

## Continuous Quality Improvement Project

### District of Columbia

Interview with John Vymetal-Taylor, QA Program Manager, Child Family Services Agency

[john.vymetal-taylor@dc.gov](mailto:john.vymetal-taylor@dc.gov) • 202-727-2799

January 6, 2012

**NOTE:** This information reflects the status of the District of Columbia's QA process as of January, 2012. During 2012 the Agency has initiated a process of re-evaluating and enhancing its processes and will have an updated CQI plan and report in the near future.

### CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT (CQI) STRUCTURE

#### Department Structure

The Quality Assurance Unit is housed in the Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support (OPPPS), an administration within the Children Family Services Agency (CFSA). The Unit consists of a Program Manager and two supervisors: one oversees the Quality Service Reviews (QSRs) and has three full-time reviewers and a clerical assistant, the other oversees Child Fatality Reviews, data collection on internal CQI tools, monthly grand rounds, ChildStat, etc., and has six full-time staff. The QA Unit's Manager is supervised by the Administrator for Planning, Data and Quality Assurance (PDQA). There are two additional Program Managers supervised by this position: one oversees Structured Progress Reviews and has seven staff, the other oversees the planning and data functions and has two supervisors, one who works with SACWIS system reports and generates internal monitoring reports, and one who oversees special studies, PIPs, and develops program manuals.

The District's basic CQI structure was created eight years ago in response to a lawsuit. The current department structure has been in place for the past three years.

#### Staff Qualifications and Responsibilities

All QA Unit staff have a minimum of a Master's Degree. There is no specific requirement regarding licensure or area of study. All QA staff work strictly on CQI-related activities.

#### Training

Training of QA Unit staff depends on job function. Those working on QSRs must complete a two-day training and on-the-job training (shadowing another reviewer). Those working on other QA functions are trained by shadowing other staff. Every year the QSR unit conducts at least one two-day training on the QSR model for internal and external staff, in addition to "refresher" courses for those who have been trained but have not reviewed recently. Trainees include staff from private agencies, the Collaboratives, and all levels of CFSA management, including program managers and administrators.

There are a few data analysis trainings offered through the District, including training on the use of Access and Excel. Several QA staff have been training on Tableau (software used throughout the District for management activities). QA staff are also encouraged to participate in outside trainings and workshops.

## Committees

The Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support (OPPS) CQI Committee consists of members of the OPPPS administration, particularly program managers and supervisors involved in CQI activities. The committee meets regularly to compare notes, prioritize issues, find resolutions and discuss existing resources that may be better utilized by the District. The Training and Policy Departments also participate. Meeting notes are recorded and recently the committee has begun preparing an annual report.

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes monthly management meetings in the District:

CFSA's senior management meets monthly to review the Agency's progress toward meeting national and self-imposed standards. Program administrators lead the discussions using data from selected FACES reports. Topics include movement or lack of progress and steps taken to improve the Agency's outcomes. This forum allows senior management to revisit concerns in a consistent manner and to probe deeply into factors influencing Agency performance while still allowing for recognition of successes.

## CQI PLAN

### Expectations, Missions, and Objectives

The following principles are among those currently in practice at CFSA under the guidance and coordination of CFSA's Office of Planning, Policy and Program Support (OPPPS):

- Organizational culture supports and actively promotes CQI.
- The Agency adopts specific outcomes, indicators, and practice standards that are grounded in the Agency's values and principles.
- Agency leaders, staff, children, youth, families, and stakeholders receive training in the specific skills and abilities needed to actively participate in CQI.
- CFSA and its contracted agency partners collect qualitative and quantitative data and information from and about children, youth, families, and staff.
- Staff, children, youth, families, and stakeholders review, analyze, and interpret qualitative and quantitative data to inform Agency practices, policies, and programs.
- CFSA and its contracted agency partners use CQI results to improve policies, practice, and programs.

The overall system is described as improvement-based. Compliance is checked routinely in some areas; however, the majority of CQI activities are focused on practice improvement.

### CQI Policies

The District does not have an overarching CQI policy. They have recently begun creating policies for specific CQI activities (e.g. QSRs, CFRs, Critical event meetings, etc.).

## ELEMENTS OF THE CQI SYSTEM

### Qualitative Reviews

The District conducts several different qualitative reviews. Following are descriptions of the qualitative reviews pulled from the District's [2011 CQI Report](#).

### Quality Service Reviews

The Quality Service Review (QSR) unit conducts formal case reviews of both CFSA and private agency cases based on movement toward permanency, teaming, the status of the child and the parent, and casework practice in general. QSR reviewers provide strength-based feedback to the social worker and his or her supervisor. The following procedural steps are included in the overall QSR process:

- **Identification of Next Steps:** The social worker is the first and generally the last person that the review team speaks with regarding an individual case. Reviewers discuss the strengths they have identified in the case, any obstacles or challenges to permanency or case closure, and recommendations they might have regarding specific actions. Participants then identify and document next steps that they anticipate can be completed within 60 days.
- **Involvement of Program Managers:** Educated in the QSR model and approach to case practice, Program Managers (PMs) take ownership for QSR results and for ensuring that the lessons learned from the review are implemented and next steps are pursued. PMs also present the results of the QSRs to CFSA management. This presentation reinforces the program's accountability of findings and allows PMs to conduct an open and balanced discussion of strengths and challenges with their peers. In addition, PMs are working with their counterparts in private agencies to identify an equivalent process that would allow private agency representatives to report out their own findings and results.
- **Special Population Review:** CFSA expressly utilizes the QSRs to gain insight into the needs of specific populations served by CFSA while looking at common practice issues across the board. Two populations are identified to focus on during the current calendar year with approximately 30-35 case reviews for each population. Cases are reviewed within a four-month time span with two months in between for data recording and reporting. Follow-up meetings are convened 30-45 days post-QSR to include outcomes in both reports. The first population to be reviewed in this manner (youth ages 18 years and older) was selected in response to the Agency's ongoing efforts to address the permanency needs of our older youth and to allow an examination of the redesign of OYE with a particular focus on the transition planning process. A sample of 34 cases was selected from CFSA and private agencies for the reviews, which were completed over a six-month period. The team is currently developing both a written report and presentation regarding the findings. A second population of children ages 0-17 in out-of-home care will be drawn from private agencies and CFSA units who have not had a QSR in at least 12 months.

To ensure consistency in review processes, case stories and scores for each case reviewed are read and compared by the QSR supervisor and one other manager experienced in QSR. In cases where the stories are unclear or do not appear to support the ratings provided by the 14 reviewers, the reviewers are asked for clarification or further evidence. If the scores cannot be supported to the supervisor's satisfaction, the scores are amended accordingly. In further support of inter-rater reliability, the QSR supervisor holds Case Judging meetings with QSR specialists to review rating and to go over the issues identified in the interviews. These meetings include both the QSR and QA supervisors as well as the QSR

Specialists so that they can collectively review the justifications for the scores applied to individual cases.

The QSR unit strives to review a sample of cases that is both large enough and diverse enough to be representative of the population of children being served by the Agency. Although the actual number is usually less significant than the quality and thoroughness of the reviews, in 2011 the QSR unit will review 65 cases.

At present, the District is using the QSR tool to examine only out-of-home cases. The unit has used the tool for in-home cases in the past.

In addition to the QSR unit, experienced staff representatives from other divisions within CFSA and outside agencies serve as lead QSR reviewers. Prospective candidates must have the following qualifications:

- Complete formal (two-day) QSR training.
- Shadow a case with a QSR specialist or other qualified lead reviewer.
- Perform lead reviewer functions on at least one case under the supervision and direction of a lead reviewer. This includes writing the case story, completing the rating instrument and rollout sheets, and guiding the interviews and feedback sessions with staff.
- Be recommended for the task by the lead reviewer. Reviewers who are not assessed to have sufficient judgment and understanding of the tool or the process will not be designated lead reviewers.

Some community members help with the review process as well. For example, one community member participates in internal child fatality meetings; another member from the court monitor office sits in on reviews.

### **Child Fatality Reviews**

The District has a two-tiered process for reviewing child fatalities. At the macro level, the citywide Child Fatality Review Committee (CFRC) identifies broad systemic issues that influence child fatalities. Its multidisciplinary review team is composed of representatives from the community, and from public and private agencies working in education, health and mental health, human services, jurisprudence, law enforcement, and public safety. The CFRC issues an annual report of citywide statistics and recommendations. At the micro level, District child-serving agencies conduct internal reviews of deaths of children known to them. (The definition of children “known” to CFSA for review includes families that were involved in at least one CPS investigation or had an open CFSA case within the four years preceding the child’s death.) CFSA’s internal Child Fatality Review (CFR) team includes Agency employees from several programs in addition to representatives from the CFRC, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the community.

The number of fatalities reviewed monthly depends upon the number of fatalities reported to CFSA. The reviews are multidisciplinary staffings and include information related to the deceased child and his or her family, as well as the fatality. The internal CFR process also includes a report prepared by a CFR specialist. Recommendations regarding policy, training, documentation, or other issues made by participants at the monthly CFR meetings are recorded and collected. In addition, the CFR staff identifies the exact wording and appropriate contact persons for individual recommendations during the review meetings themselves. Each subsequent staffing updates CFR committee members on responses that

have been received to date and the status of any recommendations that are still pending. This process allows recommendations to be addressed immediately and provides the committee with regular communication on the Agency's progress.

CFSA also publishes a report of trends, findings and recommendations about fatalities of children known to the Agency. This report builds upon the individual case reviews by analyzing the fatalities during a year as a whole, and identifying demographic trends, geographical factors, types of fatalities and comparisons with prior years. Due to the nature of the report, it is not completed until all internal reviews have been held. This report is made available to the Agency, community participants, members of the Citywide Child Fatality Review Committee, as well as the general public.

### **DC ChildStat**

The DC ChildStat is a monthly, macro-level case review process that includes both written and verbal presentations on one case made by a team consisting of the caseworker, supervisor, PM (or equivalent) and other persons critical to the case. Cases are selected using a stratified random sampling process from all administrations and private agencies. The presentation is made to senior staff and is followed by a discussion of case practice issues, obstacles to permanency, systemic barriers and other related issues.

Presentations also include a review of FACES data related to the private agency or CFSA division's caseload using Tableau software, allowing for a point-in-time look at practice. This process allows for a discussion of how cases are moved towards permanency, what kinds of obstacles are faced in working towards permanency, and how children are exiting care, among others. Results of QSRs are also included as part of the presentation. Further, Structured Progress Review reviewers are invited to provide additional insight into cases.

A written summary of each ChildStat meeting is prepared immediately following the meeting and distributed to senior management and presenters. QA also maintains a summary of themes arising from the DC ChildStat, e.g., themes related to policy, practice and training issues. These summaries serve both as a record of the discussions held and a reminder of the key issues and questions that have been raised.

The DC ChildStat process also serves as an ongoing needs assessment in the context of case practice, allowing reviewers and evaluators to identify trends (both positive and negative) and to measure progress along various case practice indicators.

### **Structured Progress Reviews**

The Office of Structured Progress Reviews (OSPR) is staffed by licensed clinical social workers (SPR specialists) who perform regular case reviews of children in out-of-home care to evaluate the progress of each case, provide recommendations, and maintain a system of accountability, including the prescriptive requirements for planning, participating in, and following up on the review. The SPR is among the Agency's most effective quality assurance vehicles for assessing service and permanency planning for children who have been in care for at least 180 days.

Since the inception of the SPR format in 2010, over 95% of reviews have occurred within the required timeframe (i.e., each case is reviewed within 180 days of a child's removal and every 180 days thereafter). Six weeks prior to a review, the OSPR sends written notification to parents and involved

family members of the scheduled SPR. The SPR support staff also telephone family participants with a reminder two to three days prior to the review date. All parents are invited to attend and contribute to the SPR except in cases where parental rights have been terminated, the parent or their whereabouts is unknown, the parent is incarcerated or otherwise physically unable to attend, or attendance is prevented by court order. In addition, SPRs specifically encourage engagement and participation of fathers in the process through the Fathers Participation Enhancement Project (FPEP).

### **CPS Grand Rounds**

Every month, QA selects three CPS investigations that have been open for approximately 15 days. At least one of the case-specific investigations will involve a family that has been the subject of four or more allegations. CPS supervisors and PMs, as well as CFSA-contracted private agency supervisors, and representatives from other divisions within CFSA (including legal, training services, policy, and ongoing services) all participate in these case-specific discussions. The “rounds” take place with both QA and CPS staff reading all existing FACES documentation on the investigation and completing a structured tool that addresses both compliance (e.g., timeframes for contact and completion of safety assessments) and best practice issues (e.g., consideration of prior history and evidence of supervisory direction).

Written narratives summarizing the Grand Rounds discussions are documented immediately after the meeting and updated after case closure to indicate the extent to which the discussion influenced practice on the particular investigation. The written documents are shared with the meeting attendees as well as with the CPS administrator and the Deputy Directors for OPPPS and Agency Programs. QA staff will also conduct a secondary review of the case record in FACES and update their case review notes to reflect any responses to the recommendations, as well as highlight actions that have not been addressed. In addition, a collection of individual summaries is maintained electronically as well as a spreadsheet for tracking compliance with the recommendations. This information is shared with senior staff for follow-up to address outstanding recommendations.

### **CPS Investigations**

CPS has implemented a number of measures (described individually below) to ensure the high quality of CFSA investigations, especially completion of investigations in accordance with mandated timeframes. Two measures that have been particularly useful are the 24/48 Hour Case Review and the 18-Day Case Review.

- The 24/48 Hour Review takes place during the weekly supervision meeting between the program managers (PMs) and their social work supervisors. During these meetings, the PM and supervisor review the CPS management reports to determine unit trends related to successes and shortfalls in meeting the 24/48 hour timeframe of documented contacts, including contact with the alleged child victim. The PM will then use the information in conjunction with a supervisor’s verbal assessment to better guide decision-making for each unit and for individual referrals. PMs may also employ peer-to-peer learning, develop training sessions, and guide disciplinary measures, if necessary, to address trends that prevent timely and quality documentation.
- Led by the PM for each division, the 18-Day Review Meeting occurs three times a week and includes a presentation by the social work supervisors on each referral within their units identified as an investigation that is 18 days or older. These presentations include systemic or internal issues that may have impacted the quality of an investigation. The supervisors will also

present any proposed plans to address the issues or describe any resolutions already implemented to mitigate issues. Guidance, support, and recommendations for achieving safe and timely closure of the investigation are given.

In 2010, the QA unit collaborated with the federal Court Monitor to develop and implement an evaluation tool for the investigation process. This evaluation occurs on a quarterly basis and includes a review of 40 randomly-selected investigations per year. The review sample is comprised of those investigations that were closed within the month prior to the review. Each investigation is evaluated on the quality of practice according to the information provided in the written case record. The evaluation instrument is based largely on a tool used by the Court Monitor in previous CPS reviews to promote consistency in findings.

### **Multidisciplinary Team Consultations**

In order to provide consultation and guidance to social workers, supervisors, and program managers who may be facing challenges with individual cases that have not been selected for other QA review processes, QA has implemented the option of voluntary multidisciplinary case consultations. These confidential meetings are available to both CFSA and private agency staff. The case consultations allow staff to present specific, current case issues (e.g., timely case closure) and to gain the benefit of recommendations and brainstorming from clinical, legal, medical and other professionals. QA staff complete a written summary of the consultation which is forwarded to participants. This document is also forwarded to the OPPPS Recommendations Committee to determine if the conditions of the case indicate a need for training, guidance, or policy development.

### **Quantitative Data**

The QA Unit uses a number of reports from the SACWIS system, including information about case loads, client demographics, entry/exit to foster care, etc. The Unit also has an Access database for QSR scores and findings and keeps their own records on reviews and counts for child fatalities. These numbers are hard to pull from SACWIS at this point. Occasionally information is pulled from other District agencies (e.g. chief medical examiner's data on child fatalities, census data, AFCAR data).

Following are descriptions of the quantitative reviews pulled from the District's [2011 CQI Report](#). The District is currently working on ways to make them more quality-focused in the future.

### **In-Home and Out-of-Home and Permanency Administrations**

The In-Home and Out-of-Home PMs use an internal case review instrument on a minimum of three cases per month. Supervisors use the tool on two cases monthly. This review tool addresses service delivery along with medical, dental and educational information. As a priority, progress towards meeting a child's permanency goal is examined with specific attention for each individual goal of reunification, guardianship, adoption, or APPLA. As with other internal QA processes, the purpose of the tool is to direct supervisors and PMs to be attentive to issues of quality in the casework of their staff and to aid them in discussing and identifying individual challenges or issues. The current tool has been in use since 2009 and is currently being refined in response to ongoing feedback from supervisors and PMs regarding the usefulness of the tool in strengthening case practice.

## **Office of Youth Empowerment Reviews**

The Office of Youth Empowerment (OYE) collaborates with the QA unit on a case review process to ensure concurrent support both for permanency achievement and for dynamic development of youth skills. Each month, the QA unit randomly selects six cases for review. OYE supervisors and PMs evaluate the cases based on information provided by FACES, the case file, and the assigned social worker. Documentation includes family engagement and family involvement in permanency planning. Additionally, documentation focuses on medical appointments, educational data, and employment. The review process is designed to achieve 94% review completion for OYE's total caseload by the end of 2012. The results will help define trends and determine areas for improvement in case management, as well as the case-review process.

## **Special Reviews and Studies**

In addition to each of the many functions described above, the QA unit conducts analytical studies (e.g., youth transitioning to adulthood and reviews of children under the age of 14 with a goal of APPLA), facilitates various case practice review processes, and provides technical assistance to support the work of CFSA and private agency staff. QA staff members also confer with one or more subject area experts, administrators, or other consultants to identify significant research questions, relevant policies, current practices, and other relevant features that may impact various case review processes.

## **USE OF DATA**

### **Reports**

Data from the SACWIS system is pulled to create monthly management reports that look at specific outcome measures and problem areas. These reports are distributed on a monthly basis to upper management and down the line to the supervisory level. Data graphs are generated for specific CQI activities, such as ChildStat. Annual reports are created for QSRs and Child Fatality Reports and are generally available to the public on the District's website. These reports identify trends through a compilation of the previous year's reviews.

### **Data Software**

The QA Unit primarily uses Excel for data analysis. Tableau is used for presentations.

### **Plan Development, Training and Systemic Issues**

Most of the District's improvement plans are incorporated into the court decree. These specific areas where the District must show improvement tend to receive the most attention. Occasionally individual groups will identify an area they want to track for a certain period of time.

Data is used to guide training and policy development. For example, in recent years there has been a renewed interest in understanding the issues related to domestic violence in the District. Data was used to inform the policy and training departments to put new training initiatives together.

## Identifying and Correcting Data Quality Issues

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes how the District addresses data quality issues:

The purpose of the Data Reliability and Accountability Workgroup (DRAW) is to identify, address, elevate, and resolve prevalent and pervasive Agency data reporting errors and inconsistencies. The workgroup works with Agency management in the identification of the reporting errors/inconsistencies and convene a rotating body of individuals critical to resolving the data reporting issue bi-weekly. The scope of assignments and projects to be completed by DRAW include the following: 1) addressing issues that have a significant negative impact on operational outcomes; 2) addressing issues that would have a significant positive impact if corrected; 3) addressing pervasive worker error/inconsistencies; and 4) working with staff where necessary to modify existing reports. The DRAW priority areas include the following 1) federal mandates 2) Exit Plan mandates 3) external stakeholder mandates. Layered within the priority areas include data reported tied to fiscal priorities, permanency outcomes and individual program area Agency initiatives.

## Linking Data Sources

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes how the District links data sources:

The Structured Progress Reviews process links closely with the Quality Service Review (QSR) unit, which forwards copies of QSR cases within the last twelve months to the SPR unit. This process allows the SPR specialists to know what findings were recently made, what steps were recommended, what types of interventions might be required, and whether to notify up the chain of command for immediate follow-up.

## Collaborative Data Analysis Efforts

The District has teamed up with Howard University to assist with special studies and projects in the past. For example, the District partnered with Howard University to look at the involvement of fathers in the child welfare system. The District has worked with the Department of Mental Health to complete joint reviews of those cases with both mental health and child welfare involvement. Additionally, the District has worked with the Healthy Family Collaborative, a group of community organizations that work independently and under contract to provide services for families, to look at data on the families served.

## STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

### Internal/External Stakeholders & Collaboration

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes stakeholder involvement and collaboration in the District:

CFSA continues to seek feedback and advice from external partners whenever reviewing Agency performance and identifying future initiatives for quality improvement. In 2011, for example, the Citizen's Review Panel (CRP) completed a study of children who are returned to their families after brief stays in foster care. This study includes both a series of case record reviews and analysis of aggregate CFSA data.

CFSA also continues to coordinate the follow-up to a three-part series of permanency forums convened in 2010 that provide an opportunity for an expanded group of stakeholders to identify, prioritize, and consider how to resolve key barriers to permanency for children and youth in care, particularly the large number of "legacy" youth growing up in the District system. The 2010 forums engaged key stakeholders,

including CFSA and private-provider managers and staff, youth, foster parents, birth parents, members of the legal community and other partners from across the District of Columbia's child welfare system.

After the forums, workgroups have continued to meet to resolve the identified barriers. As such, the Agency has improved its practices based on the input of a broad base of stakeholders that are educated to all of the successes and the issues, and are partners in owning the new path to the achievement of permanency for youth in foster care.

### **Privatized Systems**

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes the roll of privatized systems in the CQI process:

CFSA-contracted private agencies are integrally involved in QA processes. Cases assigned to these agencies are selected for review for the DC ChildStat and Quality Service Reviews. Additionally, private agency representatives are routinely invited to internal Child Fatality Reviews when the decedents or their families had previously received services from a private agency.

CFSA's Contract Management and Performance Improvement Administration (CMPPIA) also participates in the QA process by reviewing findings from private agencies' data collection. These processes and their tracking methods are continually reviewed for enhancement. The QA systems are evaluated every six months using a five-point rating scale.

Evaluations are completed on an annual basis with quarterly status reports submitted by each private agency. This allows the Agency to regularly monitor any improvements or decline on the individual components and measures, including timeliness and permanency of reunification, timeliness of adoption, and placement stability. In addition, both CFSA and private agency staff members use data to assess and improve strategies and outcomes to address previously identified practice concerns.

## **FUTURE PLANS**

The QA Unit has begun preliminary work on expanding their scope to include not only program work, but also areas like facilities, transportation, and access to closed records. They would also like to move away from doing only paper reviews of some cases, eventually reaching the point where every case review involves both document review and conversations with the relative populations.

The [2011 CQI Report](#) describes some future plans for the District's CQI process:

Achieving the highest levels of quality requires a clearly defined and well-executed approach to continuous improvement of all operations and work unit activities of an organization. The CFSA CQI expansion plan includes all of the non-casework functions of the Agency (e.g., finance, human resources and facilities management). To ensure the future quality of CFSA's CQI processes, the Agency is reviewing information provided from other jurisdictions regarding their experience with similar projects. CFSA also consults with the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Development to ensure the utmost success based on the latest information available in the child welfare system.

## **SUMMARY DOCUMENTS**

[2011 CQI Report](#)