

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Technical Assistance Report



Prepared for Oklahoma Department of Human Services
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Please indicate which responses were employed in this T/TA:

- Technical Assistance**
- Training**
- Phone Consultation**
- Referral to another NRC**
- Referral to Other Organization**
- Review of Policy and Materials**
- Publications Provided**
- Secondary Research**
- Other**

Situation and Technical Assistance Request

Oklahoma has requested assistance in reviewing their current policy and practice regarding safety in out of home care. Some recent incidents of children being harmed in out of home care have brought this issue to the forefront and the agency is committed to making improvements. This will also be an issue in their PIP, which is currently in negotiations.

Site Visit

This meeting with a work group of Foster Care and Adoption staff continued to focus on their role in assuring safety for children in out of home care. The recommendations are broken into three primary areas: Policy and practice changes, forms enhancement, training and the skills needed for staff to be successful in assessing safety.

Policy and Practice:

- **Recruitment**
 - In responding to inquiries from prospective resource families, the message must be realistic and hopeful
 - With every contact with RP, assessment should be taking place. Identify potential strengths and concerns, look for indicators of protective capacities
 - What forms are sent to RP and when. More emphasis on using forms, especially the Child Needs List, to generate discussion. It should not be given to the RP to complete without discussion with the worker.
 - Send Background checks and information to complete CW history Check to RP. This should go with literature about the program
- **Support in First Year for Resource Parents**

- Resource Parents need more support at all times but specifically during their first year with the program. Need to explore who can do this. More foster care workers would be helpful. Also, Permanency Planning workers could be more involved in helping the Resource Parent deal with behaviors of specific child in the home. Supporting the RP should be seen as another way to be sure the child is receiving everything he/she needs.
- Policy should be stronger around frequent contacts (possibly weekly) during early placements. And policy should be more specific re: expectations for communication among all workers, service providers, CASAs etc who are working with the RP, the child and/or the birth family.
- **Child Abuse/Neglect Investigations**
 - There needs to be more clarification on how Foster Care and Adoption workers can support RPs during and after an investigation. This should be in keeping with Practice Model Guiding Principles to respect and support partners while remaining objective.
 - Policy should clarify that Foster Care staff can not discuss the allegations with the Resource Parent but can offer understanding of the stress inherent with allegations. Foster Care/Adoptive staff may also help explain the steps involved in the investigation
 - The Cherokee Nation has a specific protocol for investigations of tribal Resource Parents that should be part of the information available to Oklahoma's new centralized intake process.
 - After hour contacts for all Tribes should be included in centralized intake protocol
 - Information about the investigation process should be available to RPs during the assessment. This is currently in the Resource Parent Handbook but needs to be reviewed and possibly enhanced. The information might also be made into a separate brochure. *The work group created a small committee to work on this.
 - Current policy is clear about communication and staffing after the investigation has been initiated. There should be policy to include communication among CPS, any Permanency Planning staff with children in the home and the Foster/Adoption staff prior to first contact with the Resource Family. This includes contractors and tribes.
 - Consideration should be given to the Foster/Adoption staff accompanying the investigator to the home.

- **Assessment**
 - Staff needs to spend more time listening to the family and getting a more complete understanding of family functioning. Completing the forms is superficial and should be seen as a way to begin deeper discussions. This will be discussed more under skills needed by staff.
 - Both for assessments and reassessments, RPs need to be very clear on expectations for alternate care givers and short term care providers. Foster Care staff needs to be sure this is completely understood. Permanency workers need to understand and reinforce policy re: foster children caring for other foster children
 - Training for RPs needs to be reevaluated. Current policy mandates 27 hours of pre-service classroom training. It might be more useful to reduce this and use some of the funds to support RPs when a placement has occurred
 - Using experienced RPs as mentors for new RPs should be explored
- **Reassessments**
 - Permanency Planning staff and Foster/Adoption staff, including tribes and contractors, should all be encouraged to share information readily. Both strengths and concerns with the Resource Family should be shared via email, telephone or face to face at the time of the occurrence. Workers should use the information to reinforce the RP throughout the year. Policy should set expectations and supervisors should support this.
 - Put in policy that supervisors should randomly contact some of the RPs after the reassessment has been completed. This contact should verify some of the information collected and also serve to assist in evaluating the workers interaction with the RP.

Forms Enhancements:

- **DCFS-63:** It might be helpful to add some example behaviors under some of the headings. This might help workers think about the discussion that they need to have with the RP regarding what types of issues might arise with each of the characteristics they are considering.
- **DCFS-38:** Include age range of children to be cared for
- **Adoption Booklet:** This should be updated.
- **Visitation Plan:** These should be current, specific and readily available to Foster Care staff including tribal and contractors so that everyone understand the expectations for visits between the child and birth family. This is especially important for Kinship care.

- **Resource Family Handbook:** Needs to be reviewed and updated regarding the process for a child abuse/neglect investigation on the Resource Family

Skills/Training Needed:

Current Practice Model supports assessing safety but the agency culture has not yet embraced safety as the primary component in decision making for all circumstances. A disconnect is perceived between the meaning of safety for CPS and the meaning of safety in out of home care. There is also a perceived difference between “safe enough” for kinship care and stranger care or adoption. The agency needs to reinforce the intentions regarding this issue and be sure staff is supported as the vision for the Practice Model is pursued.

- **Application of Practice Model**
 - The Practice Model advisory group should explore the intent and recommend ways to relate the definition of safety to every aspect of Child Welfare, especially Resource Families
 - Safety is more than absence of physical danger. Nurturing and other protective capacities must be assessed as well
 - Foster Care/Adoption workers need training that applies the Practice Model more directly to their work of assessing and supporting Resource Parents
 - Permanency Planning staff need similar training for both alternative care providers and birth families
 - CPS workers making voluntary placements as part of a short term safety plan need to consider the possibility of the child needing longer term care
- **Foster Care/Adoption workers need strong interviewing skills to thoroughly assess for safety, especially for protective capacities when there may not be children currently in the home.**
- **Customer service, engagement skills and relationship building are principles of the Oklahoma Practice Model, they need to be reflected in policy for working with Resource Families and reinforced in training and through supervision**
- **Assessment/reassessment staff/contractors need to be able to reflect in writing the uniqueness of each family. Assessments and reassessments should not sound “cookie cutter”. Supervisors should support this with thoughtful critique**
- **Assessment/reassessment staff/contractors need to have a clear understanding of the myriad of behaviors and emotions that might be manifested by children in care so they can realistically talk with Resource Parents about potential issues. Understanding how the Resource Family currently functions and the affect the foster child’s potential behaviors may have on the routine of the family and the relationship of family members is important. If staff does not have**

experience in other areas of Child Welfare, more training is needed to address this.

- **Critical thinking skills are essential for both supervisors and workers. Training and support should be available for supervisors so they can reinforce these skills with staff.**

Next Steps

This work group primarily focused on the role of foster care staff and adoption staff. Policy is currently being updated. The recommendations noted will be considered. Changes to forms will also be addressed.

Three small committees were formed to consider changes. One group will look at current tools used by Foster Care staff in making regular contacts with Resource Families. They will attempt to create one tool for use across the state. A second committee will examine the information regarding investigations that is currently available for Resource Families and make changes as needed. The third committee will look at a formalized visitation plan. In addition, the current family assessment committee will continue to review the Assessment Guide and all related forms.

The skills and training issues will be discussed with agency administration and the trainers to consider possible ways to enhance skills. Hopefully that discussion will include ways to support supervisors in their work with staff.

As the federal fiscal year draws to a close, Oklahoma's DHS may want to consider a future TA request to further explore the role of Permanency Planning staff, contractors, and CPS staff in assuring safety in out of home care. Communication and a common understanding and purpose among all agency staff, contractors and tribes will be important in securing safety.