

# **NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES**

## **Technical Assistance Site Report**



Prepared for Florida Department of Children and Families  
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Site visit of February 16 and 17, 2005

## **Technical Assistance Request**

The request from Florida's Department of Children and Families for technical assistance is as follows:

Florida's PIP calls for several performance improvement efforts, such as: the design and development of an alternative response system (including a re-design of the safety and risk assessment processes); a high risk protocol for the identification and tracking of high risk reports/cases, and the update of the state's child maltreatment allegation matrix. The department recognizes the need to ensure that all performance improvement efforts are seamlessly integrated in order to reduce redundancy and provide consistency in concept, approach and practice.

A brief description of the referenced performance improvement efforts follows:

1. Revision of the Florida Allegation Matrix. The department is in the process of revising the allegation matrix, which incorporates the mandates of state law and administrative rules as they relate to the receipt of and response to reports of child maltreatment. The matrix objective is to improve the consistency of judgments made by hotline counselors and child protective investigators (both state and sheriff offices) when dealing with similar allegations of harm or threatened harm.
2. High Risk Tracking and Review System. A newly developed statewide process intended to identify and assure close monitoring and tracking of the highest risk investigations/cases served by the department, community-based care agencies and the local sheriff offices providing child protective investigation services. Investigations/cases that meet the criteria for high risk tracking require periodic reviews at either critical junctures/decision points or at least every six months, whichever is sooner, until the review process formally concludes that the high risk designation is no longer warranted. These reviews include discussion of the presenting issues of the investigation/case, the persons involved, investigation/case synopsis, risk factors, investigative/case activity recommendations and permanence issues. All persons having

information pertinent to the decision being made on a high risk case are invited to participate in the reviews, including family members.

3. Alternative Response System. The department intends to release a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the design and development of an alternative response system. The desired differential response model provides for different levels of child protective investigative activities and service interventions, based on the truthfulness of the allegation of maltreatment, the threat of harm and the probability of future abuse or neglect. The development and design of the alternative response system will include a re-design of the safety and risk assessment processes currently in place throughout the continuum of child protective services and interventions in Florida. The design will also incorporate the best practices identified by the department and provide a decision support framework to facilitate decision-making at each critical point throughout the child welfare continuum of interventions and services.

The desired model will focus on improving child protective interventions and services, based on a family's unique needs, while strengthening the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and their families.

### **Site Visit**

Terry Roe Lund conducted a site visit with Department staff on February 16 and 17. Prior to the site visit, Department staff sent materials for review. These materials included the Child Safety Assessment (CSA), the Allegation Matrix, the High Risk Tracking System, and the December 2003 Report to the Legislature. Also reviewed before the site visit were the Child and Family Service Review Key Findings for Florida, the Program Improvement Plan (PIP) and the most recent status report of the PIP.

The technical assistance request itself outlines ambitious activities which the Department hopes to carry out. The site visit revealed further priorities that will compete for attention and time. A few contextual issues will be described.

As stated in the technical assistance request, the Department is committed to issuing a request for proposals (RFP) by March 31, 2005, to begin the development of an alternative response system. This commitment began at least two years ago, with wide-ranging agency and community involvement in the recommendations.

The quest to go forward with an alternative response system demands that the Department review and likely revise a number of “tools” and processes used for CPS investigations. These tools and processes were some of the materials reviewed prior to the site visit.

Discussion of the various tools and processes revealed that many things have been developed (as they are in most agencies) somewhat independent of each other, and sometimes in reaction to an urgent need or high profile situation. As a result, the tools and processes for CPS investigation do not reflect a seamless vision by the Department of the purpose of the investigation, who should receive services, what are the job requirements, etc.

Florida’s ongoing service system (i.e., post investigation services) will be completely privatized by July 1, 2005. Some areas of the state are just beginning this phase; others have been privatized for years. The Community Based Care Agencies are only regulated by the Department through the contract language, which is somewhat flexible. While the contractors must follow law and administrative code, they do not have to follow the Department’s operating procedures, which relate more to practice issues.

In addition to many Department assignments and initiatives that result in multiple workgroups developing products that may or may not mesh with each other, the Department is undergoing reorganization effective June 1. It is unknown if or how this reorganization will affect the technical assistance needs and/or the Department staff who may join or depart the technical assistance process.

As a result of long discussion and establishing priorities, the following was determined by Department staff:

- It is essential to approach this technical assistance pragmatically. Competing priorities will remain a fact, and time

and resources will be limited. It will be necessary to look at how to improve practice and processes within the context of what is feasible.

- Instead of approaching the technical assistance from a perspective of how to “bring together” the CSA, the allegation matrix, and the High Risk Tracking System, the lessons learned from contracting for other services should be considered.

This means using the need to develop an alternative response system as an opportunity to examine and formalize what ANY family getting ANY initial response from the Department should be able to expect. By establishing the framework for Florida’s response to families, this would include formalizing the following:

- What types of situations will the Department investigate?
- What information must be collected to understand if the children are at risk?
- What information must be collected to understand if the children are safe?
- What will be the expectations for who is seen, interviewed, in what order?
- What will be the criteria for risk?
- What will be the criteria for safety threats?
- Which families will receive post-investigation services? What criteria will be used?
- What is the purpose and practice approach staff should take when conducting an investigation?

Examination of and decisions about the above will form a framework for a child protection response in Florida. And Department staff agreed during the site visit that if these decisions are reached, then it will be far easier to articulate what is wanted from an “alternative response.” In addition, the tools and processes mentioned earlier, such as the CSA, become easier to examine, since it will then be within the context of what Florida is trying to achieve during an investigation (or an alternative response).

## **Next Steps**

Keeping in mind the need to be pragmatic, it was agreed that technical assistance should stay steady, but in small steps. While as many as 10 on site days may be needed, the pending reorganization and other multiple Department activities helped determine that technical assistance will be most beneficial if it is scheduled in increments, with achievable and stand-alone goals established for each visit. A 2 day visit will therefore be scheduled to begin some shaping of a framework such as outlined above in this report.

Prior to the end of the site visit, time was spent assisting with the framing of language and ideas for the RFP for the alternative response system development.

The next site visit will be April 6 and 7, 2005. Prior to that, Department staff will review safety articles that are posted on the website of ACTION for Child Protection: [www.actionchildprotection.org](http://www.actionchildprotection.org)

Subsequent to the site visit, off-site technical assistance will include the review of and recommendations regarding the CSA, allegation matrix, the Hotline script for taking reports and other materials to be identified by NRCCPS and the Department. This review will be performed in the context of what framework is developed by Department staff for its CPS intervention.

Further technical assistance will likely be needed but feasibility and timing of this will be determined at or subsequent to the next site visit.