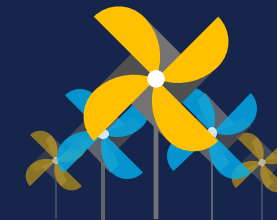




Collaborative Quality Improvement

Division of Child Protection & Permanency



2023 BRIEF #1: QUALITY OF CHILD PROTECTION INVESTIGATIONS

Overview

The Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P) is New Jersey's child protection and child welfare agency within the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF's vision is to assist all New Jersey residents to be safe, healthy, and connected. DCP&P is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect and, if necessary, arranging for the child's protection and connecting families to appropriate services and supports.

The State Central Registry (SCR) is New Jersey's Child Abuse Hotline, and the first point of contact for anyone reporting allegations of child abuse or neglect in New Jersey. SCR fields child protective service (CPS) reports and child welfare service (CWS) referrals from the public 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. ⁱ SCR screeners are responsible for assessing the caller's situation, determining the appropriate response times based on policy, and assigning to the designated DCP&P local office. This brief is focused solely on CPS reports.

Each CPS report is assigned to a highly trained DCP&P intake staff to conduct a rigorous investigation, which includes safety and risk assessments to determine if a child has been abused and/or neglected or is at risk of abuse or neglect. Planning occurs with the family to mitigate safety concerns and reduce risk to the child(ren), and to assess the need for interventions, services, and/or resources that could benefit and support the parents to safely parent the children. The investigation concludes with a one of four tier findings for each allegation: Substantiated, Established, Not Established, or Unfounded. ⁱⁱ A finding of either Substantiated or Established indicates that the preponderance of evidence shows that child abuse and/or neglect has occurred, Not Established or Unfounded determination indicates there was not a preponderance of evidence to support the abuse and/or neglect allegations. Upon conclusion of the investigation, intake staff makes a decision on whether to open or close the DCP&P case for the family based upon safety and levels of risk to the child(ren) and/or the service needs of the family. ^{iii,iv,v}

KEY FINDINGS

The overall quality of investigations was found to be a strength in **81%** of the investigations. A strength rating required clear documentation that supported all allegations and findings, including interviews with all relevant parties. The documentation must have been thorough, containing detailed information from interviews and accurate assessments around risk, and safety that helped support the investigation findings.

- Areas of Strength: **Response Times and Interviews, Safety Assessments, Investigation Completion**
- Areas for Improvement: **Pre- and Post-Investigation Conferences, Accuracy of Risk Assessments, Use of Collaterals**



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Areas of Strength

Key areas of strength are highlighted below:

RESPONSE TIMES AND INTERVIEWS:

DCP&P has established timeframes for the initial response, as well as guidelines regarding relevant persons to be interviewed about the allegations. Required response times vary from immediate to within 24 hours. In 98% of the investigations, the initial response was timely, with contact occurring within the mandated timeframes. In relation to the parents, the review highlighted mothers were consistently interviewed in 98% of investigations, and fathers were interviewed in 85%. Of note, fathers were more often identified as primary caretakers than they had been in past reviews.

SAFETY ASSESSMENT:

Safety Assessments are part of the suite of Structured Decision-Making (SDM) tools used by DCP&P staff and are completed as part of each investigation. SDM tools, which are research and evidence-based, are designed to assist local office staff to make important decisions about critical aspects of the agency's intervention with a family through a uniform process. ^{viii} Safety Assessments support in the determination of whether any child is likely to be in immediate danger and if a safety intervention should be implemented. The review showed Safety Assessments were completed accurately in 92% of investigations with the integration of the available information into the investigative decision making.

INVESTIGATION COMPLETION:

Within 60 calendar days of the local office's receipt of a CPS report assignment from the SCR, assigned intake staff must conclude investigations with a clear statement of the investigation findings for each allegation. ^{vi} The Local Office Manager may grant extensions in increments of 30 days, if the agency needs time to confirm critical information. The review found that 90% of the investigations were completed timely, within 60 days or less of the intake assignment. Extensions were being requested appropriately when investigations needed to go beyond 60 days in 92% of investigations.



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Areas for Improvement

The investigation review highlighted areas for improvement. While the review found that 81% of investigations were of complete or substantial quality, this was a decline in the overall investigation quality since the last review (91%).

Factors that may have contributed to the decline are further described below:

QUALITY OF PRE- AND POST-INVESTIGATION CONFERENCES:

Upon assignment of a CPS report, Intake Supervisors must complete a pre-conference with the responding Intake Worker before an investigation is initiated. The pre-conference should include a discussion of each CPS report and identify appropriate tasks to be completed by the responding Intake Worker. Post-conferences must be promptly held between Intake Supervisors and responding Intake Workers after the initial contact to ensure that an appropriate response was made and that all safety, assessment, investigation, and risk reduction factors were addressed. ^{vii}

The review found that pre- and post-investigation conferences occurred in 98% of investigations; however, the quality of conferences was rated at 76% and 66% for pre-investigation and post-investigation conferences, respectively. Conferences were found to address the specific allegations and concerns in the reports; however, did not contain evidence of clear case specific guidance, a synthesis of information gathered to guide and support the overall investigation, or comprehensive next steps.

ACCURACY OF RISK ASSESSMENTS:

Risk assessments are part of the SDM tools and assist DCP&P staff to determine whether to open a DCP&P case for the family for ongoing services based on assessed risk levels. Risk levels determine whether a family is likely to become re-involved with child protective services.

During the review, 59% of risk assessments were of substantial and complete quality, as compared to the last review, where the overall quality was 67%. The review showed that risk assessments were not always completed for secondary caregiver households, and they did not capture the specialized needs of the children in the household. In November 2020, changes to the SDM tools were implemented to better assess situations where children could be residing in two households, requiring assessments for both primary and secondary households.

USE OF COLLATERAL CONTACTS:

Critical information is often available from persons outside the family household that could [enhance](#) the overall assessment of the family's functioning. Such information is referred to as "collateral contacts" and is used by intake staff to support the overall assessment and investigative findings. Collateral contacts help inform the overall picture of families and children's strengths and needs. ^{ix}

The review assessed that 57% of the investigations contained all relevant collateral contacts. In the remaining investigations, collateral contacts related to the allegations were contacted, but collaterals that could allow for a more thorough assessment or further support for the findings were omitted. Missing collateral contacts included neighbors, possible additional witnesses, other household members, or treatment providers.



SUMMARY

Overall, considerable strengths were found in thorough investigative interviews with child victims and perpetrators, integration of fathers, and comprehensive documentation of interviews to support findings. These practices could be leveraged to increase the accuracy of the risk assessments, as well as ensure that additional collateral contacts are interviewed and integrated into the assessments and documentation. A focus on the quality of pre- and post-supervisory conferences would strengthen the integration of strong practice skills and improve the overall quality of investigations. Concentrated efforts to improve the overall investigative practice are incorporated into the improving planning processes across DCP&P.

Recommendations for Action

- Ensure outreach to relevant collaterals is completed for each investigation.
- Incorporate collateral interview information into the overall assessment of family needs.
- Ensure more comprehensive, thorough, accurate assessments of the families' needs are occurring for both primary and secondary caregiver households.
- Enhance supervisory practice to include case specific guidance is provided during the investigation.
- Incorporate findings into the Local Office Collaborative Quality Improvement Rapid and Annual Cycle improvement planning processes.

Investigation Review Activities

DCF conducts a review of a statistically significant (95% confidence) and representative random sample of investigation practice during a two-week period of time, biennially. The review for 2022 was completed the week of February 14, 2022, during which a total of 354 investigations were reviewed. The sample included 16% of the 2,169 investigations received between October 1, 2021, to October 14, 2021. Information about the total number of investigation referrals and findings is available via the Child Welfare Data Hub.^x

The assessment of the overall quality of investigations included a review of the response timeliness, quality of responses related to the allegations, pre- and post-supervisory conference completion and quality, and documentation and assessment supporting the overall investigation findings. This biennial review provides DCF the opportunity to identify and analyze strengths, areas for improvement, and inform DCF's ongoing Collaborative Quality Improvement (CoQI) efforts.

REFERENCES

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