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Special Issue

Best Practice *Next Practice*

Family-Centered Child Welfare

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice convened its first Annual Meeting of State and Tribe Child Welfare Officials on November 29, 2000 in New Orleans. The meeting focused on the new Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and provided an opportunity for 41 states and seven tribes to learn about it from the Children's Bureau. Peer-to-peer technical assistance was also provided in workgroup sessions. Jerry Milner, Child Welfare Specialist with the Children's Bureau, was the keynote speaker. His opening address, "The Vision of and the Opportunity for the New Review Process," focused on the development and importance of the CFSR process. Child welfare staff who participated in testing the CFSR provided many ideas, strategies, and suggestions for others preparing for their review. Below we provide some of the key points that Jerry Milner discussed, and focus on the importance of collaboration in the review process as discussed in the workgroups. A complete transcript of the meeting is available on our website

CFSR: "Just So Darn Close"

"Not everyone is as excited about this review process as I am," said Jerry Milner at the conference. "It has been very exciting to be a part of something that has such tremendous potential and promise for affecting the quality of services to children and families in our country."

Jerry Milner has been instrumental in creating the CFSR, which has benefited from and contributed to the quality assurance system in Alabama that has been operational in the state for several years. Using this experience, he has refined it further. Over the past five years, 14 states have piloted the CFSR. He says that for the most part, the 14 pilot states that helped in the development were enthusiastic about it. Some suggest the states were eager because there were no penalties attached for noncom-

pliance; there was nothing at risk. Milner disagrees with that idea, however.

"The 14 pilot states took a tremendous risk in opening up their systems to expose, not only the things that were working well, but things that needed improvement. We appreciate their willingness to help shape the process." Based on their results, the review has been further refined. At the same time Milner says, "We were able to preserve the fundamental concepts of this overall review—a focus on the outcomes and quality." While Milner concedes that the review process is not yet a *perfect* process—tremendous revisions have been made along the way and will continue as we learn more—he is convinced that "it's just so darn close."

Milner stresses the importance of the review process, both for those in the field

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PROFIT: Realizing the Benefits of the CFSR

Elaine Squadrito, Regional Director of Family Services in Rhode Island, learned a great deal from her lead role as a CFSR pilot state. At the conference she reminded participants that “there are numerous opportunities that you can’t see as you’re going into this...valuable realizations that result in long-term practice improvements initiated by this review. These continue long after the review is over.” She devised the following mnemonic device, PROFIT, to explain Rhode Island’s review experience:

- P Partnership**
- R Results**
- O Orientation**
- F Focus**
- I Institutionalization**
- T Timing**

Partnership with federal, state, neighboring states’ offices, and stakeholders began before we even knew we were going to be a pilot state through our work with the regional office.

To prepare for training on the review, our regional office arranged for us to participate in another state, Maine, as reviewers. We learned a great deal in the Maine review process, and we applied what we learned to Rhode Island. Partnerships made it possible to approach the review with a fuller understanding of what direction to take. Nothing we did was by ourselves.

The partnership grew to a review team committee, which included both key internal staff and key community stakeholders. We wanted them involved from the beginning. Because we wanted good representation, we invited some of our major critics to be a part of the CFSR process. This helped assure that we got good information. We didn’t want to get to the on-site review and find out things for which we hadn’t, and weren’t, prepared.

Results and Orientation, the R and O in PROFIT, are really “where do we want this review process to take us?” It is determining the results you want to have for your state. These are not just the results as specified outcomes, not just the results of the review itself, but the results in a long-term sense of practice improvements initiated by this review process that continue to be experienced after it is completed.

Focus. The CFSR was an opportunity for us all to take a good look at what we really are all about: good practice with children and families. We realized that over the years in the aftermath of our SACWIS implementation, we had experienced a definite culture change that had pulled our attention away from good social work practice.

We had been doing mandatory training on AFCARS, for example. We were saying to our social workers: “It’s very important that you sit at your computer and be sure to enter whether the mother was married at the time of the birth of this child.” Workers started to say to us, “What direction are we going? What’s happening here?” They were questioning whether the emphasis on the new electronic data system was beginning to take precedence over good social work practice. It isn’t that the training and the emphasis on AFCARS and SACWIS wasn’t important, it was more like a plea: “This isn’t the stuff we’re made of. This isn’t why we came into this practice.” And they felt they were spending less and less time with their families, and increasing amounts of time using the new information system.

This was a valuable realization. We embraced the CFSR process because of the focus on safety, permanency, and well-being, and how it can put the emphasis back where it belongs on the work that our line staff does with families and children and how we support them in that difficult work.

When our staff meet now at supervisors’ meetings and administrative meetings, we’re talking about safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families. It’s our responsibility to keep the focus there, now that the on-site review is over.

Institutionalization. We continuously monitor both outcomes and the viability of the fundamental systemic factors. In this way we can keep informed about how well we are doing, and what changes have occurred.

We’ve accomplished this in several different ways. First, we decided that supervisors were absolutely key to this process, and we involved them on the review committee from the beginning. Some were case leaders, others had cases that were examined. We’re

still working with those same supervisors because of their influence on direct practice. Second, we modified our SACWIS system to generate a monthly fact sheet containing all of the data elements. These are available for a monthly review by supervisors with workers, for every case around those issues linked to the specified outcome data elements. This helps workers and supervisors to stay focused on safety, permanency, and well-being. Third, we continued to involve our MIS staff. The experience of the review taught our MIS staff that when the data elements were there, it was easy to analyze them. Now that Rhode Island's MIS staff know what those data elements are, they are going to institutionalize procedures to develop those data items, not just every four years, when the review comes, but regularly, for staff to use for many other purposes.

Timing. Timing is everything. Give yourselves time, especially around the sampling and scheduling of parent interviews. This takes more time than expected, and may delay preparing the supervisors for the cases that are selected for review. Even if your state is not being reviewed this year, start now. It is never too early to get ready for this process.

Remember, CFSR is just the beginning to make long-term practice improvements.

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and for policy makers. "There are members of Congress who believe that this process offers us the hope of having positive effects on the way that child and family services are delivered to children and families throughout the country. Don't underestimate the importance of this."

The reviews are important because of *what* they are designed to accomplish and *how* they are done. First, the reviews give us a process to look at outcomes for children and families. While previous reviews were based on documentation and thoroughness of case records, the CFSR gives us the opportunity to see what is actually happening to children and families. It is about outcomes: whether children are safe, whether children in foster care are moving toward permanent outcomes, and whether the well-being of children and families that we serve is promoted and assured by the services we provide.

"These should be the measure of our success in child welfare, as opposed to whether we have actually documented everything in the record," explains Milner.

Second, the reviews are designed to give information that state, tribal, and other child welfare leaders, officials, and staff can use to make *program improvements* in their states. "The review will yield information that is important at the national level to help shape policy, to help allocate resources, and design the programs throughout the state that provide services to the

children and families in *your* state," Milner pointed out. The opportunity to make program improvements is the primary reason that the process has been designed. "We can determine the strengths and what the needs are within programs," says Milner. "We don't just walk out of a state after a review is over; we continue to work with the states to make program improvements where we have identified the need."

Third, the reviews are important because, like services to children and families, they are part of an *ongoing* process. "The real heart of this process," Milner says, "is the program improvement aspect of the Child and Family Services Review. It signals a new way of doing business with states because it incorporates so many of the programs that we currently work on with states." The reviews include many different facets and activities that extend over time, as we work with states to move all states toward a higher standard than we have now. The review process also emphasizes practice principles that support improved outcomes for children and families, family-centered practice, community-based services, and individualizing services.

Next, the CFSR is *comprehensive*. It looks at all the programs, and all the services that affect the children and families we serve. Since many children and families receive services of many different programs, it only makes sense to look at them together, not separately.

Catalyst for Change

Diane Towle, Director, Bureau of Operations for Children and Family Services in Maine, served as the state lead on the CFSR pilot. In fact, she wore many hats on the review committee. “This whole process was good, it was very difficult,” she explains. “But it was beneficial as it was an opportunity to look at the serious concerns we had about our practice, and provided an opportunity for all of us to change.” Based on her experience she attests to the importance of the review process:

The first part of the review, the statewide assessment, was completed in June through a series of focus groups and staff meetings, which were more informative than the data analysis. Separate meetings with caseworkers, supervisors, and program administrators gave staff the opportunity to express not only what they thought the system needed, but to say what they needed. Many caseworkers expressed confidence in their ability to assess safety and to protect children. Others stressed a lack of clarity about priorities, roles, and responsibilities. They cited the number of changes, including downsizing of state government, changes in state and federal laws, and new technology that affected morale and staff retention.

To say “We’re afraid when we do this because we don’t know how to do it, we don’t feel qualified to do this anymore,” became the Bureau’s problem. The Bureau became responsible for handling it at all levels. These self-assessments were key to moving the process forward.

On-site visits were set up in August. It is difficult in Maine, which is geographically huge, but the population

is concentrated in pockets scattered around the state. Coordinating meetings with foster parents in one area, biological parents in another community across the state, and services in another direction was a challenge. It took coordination and organization.

The results of the site visits were not a surprise. We knew what our problems were, we knew our strengths. It was gratifying to hear what we were good at—working with families to support reunification or the appropriate use of services to meet the needs of children and families. But to hear the things that were not good—safety concerns, the length of time spent in pre-placement work, often resulting in repeat maltreatment—was sobering. To hear these presented as findings, however, complete with recommendations, helped us focus and address them.

Since the review, we have been working on our improvement plan. We are working with our regional office and a resource center, so that we are not left to do it all on our own. The Administration for Children and Families is right there working with us. I don’t think there is any expectation that the Feds are going to come in and say, “Oh, what a mess. You need to fix all these things,” and leave it to you to do all by yourself.

As a matter of fact, the final written report gives leverage where it is needed most—with legislature, with service providers, and other areas where changes have to be made. Completing this process was probably the best thing we could have done.

“You will hear the word ‘partnership’ floating around, and that word gets used a lot, but sometimes it really doesn’t add up to *partnership*,” notes Milner. What does this mean in the CFSR context? Milner explains that these reviews are conducted in collaboration with states and with state staff and external representatives who can give us a broader perspective about the services and outcomes within that state. These staff sit along side one another, are part of the process, in meetings, in decision-making. At the end of the process, there should be very few surprises for the state, because the state staff have been involved throughout. “Part-

nership actually materializes in some significant and important ways.” This partnership also provides tribes with opportunities to be involved in this process.

Accountability is another reason the reviews are important. “We are not sacrificing accountability,” said Milner. “All of us share the responsibility to see that programs are administered as they were intended, that funds are spent on behalf of children and families in appropriate ways, and that we are moving steadily towards the outcomes that those programs were intended to achieve for children.”

The review gives us an opportunity to look at factors that have a significant impact on state agencies' ability or capacity to help children and families achieve positive outcome—the *systemic factors*. These are the state child welfare agency's information system capacity, training of staff and providers, the case review system, recruitment of foster and adoptive families, quality assurance systems, involvement of community stakeholders in family safety, permanency, well-being, and the array and availability of services.

CFSR: Not a Checklist

“The CFSR is meant to be a process that will yield important information of depth and quality. It is meant to be difficult because the work that we are reviewing is very hard work,” cautioned Milner. It requires careful planning and assessment and crucial decision making. “We decided that if we had a review process that did not reflect that level of effort, and did not review some of those same kinds of processes that we expect out of our case workers in the field, then we would not be able to collect the kind of information we need to change practice, to improve practice, and to build on the strengths that we discover in the process.” The review mirrors what best practice should be.

A checklist type of review—read a few records and declare the state in or out of conformity and move on merrily to the next state—would have been much easier, concedes Milner. “There have been a few occasions when I thought that would have been a better way to go; less controversial,” he chuckles, “But the reviews are strongly focused on quality—the quality

Tribal Involvement in CFSR: An Active Role

Mary McNevins of the National Indian Child Welfare Association urged an active role in the Review process:

As we know, the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is a collaborative effort between the state and federal governments. However, tribal governments are key stakeholders and should also play an active role in the CFSR. States are strongly encouraged to include tribal representatives in this review process. Consequently, all tribes should have an understanding of the review process and how they can be actively involved in the review team, the statewide assessment, and the on-site phases of these reviews.

For states:

- ◆ Send letters to all tribal councils and tribal social services directors within the State to explain the Child and Family Services Review, including the proposed review date.
- ◆ Invite tribal representatives to a statewide tribal meeting about the review.
- ◆ Identify interested representatives who will participate on review teams.
- ◆ Identify key tribal stakeholders, both locally and statewide.
- ◆ Continue ongoing dialog with tribal leaders, social service directors, and review team members, beginning at the earliest stages.

For tribes:

- ◆ Ask for a copy of your State IV-B Plan and review it.
- ◆ Communicate with the State Child Welfare Administrator about the Child and Family Services Review; find out the review date.
- ◆ Ask to be invited to state planning meetings for the review.
- ◆ Discuss the review with local/regional state child welfare administrators in your area.
- ◆ Identify potential tribal review team members.
- ◆ Identify potential key tribal stakeholders.

For more information, contact the National Indian Child Welfare Association, 503.222.4044.

“Miracles” Started Happening in Mississippi

Things needed to change in child welfare in Mississippi: the media focused on several child deaths; reports about the agency were critical of services; and foster parents had vocalized their concerns about their needs and the needs of the children in their care. Case loads were burdensome, and statistics did not show progress. It was a good thing that Mississippi was the first state chosen to test the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) monitoring strategy designed to encourage federal/state partnerships in identifying and working toward improved outcomes for children and families. When you are down, that’s the time that people are more accepting of assistance, explained Sue Perry, Director, Family and Children’s Services. “We didn’t know what we were getting into, but we’re thankful that we went through the process, because it does work.” Perry explained how that happened in Mississippi:

After our review, as recommended, we held a state-wide self-assessment conference and brought together all the critics, stakeholders, foster parents, and legislators to share the Administration on Children and Families final report. We were hesitant to share the report, which contained so many recommendations to improve the areas of safety, permanency, and well-being within our systems; the report opened us up, we feared, to further criticism. “You have to show this report,” the Feds said, “because they have to be part of making the changes that are needed for this system. You can’t do it by yourself.” And that was the beginning of the change, the “miracles,” in Mississippi.

We immediately received targeted technical assistance from the national resource centers; we began forming task forces throughout the state; groups worked together for legislation to raise money for task forces; we were moving in the right direction. Yet, we had more hurdles to overcome.

of services and the quality of outcomes—and quality doesn’t come cheap or easy.”

The Review poses challenging questions: it cannot be reduced to a compliance-oriented checklist. The CFSR is inherently a process requiring negotiation, consultation, evaluation, and partnership between the federal, state, and regional office, and between the child welfare

A case was receiving a lot of media attention, and the judge opened the courtroom to the media. Though the case had been managed well, it appeared in court that the case had been seriously mishandled. A painful Senate hearing resulted. Yet, our former critics, and federal officers, came to support us—they had now invested themselves in our system and its improvement. All of us worked together and drafted an extensive bill that made major improvements and increased funding in Mississippi.

There was not enough funding to do all that we needed: to increase funds to a more acceptable level to foster parents and to provide more staff for DHS. Yet the foster parents, recognizing the impact of this funding decision, called their legislators and said “No. We’ll make do with what we’ve got, but give us the social workers.”

Our staff felt supported by the community and by the foster parents. We felt we were all working together in a concerted effort to make positive changes in the lives of children and families.

We also developed a strategic plan to help us know where we are going and measure our success. When this process began we had two family preservation specialists in the state; now we have 62. Previously, we had no family resource centers, today we have 67 in the state. We have made a difference with families: in 1998 we had 553 reports of substantiated abuse; in 1999 it was 264. Reentries in foster care have decreased: in 1998 there were 72 reentries, in 1999 there were none. The number of children entering custody has decreased: in 1998 there were 1211 new entries; in 1999 there were 838.

While the child welfare system in Mississippi is not perfect, it’s a lot better. Working together, we are going to get there.

agency and the diverse constituency needed to produce solid outcomes for children and families. Perhaps this is what Milner means by “perfect.”

CFSR: A Collaborative Process

According to those who have experienced the review process, involving other stakeholders—from the local commu-

nity to the federal level—in the process is both essential and required. “We require that there be external participants in the review process,” explained Milner. “Once we have given external representatives, including some fairly harsh critics, a stake in the process and an opportunity to be part of the process, their support of the agency is solidified. In some cases we have had some support from some very unexpected places because of the way we have included partners.”

Who are the stakeholders? According to the planning process required by the IV-B Children and Family Service Plan there are nine categories of stakeholders involved in the consultation process:

1. All appropriate offices and agencies within the state agency: for example, child protective services, foster care and adoption, the social services block grant, emergency assistance, reunification services, independent living, and other services to youth;
2. In a state-supervised, county-administered state, county social services and/or child welfare director or representatives of the county social service/child welfare administrators’ association;
3. A wide array of state, local, tribal, and community-based agencies and organizations, both public and private nonprofit, with experience in administering programs to infants, children, youth, adolescents, and families, including family preservation and support;
4. Parents, including birth and adoptive parents, foster parents, families with a member with a disability, and consumers of services;
5. For states, representatives of Indian tribes within the state;
6. Representatives of professional and advocacy organizations: for example, foundations and national resource centers, individual practitioners working with children and families, the courts,

Overcoming “Judicial Phobia”

Mark Hardin and Mimi Laver of the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Legal and Judicial Issues stressed that partnership between agencies and courts is critical to the ultimate success of Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR), and finding new ways to work with courts is essential to achieving best results for children.

The CFSR is an opportunity to make court improvements and strengthen court and agency relationships. Ultimately, the relationship between courts and child welfare agencies should be alliances, even while the courts maintain their full neutrality and objectivity. “Agencies have to overcome their judicial phobia,” said Hardin, “as part of their reviews.”

“Specifically, we want CFSR to encourage real, as opposed to superficial, judicial compliance with federal permanency and safety requirements,” he said. The goals of statewide reviews are to help courts and judges commit to achieving permanency and safety for children, to get agencies to support courts in reorganizing themselves, and help staff do a better job in child welfare cases. CFSR can also help identify when agencies, children, and parents need better legal counsel.

How are these challenging goals linked to Child and Family Services Reviews? Do legal improvements depend on how these reviews are conducted? The answer, Hardin says, is for agencies to involve courts and lawyers in the review process. Courts can often help identify crucial, rather subtle, legal barriers to safety and permanency. Courts and attorneys can also identify how agencies can improve their performance in the legal process. On the other hand, agencies can help courts make better safety decisions by presenting better evidence through joint training with case scenarios, joint meetings, and discussions with courts. Improved safety and recidivism rates will be documented in CFSR. Courts are ultimately making these decisions, and need help to improve them.

Agencies can make their reviews responsive to the judicial dimension by actively involving court representatives to plan for the reviews, in the statewide assessments, and to start now. Hardin suggested giving courts information about the reviews in advance to help them understand what the reviews are supposed to accomplish. “At the end of the review process,” he said, “keep judicial improvements in mind as you develop your improvement plans. We hope the plans involve intense cooperative work with courts, and that they will seek improvements in judicial resources and organizations.”

For more information, contact Mimi Laver at 202.662.1736.

representatives of other states or Indian tribes with experience in administering family preservation and family support services, and academicians;

7. Representatives of state and local agencies administering federal funds: for example, Head Start; the local education agency; the health agency; and law enforcement;
8. Administrators, supervisors, and frontline workers of the state and child family services agency, and;
9. Other categories of organizations and individuals based on state and local circumstances.

Stakeholder involvement must be substantial. Milner outlined how stakeholders are used in the review. Stakeholder interviews are held in three different locations in the state. "Statewide" stake-

holders are also interviewed. They are individuals or representatives who can give not just a local perspective on the seven systemic factors, but also a broader statewide perspective.

"We strongly encourage states, as you choose those external representative to be part of that statewide assessment, to tap the valuable resource among tribal representatives to include tribes as part of the process in evaluating outcomes and the systemic factors," said Milner. In addition, he urged states to make use of their court improvement project staff to get greater court involvement. "Many of the areas that we will be reviewing," he explained, "have direct links to the judicial system, and it's important that we have the investment of the courts as we evaluate how well many of those issues are functioning."

CFSR: Making It Work

While the conference offered many other suggestions for preparing and completing the review, involving others was a recurring theme and worth sharing again.

Working with others involved, creating partnerships and sharing ownership, brings surprising results.

The key to a successful CFSR is orchestrating a comprehensive consultation that everyone understands. One simple strategy for this, for example, is to send letters with brief descriptions of the CFSR process to all potential stakeholders who might be involved. Translate the process into terms that people can understand in their day-to-day work. They will be more prepared to begin the process.

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