

MANAGING CARE

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A Newsletter of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement

From the Director...

Much of the work of child welfare managers focuses on maintaining and enhancing the quality of services the agency delivers. Increasingly, agencies are using formal quality assurance structures to regularly assess data to track the results of these efforts.

Quality assurance systems look at services delivered and the outcomes that they achieve. Then, in conjunction with management, they identify the actions needed to correct observed weaknesses and track the results of changes over time. This issue highlights this core function, which is becoming increasingly central to the management of child welfare agencies.

Our lead article describes the context and some key features of quality assurance within child welfare agencies today. Drawing on examples of state and county systems, we describe the data sources used and the strategies employed to ensure that this data leads to improvements in practice.

The Practice Forum describes collaboration as an emerging feature of quality assurance systems

and discusses setting standards for practice. We also list resources available both from our Resource Center and from other sources that you might find useful. Finally, this issue reports on developments on the federal level related to outcomes.

We hope you find this information relevant to your work. As always, we welcome comments or suggestions on how *Managing Care* can help you improve the management of child welfare services.

—Kris Sahonchik

Quality Assurance in Child Welfare

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New Strategies: Quality Assurance in Child Welfare

Child welfare agencies are placing increasing emphasis on quality assurance as a major component of their efforts to assure child safety, permanency and well-being. This national trend is largely a product of increases in the number of children coming into care, the growing severity of the problems that families present, and the simultaneous demands for high quality services that achieve desired results.

In the face of these pressures, efforts to monitor and improve services are increasingly central to the management of child welfare agencies. While agencies have always been concerned about quality, efforts to assure quality are becoming more formalized, and many agencies are dedicating top managers and organizational units to quality assurance initiatives.

Increasing federal expectations have hastened the movement towards strong quality assurance programs. Provisions of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act require states to develop and implement standards to ensure quality services for children in foster care and require the federal Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to assess state performance based on outcomes.



In addition, the proposed revisions to the federal child and family service reviews call for a case review process that DHHS expects will build on states' ongoing quality assurance efforts. (See Update, page 6.)

Defining QA

Quality assurance (QA) is a systematic process to:

- evaluate both the services an agency delivers and the outcomes achieved;
- recommend actions, in conjunction with management, to correct deficiencies, and
- track the effectiveness of these efforts over time.

Quality assurance has rapidly become a practice specialty in its own right, as professionals seek to develop and implement this systematic process throughout their agencies.

As the term implies, the emphasis of quality assurance is on assessing how well child welfare case practice is conducted. Rather than tracking the number of investigations conducted, for example, quality assurance systems look at whether the process of conducting the investigations conforms with established standards—for instance, whether investigations are completed within required time frames.

Increasingly, quality assurance is also concerned with evaluating what happens as the result of processes carried out on the case level. For example, some quality assurance systems track measures such as the rate of substantiated child

abuse and neglect reports among children receiving child protective services who remain with their families.

Identifying data sources

Traditionally, the range of data that child welfare agencies have used to evaluate the process and outcomes of services include:

- Case reviews: Reviews of a stratified random sample of case records at regular intervals,
- Targeted case reviews: Periodic reviews of specific groups of cases, and
- Management information systems: Regular reports that provide information on both compliance with procedures and achievement of outcomes.

Quality assurance systems are now drawing on a broader range of sources of data. These sources include:

- Case-specific interviews: In some cases, the review of case records is combined with interviews with the child and family, the foster parents or other providers, and the social worker involved in those cases.
- Key informant interviews: Structured interviews with managers and stakeholders outside of the agency are used to identify issues that might affect practice and opportunities for improvement.
- Surveys, questionnaires, focus groups: These approaches are used to obtain input from those affected by agency actions—agency staff, providers, foster parents and children and families. Agencies are also drawing on any existing processes for family and community input.
- Contracted services reviews: Some sites have set up special

review procedures that generate data on the quality of services delivered by contracted providers.

- Ongoing case review processes: These include the bi-annual, federally-required case reviews of children in foster care and information collected in some states under consent decrees.

Following are examples of how quality assurance systems are drawing on these data sources:

Massachusetts

In Massachusetts, the Director of Quality Assurance oversees two data sources that are central to the state's quality assurance system. First, the Department's information system generates monthly reports of key management indicators for each area office. These indicators are used to track compliance with procedural requirements, such as the timeliness of investigations, assessments, and service plans. The system also reports on some indicators of outcomes, such as the length of stay for children in placement.

Targeted case reviews are the second key data source. The Department recently reviewed every case that met one of three criteria: cases with three or more abuse or neglect reports within six months, children in home settings for more than two years with an open case, and children with three or more case managers.

Los Angeles

In Los Angeles, California, the Quality Assurance Division draws on data from three sources:

- A group of social workers conduct monthly compliance reviews on a random sample of 1,100 cases. These cases are drawn from caseload of about 70,000 in- and out-of-home cases. Reviews focus on assessing conformity to state and federal procedural requirements, such as

assessments, contacts with families, and service offered.

- A second case review group conducts more qualitative studies. These studies involve both reading cases and conducting extensive interviews of all parties to a case.
- The division's contract review unit conducts reviews of group homes, family foster homes, independent living services, and family preservation services. For group home reviews, county staff read case records and interview children and staff. For family preservation services, reviewers examine written documentation to confirm that home visits are made and that specified services are provided.

Oregon

A Quality and Research Manager in Oregon's Office of Services to Children and Families (SCF) oversees a small staff that generates extensive reports from the state's information systems. Monthly performance measures reports track numerous process and outcome measures and present them in the context of eight broad goals. For example, "time worker spends with families" is presented under the "partnerships" goal, which states that child safety is assured through effective intervention by SCF staff.

Gathering data

Gathering data from multiple sources requires a comprehensive approach. Some agencies have developed structured processes to gather and assess data from a number of different sources. Following are some examples:

Oregon

Oregon conducts comprehensive branch reviews for each of its 42 branches every two years. During the review, a broad-based team spends 3 to 4 days on site, reading cases,

reviewing written information, interviewing staff and community partners, and reviewing questionnaires from foster parents, community partners, and client families.

Illinois

Each of Illinois' six regions have a Regional Quality Council (RQC) comprised of a range of agency staff. Under the direction of an Associate Director of the Department and with the assistance of the state Office of Quality Assurance, the RQCs are charged with leading quality improvement efforts.

RQCs conduct quarterly peer reviews of each of the Department's service delivery sites. Peer reviewers examine a sample of records to assess compliance with service standards. RQCs also review:

- reports of incidents, accidents and grievances,
- program evaluation data, including reports generated by the state data systems on indicators of process and outcomes,
- consumer satisfaction data from surveys of foster parents, families and staff.

Colorado

State-level staff in county-operated systems need innovative approaches to gathering quality assurance data. In Colorado, the state Department of Human Services oversees county-operated child welfare agencies through the Child Welfare Technical Assistance and Oversight unit (CWTAO). The unit coordinates all required reviews of services to ensure compliance with state and federal regulations.

CWTAO has developed a periodic review audit instrument that is used for all required reviews—federally-mandated case reviews of children in foster care, reviews required by Colorado's Child Welfare Settlement Agreement, and reviews of a

stratified random sample of cases with in-home services and short-term placements.

The audit instrument is automated, so the computer system identifies which of the 101 questions need to be addressed for the review being carried out. The instrument focuses on assessing how cases are handled—from intake and investigations to case planning to placements.

CWTAO staff read each case file and then conduct a face-to-face review to which the child, parents, caregivers, caseworkers, and providers are invited. CWTAO also conducts county operations reviews to ensure that required policies and procedures are in place.

Using data

An important emphasis of quality assurance is on developing processes to use data to improve practice. A traditional approach is to feed back information about services to workers and managers at local service delivery sites.

Today the scope of quality assurance is broadening as top level managers involve a broad range of policy and program units in gathering and responding to quality data.

Many agencies refer to this process as “continuous quality improvement.”

Senior managers are leading these efforts to change the culture of agencies so that acting on data becomes a routine aspect of child welfare services. States and counties use a variety of mechanisms to ensure that data are used to enhance practice. Specific techniques include:

- Reports: Producing regular reports that present data. These may be distributed either within the agency or to the public.

- Comparisons: Providing data that compare sites to one another. This technique is often seen as an effective way to increase managers’ interest in the report’s content.

- Action plans: Requiring sites to respond within a specified period of time with written plans of action to address areas identified as needing improvement.

- Management involvement: Involving managers in reviewing quality assurance reports with local sites and in monitoring the development and implementation of action plans.

- Worker and supervisor involvement: Engaging workers and supervisors in designing tools to gather data, in carrying out the process, and in analyzing data.

- Technical assistance: Providing data on quality as part of a process in which the site also receives assistance from staff charged with helping the site interpret and act on the data.

Here’s how some of these techniques look in action:

Massachusetts

Strong management involvement supports Massachusetts’ quality assurance efforts. The Director of Quality Assurance reports to the Commissioner and oversees staff conducting administrative foster care reviews, the data analysis group, research staff, the training unit and the policy unit.

The Deputy Commissioner for Field Operations meets with area and regional managers on a monthly basis to go over the management indicator reports and to follow up when action is needed. Each area director also meets with the Commissioner twice a year to

review overall area performance. In addition, Massachusetts encourages staff involvement in quality assurance initiatives. A broad group of staff participates in the agency’s targeted case reviews. State staff consult with local managers in designing reviews, conduct the reviews on site, and then bring everyone involved in the reviews—from the social workers to supervisors to reviewers—together to look at the numbers and to discuss the lessons learned.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles uses its reporting processes to encourage use of quality assurance data. Monthly compliance reports are disseminated internally and compare compliance rates for offices within regions. The Deputy Director reviews the reports and works with regions to follow up on sites that have compliance rates below the expected levels.

Oregon

Oregon’s branch reviews utilize action plans to ensure that quality assurance data is translated into improvements in practice. Teams that conducts branch reviews hold an exit meeting with branch personnel and then submit a report within 60 days, detailing the branch’s strengths and the areas needing attention.

Branches are required to submit a response to the written report within 60 days, specifying actions they will take to respond to recommendations. In each of the state’s four regions, a Quality Assurance Manager oversees branch reviews and provides technical assistance to branches as they develop and implement their action plans.

Illinois

Illinois aims to engage all staff in quality improvement activities through the Regional Quality Councils and local and site quality

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of quality
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teams, as well as through an extensive training program around quality improvement. Currently, state staff, called Regional Quality Specialists, provide technical assistance to the Regional Quality Councils. When quality reviews are carried out, local sites are required to develop action plans to address the concerns raised by the review.

For more information on the initiatives discussed in this article, contact:

Massachusetts:

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Practice Forum:

Implementing Quality Assurance Efforts

Here's a look at how agencies are implementing two of the key features of quality assurance efforts:

Collaboration

Traditional quality assurance programs have tended to conduct reviews and report results in isolation. The emerging trend is towards a more collaborative approach. Increasingly, quality assurance staff are working in conjunction with program staff, policymakers, stakeholders outside of the agency, and regulators.

To develop agency-wide systems of quality improvement, many quality assurance efforts are focused on engaging program staff in the process. One approach is to consult with program staff in designing, carrying out and analyzing case reviews. Massachusetts' quality assurance staff use this approach in conducting their targeted case reviews. (See page 3.)

To ensure that findings impact on practice, quality assurance staff must also work with policy staff. For example, when the Los Angeles case review group compared the well-being of children in custody to other children, they found that children in custody had lower levels of educational achievement. Policy makers responded by developing additional education-related requirements and including them in service providers' contracts.

Some agencies have involved community representatives in quality reviews—a practice that will be encouraged by the proposed federal child and family services review process. Exemplifying this practice, Oregon uses a large,

diverse team— including state staff, regional office managers, managers from other branches, community partners, and occasionally representatives from the judicial system or the Citizen Review Board—to conduct its comprehensive branch reviews.

Regulators, like many quality assurance leaders, are interested in facilitating the ability of child welfare organizations to monitor and evaluate themselves. As part of the new federal reviews, federal staff will work with state staff and community partners as agencies conduct a self-assessment. The results of the self-assessment be the focus of the on-site regulatory review, which will be conducted by a team of federal, state and community representatives.

Standards

The quality assurance process demands that agencies establish standards for how services should be delivered. In child welfare agencies, these standards are based both on the requirements of federal and state law and on an understanding of good practice. In developing practice standards, agencies often refer to national standards developed by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and by accreditation organizations.

The CWLA standards are intended to be ideals or goals which public and non-profit agencies can strive to meet. CWLA offers one set of "standards of excellence" for the management and governance and other sets of standards for specific services.

(continued p. 8, see Standards)

Update...

Federal Reviews

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is revising the federal review procedures for Title IV-B child and family services reviews and the Title IV-E eligibility reviews. The aim is to increase emphasis on program improvements and child and family outcomes. The proposed rule for these revised reviews was published in the *Federal Register* on September 18, 1998.

The proposed child and family services reviews are intended to focus on results that programs are achieving, to promote partnerships between the federal government and states and between states and community partners, and to cover the full range of child and family services. DHHS intends to develop a review process that states can integrate into their own ongoing quality assurance efforts.

The process that DHHS is proposing for these reviews includes two stages: a state self-assessment and an on-site review. Both will be conducted through a collaborative effort involving the state, community representatives and federal staff.

The state self-assessment allows the state to evaluate internal strengths and weaknesses. In the on-site review, the team will review a small group of cases, selected randomly and stratified by type of cases, focusing on issues raised in the self-assessment. Information will be gathered from case records and from interviews with children, parents, social worker, foster parents, and service providers. The team will also examine systemic issues through interviews with state and community stakeholders.

The proposed reviews were designed based on lessons learned in pilots conducted across the country. Some of the lessons relevant to quality assurance efforts include:

- A review team that includes representatives from outside the state agency helps broaden the perspective of the review, is more comprehensive in its identification of areas needing improvement within a state, and helps identify training needs and potential opportunities for technical assistance.
- Reviews yield findings of greater quality and higher accuracy when they include case reviews and interviews rather than relying solely on case records.
- A smaller sample of cases reviewed more intensively yields more information about outcomes than larger samples that involve only case record reviews.

The proposed review instruments include a state self-assessment guide and an on-site review guide. These review instruments ask reviewers to assess each case for specific indicators of the three broad outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being. The tools also include a guide for conducting case-specific interviews and a stakeholder interview guide. These review instruments were published in the *Federal Register* on October 1, 1998.

The September 18 *Federal Register* notice is available through the Children's Bureau Web site at <www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb> or on-line from the *Federal Register* at <www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aces140.html>. The October 1 notice is available through the *Federal Register* or by calling Joe Bock at the Administration for Children and Families at (202) 205-9632.

ASFA Implementation...

In response to the requirements of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the Children's Bureau is developing a set of outcome measures to assess state performance and a performance-based incentive system. The Bureau has formed two groups to advise staff in this process:

- The *consultation group* consists of over 20 representatives of child welfare organizations, state legislators, governors' offices, juvenile courts and consumer organizations; and
- The *resource group* consists of representatives of organizations that are providing expertise, including the Child Welfare League of America, the American Public Welfare Association, the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, the National Conference of State Legislators, and juvenile court judges associations.

These groups met in the fall of 1998 and generated a list of potential outcome measures. The Bureau published the draft set of outcomes and measures for public comment in the *Federal Register* on February 2, 1999 (available through the *Federal Register* or through the Children's Bureau web site).

The groups will meet again to consider issues around rating states on outcomes and developing a performance based incentive system. This process will result in two reports — one due in early 1999 with recommendations for a performance-based incentive system, and one due in May, 1999 that will include the performance of every state on the outcome measures.

Resources and More....

Reprints of the following back issues of *Managing Care* are available free of charge from the National Child Welfare Resource Center. Contact Pat Nocera at 1-800-HELP-KID (435-7543) or by e-mail at patn@usm.maine.edu.

Managed Care: New Partnerships for Child Welfare, Fall, 1997.
Collaborative Approaches to Financing Comprehensive Services, Winter, 1998.
Outcome Based Management and Measurement in Child Welfare, Spring, 1998.

On quality assurance...

Quality Improvement and Evaluation in Child and Family Services: Managing Into the Next Century, edited by P. Pecora, W. Seelig, F. Zerps, and S. Davis, 1996 (\$26.95). Available from the Child Welfare League of America, (800) 407-6273.

Evaluation Handbook Series: The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation and a companion volume, *The Children's Bureau Evaluation Handbook*, from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 1997. One copy free. Available from the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect, (800) 394-3366.

On foster care reviews...

With support from the Children's Bureau, the National Association of Foster Care Reviewers is developing



tools to help public agencies use federally-required foster care case reviews as an integral component of a comprehensive quality improvement program. Contact: The National Association of Foster Care Reviewers, 1349 W. Peachtree Street, NE., Suite 900, Atlanta, GA, 30309-2956, (404) 876-3393.

Technical assistance...

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement is available to help you:

- Initiate a quality assurance system
- establish standards for case practice
- select outcomes and indicators
- implement case review procedures
- produce reports from management information systems

Use data to improve policy and practice

- define the audience for quality assurance data

- design reports for different audiences
- integrate data into decision-making
- cultivate an organization-wide response to quality assurance data

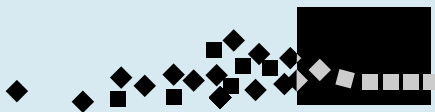
On Standards

The Child Welfare League of America standards are available individually (\$16.50/\$14.50 each) and as a set (\$170) from the Child Welfare League of America, c/o CSSC, P.O. Box 7816, Raritan, NJ, 08818-7816, (800) 407-6273.

The Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children's *1997 Standards for Behavioral Health Care Services and Community Support and Education Services* are available from the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children, Inc., 120 Wall Street, 11th Floor, New York, New York, 10005, (212) 797-3000.

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Standards, continued from page 5

Another source for national standards are the organizations that have traditionally provided accreditation to provider agencies. These organizations include the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), the Commission on the Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), and the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children (COA).

Accreditation for provider agencies has been used as prerequisite for contracting with public agencies or as a status that could be substituted for state licensing or review requirements. However, increasingly, public agencies are interested in becoming accredited themselves for their management of child welfare services and for the services that they provide.

In particular, COA's *1997 Standards for Behavioral Health Care Services and Community Support and Education Services* are relevant to public child welfare agencies. Oklahoma's Department of Social Services is currently COA-accredited, and public child welfare agencies in Illinois and Kentucky are both going through the accreditation process. States report that receiving this formal recognition strengthens public confidence in the agency.

COA standards are intended to be rigorous, but realistic, descriptions of practice that competent private and public organizations can be expected to meet. The 1997 COA standards are similar to the CWLA standards in that there are a set of generic standards related to the management and administration of all services, and a group of service-

specific standards. Both CWLA's management and governance standards and COA's generic standards require organizations to have a quality improvement process.

While national standards are available for service delivery and management, there is no clear reference point to use in establishing standards for outcomes. Many states are starting with the broad categories of safety, permanency and well-being, which the federal government intends to focus on in the revised child and family services reviews.

Developing specific outcomes for child welfare services is a central management task that needs to be tied closely to the organization's overall strategic planning and development process.