money the program brings in by how much money the program costs to administer.

But what about programs that are highly varied and for which the outcomes are less defined? For example, consider the national Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, or CBCAP program. The legislative purpose of CBCAP is to “...support community efforts to develop, operate, expand, and enhance initiatives aimed at the prevention of child abuse and neglect; [and] to support networks of coordinated resources and activities to better strengthen and support families to reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect...”

There are many different ways to interpret the true intent of this legislative mandate. The CBCAP legislative purpose does not read like a specific program (like child support enforcement) but rather like a set of guidelines for states to follow, within which there is great flexibility.

In fact, there are 50 separate state CBCAP programs, rather than a single CBCAP program operating in 50 states. In 40% of states, the CBCAP money is administered by an independent Children’s Trust Fund, and in the remainder of states the funds are administered by the state child welfare agency. There is no national database for CBCAP programs or activities. The state CBCAP lead agencies do not engage in direct service.

The PART process seems to be based on an expectation that the program outcomes will be very clear, uniform throughout the country, and that there will be measurement data available. With respect to CBCAP, this is not the case. The result has been that OMB fell back on the language in the preamble to the CBCAP legislation and has specified one outcome to which all CBCAP programs will be held accountable: a decrease in the rate of first-time victims of child maltreatment. So, 50 disparate state programs that do not engage in direct service are being held responsible for changing the national statistic on first-time

## BENEFITS OF LEARNING ABOUT AND MEASURING OUTCOMES

1. Helps identify what is most effective and what needs to be improved
2. Provides reliable information for use in decision-making
3. Empowers clients and families as they participate in your program
4. Motivates workers by helping them focus on positive outcomes and celebrate successes
5. Provides administrators with information for management decisions
6. Assists agencies in grant applications, accreditation, and community collaboration

victims of child abuse. Furthermore, since there is no national CBCAP database, OMB will rely on data from the national child abuse and neglect data system (NCANDS), a system to which CBCAP programs do not contribute.

A skeptical view of this arrangement is that CBCAP has been forced to fit into a review process that is not appropriate for its legislative purpose, relying on vicarious data sources. Similar problems of “fit” arise when efficiency is considered, since the amount of money that states can use for administrative purposes is fixed by law and the remainder of each state’s CBCAP grant is distributed to other agencies and providers.

Although outcome accountability is generally a good thing, the OMB PART attempts to hold the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention program accountable for outcomes that it does not directly influence using data that it does not collect or contribute. Even the Children’s Bureau agrees. As this article is being written, the Children’s Bureau and a working group of state CBCAP representatives are trying to negotiate a different outcome or set of outcomes for OMB to use that relate more directly to the CBCAP legislation, and for which the state CBCAP programs can provide the measurement data.

## CONCLUSION

It is very important that service providers, from line workers to agency directors to policy executives, in all areas of child welfare, become conversant in outcome measurement and outcome accountability. Doing so will help deliver the very best practice, and also help defend programs from untoward consequences of inadequately designed accountability measures and standards. ♦

## A TRAINING RESOURCE FOR OUTCOMES AND COLLABORATION

It takes everyone—inside and outside the agency—to achieve the outcomes DSS seeks. This means that if you want to make improvements on an outcome, you don't need to work harder or longer hours. Instead, you must work smarter by building partnerships within your agency and with others in your community.

Even when they accept this concept in principle, some agencies don't try hard enough to look for ways to partner across programs within the agency. Although there is the perception that there are funding or programmatic barriers that prevent this collaboration, this is usually not the case. The actual hindrance has more to do with a lack of incentives for collaboration across program lines.

In North Carolina this is changing somewhat, thanks to the Multiple Response System (MRS). With MRS—and particularly with its family assessment response—agencies are encouraged to provide more front-end, supportive services to families. To do this, people need to work more closely across program lines. This increased collaboration is already being seen between child welfare and economic services. As MRS continues, it is likely that it will foster closer partnerships with child support, food stamps, and other programs.

Now there is a training course designed to bring supervisors from across North Carolina's county DSS's together to focus on collaborating to improve outcomes. Called *Cornerstone IV: Working with Others, Working with Outcomes*, this course teaches supervisors how to analyze data and, using that data, to measure progress toward successful outcomes. It also teaches participants to articulate those successes to various stakeholders.

*Cornerstone IV* is being piloted during the 2005-2006 training year with teams of county DSS supervisors. DSS directors or supervisors interested in learning about the pilot events should contact Teresa Turner, Training Manager for the NC Division of Social Services (919/733-7672) or Amy Ramirez, Training Coordinator for the Family and Children's Resource Program at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Social Work (919/962-4365; aramirez@email.unc.edu).

The curriculum will be offered as a 300 series course for all supervisors after July 1, 2006. ♦



Photo Illustration

**Cornerstone IV helps counties "turn the curve" on outcomes.**



### WE NEED YOUR HELP!

To help us decide what to write about in future issues, we have created a **BRIEF** reader survey. If you would log in to <[http://www.practicenotes.org/vol11\\_no3/survey.htm](http://www.practicenotes.org/vol11_no3/survey.htm)> and take this very short questionnaire we would be eternally grateful. Thank you for reading and supporting *Practice Notes*.

## IN THIS ISSUE: OUTCOMES AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN CHILD WELFARE

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State Courier # 17-61-04