



Collaborative Quality Improvement

Division of Child Protection & Permanency



2023 BRIEF #4: CASE PRACTICE STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES

Overview

The Division of Child Protection & Permanency (CP&P) is New Jersey's child protection agency within New Jersey's Department of Children and Families (DCF). CP&P is responsible for investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect and, if necessary, arranging for the child's safety and connecting families to appropriate services and supports.

One strategy DCF uses to ensure high quality service delivery for New Jersey children and families is using a Collaborative Quality Improvement (CoQI) process. Through CoQI, DCF assesses performance in critical areas, identifies strengths and challenges, and develops plans to systematically improve performance and promote positive outcomes for the children, youth, and families DCF serves.

CP&P implements CoQI within each local office, in partnership with DCF's Office of Quality. Through ongoing improvement cycles, CP&P local offices systematically assess the quality of their service delivery to children and families and the extent to which case practice strategies are working to ensure children are safe, healthy, and connected. For more information about CoQI please see: [CoQI Description](#).

KEY FINDINGS

- The area of case practice that received the highest quality scores were implementing **Safety Interventions** and ensuring safe, healthy, and appropriate **Living Arrangements for Children**.
- Core areas of case practice, including **Engagement, Assessment and Planning**, continued to fall within areas needing improvement consistent with prior qualitative review processes (e.g. CFSR, Qualitative Review).
- While **Supervision** occurred frequently, it did not consistently provide caseworkers with the guidance and coaching necessary to engage, assess, and plan effectively with families.



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As part of the CoQI Strengths and Challenges Analysis, the team integrates record review findings with supporting quantitative key performance indicators and outcome measures to identify and build consensus around areas of strength and challenge for each CP&P local office. This sets the foundation for the development and implementation of improvement plans with clearly defined activities and goals. The results from the first 33 offices' record reviews and key areas for improvement are described below.

Areas of Strength

SAFETY INTERVENTIONS:

As a child welfare agency, CP&P is first and foremost committed to ensuring that children are protected from abuse and neglect. This review examined whether caseworkers took immediate action to address any additional safety concerns that emerged during the family's involvement with the agency and whether the caseworker gained agreement from all relevant parties in developing and implementing a safety intervention. This review also considered whether caseworkers had a comprehensive discussion with families about the specific safety concerns. This review found that CP&P's work to implement timely and effective safety interventions was a strength among families served in their own homes (**86% quality score**) and in families with children in out-of-home placement (**90%**).

CHILD'S LIVING ARRANGEMENT:

One of the primary goals of the child welfare system is to support families so that they can maintain their children at home and in their community when it is safe to do so. When this is not possible, children enter an out-of-home living arrangement that may include foster homes, treatment homes, group homes, or residential treatment settings. This review examined whether the home environment was safe and healthy for each child. It also considered whether children in out-of-home placement were provided with appropriate levels of supervision and support in their living arrangement and whether caseworkers were assessing each child's adjustment to their out-of-home setting. This review found that the children's living arrangement was a strength (**79% quality score**) among families with children living in their own homes and among families with children living in out-of-home placement (**83%**).



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Areas for Improvement

Selected areas for improvement from the family record review and CP&P's improvement strategies are highlighted below:



ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILY

Communicating with families regularly and in an accessible manner is an essential part of a caseworker's role. High-quality engagement is critical for meaningful assessments and case planning to occur.

This review examined whether caseworkers made efforts to ensure the family's language and ability needs were met during visits and other contacts. It also considered whether caseworkers discussed the family's values, traditions and beliefs and engaged parents to identify their natural supports.

Overall, engagement of the family was identified as an area needing improvement (**52% quality score**) among families served in their own homes and in families with children in out-of-home placement (**49%**).



ONGOING ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY

One of CP&P's overarching objectives is to identify and address the issues that necessitated a family's involvement with the agency. Assessment is the process of gathering and analyzing information to gain understanding about factors that are impacting the family.

This involves using both formal and informal assessments to identify appropriate and effective interventions to resolve the issues so that families can function safely and independent from the agency's involvement.^I

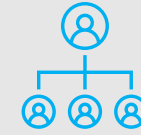
This review identified CP&P's ongoing assessment of families was an area needing improvement (**54% quality score**) for families with children served in their own homes and for families with children in out-of-home placement (**58%**).



ONGOING PLANNING PROCESS

CP&P works with families to establish goals and create action plans that detail the process for achieving goals. The implementation of the plans includes connecting families to appropriate services, monitoring family progress towards goal achievement, adjusting the plan to reflect new pertinent information, and preparing families for sustained independence from CP&P involvement once their goals are met.

Additionally, the plans for each family are tailored to recognize and accommodate the uniqueness of the family by including the families' voice in every aspect of the planning.^{II} This review found that the quality of the long-term planning process was an area needing improvement (**70% quality score**) in CP&P's work with families served in their own homes and with families with children in out-of-home placement (**70%**).



SUPERVISION

Supervision of frontline staff is a critical component in CP&P's work with families. Worker-supervisor conferences take place on a consistent basis so that supervisors can maintain familiarity with the families under their supervision and formulate guidance for their staff throughout a family's involvement with the agency.

The supervisor is accountable for developing their staff's skills in their work with each family to successfully engage, assess, and plan and team with families to assist them in achieving their goals.^{III} This case record review found that supervision was an area needing improvement (**68% quality score**) in CP&P's work with families served in their own homes and with families with children in out-of-home placement (**69%**).

94% of supervisors meet with their caseworkers to discuss each family on their caseload at least monthly.^{IV}





What Else Did We Learn?

Additional findings from the CoQI case record review, in which local offices are making progress towards quality case practice are highlighted below:

ASSESSMENT OF CHILD'S SOCIAL & MENTAL HEALTH:

The involvement of children and families with a child welfare agency may follow situations that are emotionally challenging or traumatic for children. In these contexts, it is critical for CP&P caseworkers to identify and address children's emotional needs. This review examined whether CP&P staff continuously and comprehensively assessed children's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Additionally, when children were receiving mental health treatment, this review considered the extent to which CP&P caseworkers communicated with mental health treatment providers and monitored the child's progress in treatment. In this review, CP&P's assessment and treatment of children's emotional health achieved a **64% quality score** in their work with families with children living in their own homes and a **76%** quality score in their work with families with children in out-of-home placement.

FAMILY & COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS:

When children are temporarily living away from their immediate family members, it is essential that CP&P staff support continued family connections through regular visitation and communication, except in circumstances where it is unsafe to do so. Maintaining children's relationships with family members such as mothers, fathers, siblings, and extended family strengthens family connections and can reduce the trauma children can experience after family separation.^V This review examined the extent to which CP&P caseworkers engaged parents in developing the visitation plan. It also considered whether caseworkers actively supported visitation activities and continuously assessed the interactions and relationships between parents and children during visits. This review found that CP&P's work to maintain family connections achieved a **76% quality score** among families with children in out-of-home placement.

DCF SUPPORTS FAMILY CONNECTIONS:

Of all children in out-of-home placement (n=3,020) **45% were living with kin.**^{VI} When children who entered out-of-home placement were part of a sibling group of 2 or 3 (n=129), **88%** of the time all **siblings were placed together.** When children were part of a sibling group of four or more (n=51), 94% of the time at least two siblings were placed together.^{VII}

ENGAGEMENT OF CHILD:

Communicating with children regularly and in a way that builds trust and yields meaningful information-sharing is an essential part of a caseworker's role. High-quality engagement is critical for meaningful assessments and case planning to occur. This review examined whether caseworkers effectively engaged children. The review assessed the extent to which caseworkers utilized a variety of engagement strategies with children. Additionally, when children were in placement, the review sought to determine whether they had discussions with children about the reasons they remain in care when developmentally appropriate. Engagement of the child achieved a **74% quality score** among families with children served in their own homes and among families with children in out-of-home placement (**70%**).

SUMMARY

This record review found that CP&P staff consistently worked to ensure children are in safe, healthy, and appropriate living arrangements, and when safety concerns emerged, staff implemented timely and effective safety interventions. The review also identified core case practice areas in need of improvement, including engagement, assessment, and planning with families. While supervisors meet frequently with caseworkers, the documentation lacked evidence of consistently providing caseworkers with the guidance and coaching necessary to engage, assess and plan with families effectively.

CP&P's last federal review^{VIII} found similar areas of case practice for improvement resulting in the integration of **Solution Based Casework (SBC)** into NJ's case practice in 2022. SBC is an evidence-based assessment and planning practice model associated with improved safety, permanency and well-being.^{IX}

What's Next?

All CP&P local offices have launched CoQI and are in various phases of the [cycle](#). The results of the case record review are key inputs to each local office's strengths and challenges analysis, which is used to collaboratively identify priority areas for improvement. Once the priority is identified, the teams will conduct root cause analyses, identify strategies for improvement, develop and implement their respective improvement plans, and monitor progress throughout the year. The case record review will be repeated at the end of the cycle to measure progress. Results from these 33 local office improvement plans are expected in Fall 2024.

REFERENCES

^I Service Provision: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/PPP-III-C-2-150.pdf>

^{II} Case Planning: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/PPP-III-B-1-100.pdf>

^{III} Permanency Supervision: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/PPP-III-C-5-500.pdf>

^{IV} Monthly Supervisor-Worker Conferencing in the period January 2023 – June 2023. Retrieved 12/4/2023 from SafeMeasures for New Jersey Department of Children and Families. [SafeMeasures is a data warehouse and analytical tool that allows tracking of critical child welfare indicators by worker, supervisor, Local Office, county and statewide. It is used by different levels of staff to track, monitor and analyze performance and trends in case practice and targeted measures and outcomes.]

^V Parent, Child and Sibling Visitation: <https://dcfpolicy.nj.gov/api/policy/download/PPP-IV-A-5-100.pdf>

^{VI} Data as of June 30th 2023. Retrieved from: <https://njchilddata.rutgers.edu/portal/children-in-placement>

^{VII} Data refers to the period between January 2023 and June 2023. Retrieved from: <https://njchilddata.rutgers.edu/portal/siblings-placed-together>

^{VIII} CFSR: https://www.nj.gov/dcf/childdata/njefederal/NJ_CFSR_FinalReport_2017.pdf

^{IX} Antle, B. F., Christensen, D. N., van Zyl, M. A., & Barbee, A. P. (2012). The impact of the Solution Based Casework (SBC) practice model on federal outcomes in public child welfare. *Child abuse & neglect*, 36(4), 342–353.

Image of woman and child walking on boardwalk : Photo by [Tim Mossholder](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Image of man holding two children: Photo by [Joyce Kelly](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Methodology

The CoQI record review examined the quality of CP&P case practice for 760 families that were actively involved with the division between October 2022 and June 2023 for at least 4 months. By June 2023, DCF's Office of Quality completed in-depth, structured reviews from 33 (72%) CP&P local offices from across the state. Within the review, a third of families (250) had at least one child in an out-of-home placement, and the remaining 510 families had all children served in their own homes.

The review covered topics related to the health and safety of children, including but not limited to the safety of the child's environment and the extent to which children remained connected to their family members and communities, especially when residing in out-of-home placement. It also covered topics related to the quality of case practice, such as engagement and assessment of children and caregivers, and teaming and planning with families. Additionally, the review measured the quality of supervision for frontline caseworkers.

It is important to note, the information collected during the record review about families, case circumstances, and caseworkers' interactions with families and service providers is limited to documentation in the electronic case record. When CoQI is fully implemented, the strengths and challenges analysis will incorporate data from multiple sources, including performance measures, case record reviews, Solution Based Casework (SBC) implementation data, and family interviews. In late Fall 2023, partners at Rutgers University began conducting interviews to learn more about families' experiences with CP&P to provide a holistic view of the impact practice had on outcomes for children and families; the results of these family interviews will be integrated into CoQI improvement cycles beginning in 2024.

INTERPRETING QUALITY SCORES:

Reviewers sought to determine if there was evidence in the electronic record that casework performance aligned with best practice and policy. Performance scores were assigned to each casework activity reviewed, based on whether the observed practice was completely, substantially, marginally, or not at all aligned with best practice and policy. The quality scores in this brief represent a summary of performance scores within a practice indicator. Quality scores range from 0 to 100, where 100 represents performance that is completely aligned with best practice and policy. For more information see: [Quality Scores Guide](#).