

# Improving Outcomes for Children and Families



## PIP TIPS: Item #1: Timeliness of Initiating Assessments

*Each issue of Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Tips focuses on one aspect of the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Minnesota. This issue examines Item 1, Timeliness of Initiating Assessments, included in Safety Outcome 1.*

### **Safety Outcome 1:**

Children are first and foremost protected from abuse and neglect.

### **Related Performance Items**

#### **Item 1: Timeliness of Initiating Assessments**

Minnesota Supplement: Screening and Assessment

Item 2: Repeat Maltreatment

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Review (MnCF SR) evaluates timeliness of initiating assessments based on the following criteria:

- Assessments of child maltreatment reports are initiated within required timeframes.
- Face-to-face contacts with children occur within required timeframes.

These two criteria must be met for all reports assigned for assessment during the period under review in order for a case to be rated a Strength.

*“I define child safety as our first priority and our social workers place value on seeing kids as soon as they can to know that they are safe.” (Interview with a child protection supervisor, 2006)*

Findings from the first round of federal Child and Family Service Reviews indicate a significant association between strong performance ratings on conducting timely assessments (Item 1) and providing services to protect children in their homes and prevent out-of-home placement (Item 3). National findings also reflect that when reports are not designated as “high priority” or “emergency,” it is less likely that assessments will be initiated within established timeframes. (Administration of Children and Families, 2004).

Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews rated timeliness of initiating an assessment a Strength in 69 percent of the cases reviewed between 2003 and 2005. In order of overall performance, this item was ranked 20 of 24 performance items. In MnCF SRs conducted in 2005, 121 reports of maltreatment were assigned for assessment in 89 applicable cases selected for review. More than 84 percent of the reports had a timely response.

**The Minnesota Department of Human Services and County Social Service Agencies:  
Working Together to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families**



### **Putting good practice into practice**

One Minnesota county convenes daily intake team meetings to support timely responses to child maltreatment reports. Intake workers present reports and assessment workers volunteer for assignments. The supervisor assures that priority is given to the most urgent reports and monitors worker caseloads. The team develops a plan for achieving a timely face-to-face meeting with children for each case. When delays occur, the team reviews barriers and develops strategies for preventing delays on future cases. The intake team also reviews daily coverage schedules to assure staff availability for incoming emergencies.

### **Timely initiation of assessments**

No other child protection activity is as basic or critical to child safety as timely response to a report of child maltreatment, accomplished by face-to-face contact with the children and parents. Timely response is achieved by promptly carrying out a sequence of interdependent intake, screening, prioritizing, and assigning activities and decisions.

The child protection response begins by collecting information through an intake process when a report of child maltreatment is received. The intake interview focuses on specific events and circumstances of alleged maltreatment; it also attempts to solicit broader information about child vulnerability, caregiver functioning, and present or foreseeable danger, in order to provide a basis for sound screening and prioritizing decisions.

Screening decisions, guided by applying definitions of maltreatment found in state law, along with state and local screening criteria, determine whether or not a child maltreatment report will be accepted for assessment. As soon as a report is accepted for

assessment, the agency must decide how quickly contact with the children and their families will be made, based on the severity and nature of the alleged maltreatment. Prioritizing and assigning reports for assessment is how the agency ensures that children in the most unsafe conditions are seen immediately, while continuing to manage timely response to existing and incoming reports (Action for Child Protection, 2004; and Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2003).

### **Face-to-face contact with children**

Face-to-face contact with children is essential for assessing their immediate safety. Interviews and observations of children is how the child protection worker begins to gather and analyze important information about child safety and family functioning as part of the overall assessment. In-person contact presents the first opportunity for child protection workers to develop a “helping alliance” with children and families. This alliance facilitates family involvement in developing and implementing a safety plan (National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment, 1997).

Observation of even the youngest children provides specific and critical information about their physical condition, as well as their emotional and developmental status. When face-to-face contact occurs in the child’s home and with the child’s family, observations also provide information about emotional and behavioral status of parents, interactions between family members, physical status of the home, and the child’s overall environment (Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2003).

The first face-to-face contact may occur within the context of a crisis and it becomes the child

protection worker's role to quickly and astutely assess presenting problems, identify protective factors, and determine what steps are necessary to protect children while further assessment is occurring. In-person observation of children and their caregivers is vital to making initial service intervention decisions; essentially, can the child be maintained safely at home with services or is placement out of the home necessary? (National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment, 1997).

### **Minnesota requirements**

Minnesota successfully completed a major child welfare initiative in 2005 that included broad changes to Minnesota Statute. 626.556, and development of policies and procedures to ensure timely and appropriate responses to reports of child maltreatment. This effort resulted in integrated requirements for timely responses across traditional investigations and Family Assessments; clarified expectations for response timelines when reports allege substantial child endangerment; and clarified expectations that face-to-face contact is the activity that initiates an assessment.

Reports alleging substantial child endangerment require a face-to-face contact with the children immediately, or within 24 hours, or daily attempts to see the children until contact is made. Reports that allege a lower level of risk require face-to-face contact within five days, or attempts every five days until contact is made.

When attempts to achieve face-to-face contact with children fail, caseworkers may request a health and safety check by law enforcement, or in consultation with the county attorney, petition for a court order to make children available for a safety assessment.

### **Improving performance**

County agencies can improve performance on initiating assessments by addressing key systemic issues; focusing supervision on critical areas of practice; and implementing quality assurance practices, including the use of data. Strategies for improving performance on initiating assessments include the following:

- Assess and align agency resources, including staff and caseloads, to ensure adequate capacity to carry out intake, screening and response activities.
- Establish clear expectations for timely response and face-to-face contacts with children and families, including expectations for seeing all family members within timelines.
- Ensure well-defined policies and procedures that support timely response and face-to-face contacts.
- Support staff training to enhance skills and knowledge of child development and family functioning.
- Implement quality assurance reviews and monitoring activities to assess agency performance on achieving timely response and face-to-face contacts.
- Review data entry practices to ensure accurate recording of face-to-face contacts.
- Use existing reports to monitor timely response:
  - Charting and Analysis: SSIS 1: Time Duration for Initiation of Maltreatment Assessments
  - SSIS General Reports: Time to Initial County Contact with Victim/Other.

## Resources and technical assistance

- Action for Child Protection. (Oct. 2004). *The Safety Intervention Process*. Available at: <http://www.actionchildprotection.org/archive/article1004.htm>
- Administration of Children and Families, *General Findings from the Federal Child and Family Service Reviews*. 2004. Available at: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/cwrp/index.htm>.
- Minnesota Department of Human Services. (Jan. 2005). *Bulletin #06-68-01, DHS Issues Overview of 2005 Laws Affecting Children and Families*. Available at: [http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS\\_id\\_000305.hcsp](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/publications/documents/pub/DHS_id_000305.hcsp)
- Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2006). *2005 Year-End Report, Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews*. Coming soon to: [http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county\\_access/documents/pub/DHS\\_id\\_000308.hcsp](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/DHS_id_000308.hcsp)
- National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment. (1997). *Decision Making in Children's Protective Services*. Available at: <http://nrccps.org>
- Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, US Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers. Chapter Five: Intake*. Available at: <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/cps/cpse.cfm>
- Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, US Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers. Chapter Six: Initial Assessment or Investigation*.

Available at:

<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/cps/cpse.cfm>

- QA Tool Kit, available on the [Supervisors' Web site](#) at: [http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county\\_access/documents/pub/DHS\\_id\\_000308.hcsp](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/DHS_id_000308.hcsp)

## Quality assurance regional contacts

Anne Broskoff, Lower SE Region  
[anne.m.broskoff@state.mn.us](mailto:anne.m.broskoff@state.mn.us), (507) 389-6898

Christine Harder Mehl, SW Region  
[christine.harder-mehl@state.mn.us](mailto:christine.harder-mehl@state.mn.us), (651) 215-9506

Steve Johnson, NE Region  
[steve.h.johnson@state.mn.us](mailto:steve.h.johnson@state.mn.us), (763) 497-0156

Lori Munsterman, NW Region  
[lori.munsterman@state.mn.us](mailto:lori.munsterman@state.mn.us), (320) 255-2452

Larry Wojciak, Upper SE Region  
[larry.wojciak@state.mn.us](mailto:larry.wojciak@state.mn.us), (507) 359-4666