

NRCOI FACT SHEET

Strengthening Child Welfare Supervision: A Participatory Design Process

Why Focus on Child Welfare Supervision?

The field of public child welfare increasingly is focusing on supervision as a strategy for improving practice and outcomes. Across the United States, it is clear that supervisors are the most stable element of the child welfare system, they are the keepers of the agency's culture, and to introduce and achieve systemic change, their involvement and support is crucial. The fact that over 20 States built improving child welfare supervision as a key strategy in their first round CFSR Program Improvement Plans (PIP) reinforces these conclusions.

Research supports this view of the value of child welfare supervision. Supervision has been linked to organizational, worker and client outcomes – particularly staff recruitment and retention, and improving supervisor effectiveness, team effectiveness, and worker and supervisor job satisfaction.

However, in many child welfare jurisdictions today, the potential of supervisors is not being utilized. Frequently there is not adequate training or support for them. Even some States that focused on improving supervision in their PIPs were not as successful as hoped because they took a one-dimensional approach—for example, focusing

only on strengthening supervisor training or rewriting supervision policy. This approach was “necessary” but not “sufficient.” Taking a comprehensive, systemic approach is key.

How We Can Help Improve Child Welfare Supervision

Two of the Children's Bureau's National Resource Centers (NRCs)—Organizational Improvement (NRCOI) and Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT)—have developed a process for helping child welfare jurisdictions improve their supervision systems. This process has been used with multiple States. The process requires a minimum of six-to-eight months to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to strengthen child welfare supervision and better support child welfare supervisors. This strategic plan then requires a minimum of two years to implement. If authentically planned and implemented, it results in major systemic change. This process requires intensive commitment and work on the part of agency leadership, staff, and stakeholders, and it should not be undertaken without this capacity, readiness, and commitment.

One goal of this process is empowering child welfare supervisors. Supervisors become a key partner with the agency leadership, and leaders and supervisors have ongoing

conversations about how to improve practice to achieve better results. Child welfare practice should become much more consistent across the jurisdiction.

The Process at a Glance

This generic process to redesign child welfare supervision has seven steps (the NRCs adapt the process to meet the unique needs and conditions of each jurisdiction):

1. The NRCs and agency leadership clarify the leaders' vision for child welfare supervision, plan how to align supervision with the agency's Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principles and Values and confirm the leaderships' commitment to the process and its results.
2. Leadership forms a Child Welfare Supervision Work Group including (a) a State coordinator to manage the process; (b) representative and respected supervisors (c) mid-managers (supervisors of supervisors); (d) key central office managers (e.g., Quality Assurance, Information Technology, Training); (e) university partners; (f) partner agencies if the agency contracts for services.
3. At the first meeting of the Work Group, agency leadership provides the charge and offers support. Then the Work Group provides a full picture of the current culture, structure, and

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practice of supervision in the jurisdiction; it develops a vision of child welfare supervision, consistent with the agency's vision; and it defines the purpose of child welfare supervision and the principles and values to guide supervision.

4. The supervisor members of the Work Group decide whether to participate in a Time and Activity Study which provides a picture of how supervisors spend their time and how much supervisory activity is planned vs. unplanned.

5. The Work Group constructs the Supervision Strategic Plan. While each jurisdiction's plan has been unique, the categories of topical areas addressed in the plans often include: (a) Supervisor Recruitment, Training, and Professional Development; (b) Supervisor Support; (c) Casework/Clinical Supervision; (d) Administrative/Management Supervision; (e) the Supervisor's Role in the Agency and the Community. The Work Group prioritizes and sequences the multiple goals, resulting in a multi-year strategic plan.

6. The Work Group presents the Strategic Plan to leadership and key internal and external stakeholders for review and modifications may be made.

7. Finally, the focus changes to implementation of the plan which includes assigning responsibility for parts to different persons and groups. The Work Group continues to meet quarterly to monitor implementation, celebrate successes, deal with emergent barriers, and modify the plan as needed.

Essential Ingredients for Success

The NRCs and participating States have learned that certain core ingredients are essential to a successful supervision redesign process:

- Leadership must have a major commitment to the process for vision, buy-in, participation, partnership with supervisors and ownership of the results. The leadership meets with the Work Group at the end of each meeting to learn about what was accomplished, engage in a dialogue and keep the group on track.
- The principle of participatory design guides this process: the people who will be responsible for implementing the work should be involved in designing the plan.
- Members of the Work Group serve as "ambassadors" in their offices and regions, meeting with the leadership and supervisors, briefing them on

developments at each meeting and asking for feedback. The goal is a transparent process where there are no surprises and everyone owns the plan when it is finished.

- The Work Group and leadership develop a marketing plan to get the buy-in of internal and external stakeholders.
- Planning for sustainability from the very beginning is critical. If a child welfare system does not continuously monitor supervision, it will deteriorate. The goal is to change the agency culture of practice and supervision and create a supervision system aligned with the agency's Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principles and Values. The process embeds systemic reform at the mid-level of the agency.

Resources

Visit www.nrcoi.org for more supervision resources.

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