



The Florida Senate

Interim Project Report 2003-111

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Children and Families Committee

Senator James E. "Jim" King, Jr., President

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES OF FAMILY SERVICE COUNSELOR SUPERVISORS

SUMMARY

Florida's child welfare system has undergone intense, often negative, scrutiny in recent years as it has struggled to fulfill its mission of child protection. This report focuses on one critical part of that system, front line supervision, in an effort to understand the particular management challenges supervisors face within either the Department of Children and Families or the evolving privatized community-based care system.

Drawing on group interviews, surveys, literature, and data reviews, staff found that supervisors from both state and community-based care agencies face a number of unique challenges, including insufficient training, high turnover among counselors they supervise, often unmanageable workloads, and weak organizational support.

Frequently changing management structure and reporting requirements impact the supervisors' ability to perform effectively. The links between desired departmental performance outcomes and local practices (district and agency) was not always clear. In order to better manage their processes, some programs have developed their own internal measures to help track and improve their performance. These programs are identified as "best practices."

Among the recommendations for departmental actions are the development of a management system with mechanisms for continuous improvement, improved efforts to address supervisory workloads, and the evaluation of strategies to improve utilization of technological resources and staff.

BACKGROUND

Public child welfare programs have been subject to intense public scrutiny in recent years, often in connection with deaths or injuries to children in placement or with disruption of families that might have been preserved. These incidents often reflect the pressure of caseloads that are rapidly increasing in number and severity with diminishing resources available.

Concerns about the Florida child welfare system have been raised since at least 1985. Since then, eleven special task forces have been convened as well as five Grand Juries. The most recent study completed was by a Blue Ribbon Panel appointed by the Governor. Many recommendations and improvements have been made as a result of these studies and a number of others which are underway.

With a recent case involving the disappearance of a 5-year old Miami girl, many concerns have resurfaced. A statewide poll conducted in Florida following the disappearance indicates that a large number of Floridians think the Department of Children and Families (DCF) bears the most responsibility for the case's problems. About 60 percent of the respondents indicated that the problems facing the state's foster care system result from poor management.¹

Results such as these reflect a lack of public confidence in DCF's management practices. Public concerns have been further supported by findings and recommendations made as a result of System of Care Reviews, detail-specific analyses by a team of experts, and the Blue Ribbon Panel report. Suggestions from these reviews indicate that, among other things, the department should:

¹Ward, Ron, Floridians Blame Child Agency, Poll: Woes From Poor Management, Tallahassee Democrat, June 27, 2002.

- Focus on building skills of front line supervisors.
- Shift from a procedural focus to one that develops and supports front-line practices.

Research supports the importance these suggestions attribute to the role of the supervisors and speaks to the critical management link this position provides between agency policy makers and front line workers.²

Organizational Changes in Florida

During the last 5 years, the Child Protection Program in Florida has undergone major changes as a result of both state and federal legislation aimed at strengthening and privatizing the child protection system. In 1996, for example, the Legislature directed DCF to begin the process to privatize child protection services through contracts with community-based agencies (ch. 96-402, L.O.F.). This mandate was later expanded requiring the department to fully privatize these services by December, 2004.

The Community Based Care (CBC) Initiative was introduced in Florida as a response to the long term and complex problems faced by the child welfare system. This initiative was intended to improve the safety and well being of children, create community ownership around child welfare issues, shift responsibility for direct service delivery from DCF to “lead agencies,” create a more integrated and comprehensive child protective system, and provide more flexibility to manage resources.

The organizational structure of the Family Safety Program has been in transition over the past 3 years to accommodate changing state and federal directives, including the fundamental shift to community-based care. While change is necessary for organizational growth, these changes can negatively impact organizational performance.

The ongoing reorganization of Florida’s child welfare program, combined with a series of organizational crises, has resulted in the department and private providers struggling to meet constantly changing departmental requirements and performance targets. Contributing factors have been supervisory and counselor staff turnover during the transition to community-based care, the transfer of service functions and budget from the department to the CBCs, and the absence of well defined staff roles and responsibilities during these changes.

As a result, supervisory staff have experienced difficulty performing their assigned tasks and assuring services are delivered to children and families in a timely manner. The department has initiated many improvement efforts. However, these improvements have frequently not been sustained over time or deployed systematically throughout the organization.

Supervisory/Management Effectiveness

In a changing organizational climate, it is increasingly critical that supervisors in child welfare are effective managers in addition to being content specialists in their area of responsibility. Whether a front line supervisor or management executive, the function of a manager is essentially the same. The manager must be able to make decisions and communicate these decisions to the organization and practice effective management techniques.³

Studies indicate that supervisors with the best performance records focus their primary attention on the human aspects of their subordinates’ problems and endeavor to build effective work groups that demonstrate high performance. High producing supervisors also make objectives clear and give their employees freedom to do their jobs.⁴

Seven components of supervisory effectiveness have been identified in the area of child welfare. These components include:

- The use of clear, effective communication to staff, which helps them perform well and feel secure as members of the work unit.
- The control of work-load by systematically monitoring assigned tasks and goal attainment.
- The provision of staff feedback, letting staff know how well their performance matches expectations.
- The supervisor’s focus/comfort with the role of supervision.
- The establishment of production expectations set with the emphasis on maintaining high standards of performance that are modeled by the supervisor.
- The emphasis the supervisor places on people, letting staff know that he/she is in touch with their needs and feelings related to the job.
- The supervisor’s ability to function as a coach with emphasis on the professional growth and development of staff.

Supervisory effectiveness is dependent on supervisors’ level of emphasis on the particular management

² Sahonchik, K. Ed., Supervisors as Managers: Understanding and Using Outcome Data, Managing Care, Vol. III No. 3, Spring, 2001.

³ Essentials of Management (<http://www.agu.edu/html/602.htm>)

⁴ Likert, R., New Patterns of Management, McGraw, 1967.

component coupled with competency.⁵ With constant changes in organization direction and focus, it becomes increasingly difficult for the front line supervisor to effectively utilize management techniques to align staff and prioritize workloads in a manner to meet organizational needs.

Supervisory Functioning

Child Protection Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that the agency mission and goals are realized and positive outcomes for children and families are realized through services. Supervisors play a critical role in ensuring that children are protected from harm, that they receive the necessary services to ameliorate the effects of the harm they have suffered, and that families receive the necessary services to reduce the risk of maltreatment in the future. Supervisors are also responsible for ensuring that clients are treated with respect and dignity with their rights to self-determination and confidentiality assured.⁶

One of the primary functions of the supervisor is to enable the counselors to meet the needs of families and fulfill the mission of the agency. The supervisor is the critical link between actual service delivery and the upper levels of administration. The supervisor brings the resources of the organization into action at the point of client contact and simultaneously communicates information from the work unit to upper management, enabling agency administrators to plan and allocate resources.

This interim project focuses on the activities of one group of child protection supervisors both at Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the community-based care agencies. This position is a front line supervisory position responsible for the coordination and delivery of services by Family Service Counselors, the staff that case manages children in out-of-home care and in-home supervision. It is important to identify critical supervisory practices which need to be strengthened and best practices which, if expanded, would improve the quality of service delivery statewide.

METHODOLOGY

In order to more fully understand the responsibilities, functions, and problems of the Family Services Counselor supervisor, information was gathered from a variety of sources including departmental documents, Senate survey findings, focus groups, and interviews with key staff. The review of documentation included audit reports, policies and procedures, training manuals, and performance reports. Interviews were conducted with staff in key leadership positions in various districts and community-based care lead agencies as well as with supervisors. Group interviews were conducted in a focus group format at three districts, three CBC sites, and one statewide site. Additional information was obtained during conference presentations describing the implementation of a CBC in Volusia County, and the Florida Mental Health Institute's evaluation of the CBC initiative.

Previous DCF counselor survey results were reviewed including an improvement project developed for District 13. A legislative survey was developed with input from both departmental and CBC staff, piloted, and then administered to 278 supervisory staff across the state. This survey was provided to all Family Services Counselor Supervisors currently employed by DCF, and the supervisory staff currently employed at three CBC agencies (The Sarasota YMCA Program, the Family Continuity Program in Pinellas and Pasco, and the Lakeview Center in Escambia).

FINDINGS

The information gathered during this interim project provided a valuable description of this state's front line Family Services Counselor Supervisors, the challenges they face and the management practices they consider valuable. All employees were surveyed and 44 percent of the state employees provided responses to the Senate survey.

Demographics

The Family Services Counselor Supervisor was recently converted from a Career Service to a Select Exempt Service (SES) position. The position is responsible for the services delivered by counselors in the areas of adoptions, foster care, and protective services. Some supervisors are responsible for more than one of these areas simultaneously. The position requires management skills and expertise in the areas of responsibility. The supervisor usually provides supervision to Family Service Counselors, Clerk Typist Specialists, and Direct Service Aides. This position is

⁵ Rand, T.M., Mahoney, J.T., and Mahoney, F.C., Management Effectiveness Analysis Technical Considerations. Management Resource Group, 1990.

⁶ Morton, T.D., and Salus, M.K., Supervising Child Protective Services Caseworkers, 1994.

the lowest supervisory level in the district and generally falls three levels below the District Administrator.

There are currently more than 250 Family Service Counselor Supervisors employed by the State of Florida. The average staff age is 44 years old. Supervisors report having an average of 6 years prior experience in child welfare before becoming a supervisor and 11 years of experience with the department. The average annual salary for this position is \$38,175.

A Bachelors degree is required for the state position of Family Services Counselor Supervisor, but there is no degree area specified. The current data system does not contain current information relating to employee degree areas. However, most survey respondents indicated having a Bachelors degree (68 percent), predominantly in the social sciences. Many respondents indicated having a Masters degree (37 percent), usually in the social sciences, as well.

Community-Based Care supervisors perform similar types of work as their state counterparts. Supervisors are responsible for managing the work of counselors in the areas of protective services, foster care, relative care, adoptions, and other related services. However, supervisors at the three CBCs are primarily responsible for only supervising counselors and do not typically supervise the variety of positions that state supervisors provide oversight to. Community Based Care supervisors are also usually responsible for only one primary service area. The average annual salary for these supervisors is \$34,500. As in DCF, this is a lower management position, usually three levels down from the lead agency director.

There are more than 40 supervisors employed by the three CBCs. The supervisors, on average, are 38 years of age and report having about 4 years of child welfare experience before becoming a supervisor. All supervisors were provided the senate survey and 57 percent of them provided responses.

Unlike the department, the CBC providers require persons in the supervisory position to have at least a Bachelors degree in a human services area as well as work experience ranging from 2 to 4 years, depending upon provider requirements. A Masters degree is preferred. Therefore, all supervisors at provider agencies have at least a Bachelors degree in a field related to this work, and approximately 21 percent of them have a master's degree, usually in the area of social work or counseling.

Supervisory staff from both state and private agencies perform similar primary job functions. However, differences were noted in the following areas:

- State employees are responsible for supervising a broader range of positions than privately employed supervisors.
- Supervisors employed by private agencies are younger and less experienced than the state supervisors.
- Supervisors with private agencies are paid lower salaries overall than those employed by the state.

Supervisor salary and education were compared to national trend data, as these issues are frequently identified as challenges in the area of child welfare supervision. Salaries paid by both state and private agencies in Florida are lower than the national average of \$44,444 identified by the Child Welfare League of America. Although research indicates staff formally trained in the field of social work react better to associated job stress and perform more effectively than those from other fields, only about 28 percent of the national child welfare workforce have degrees in social work.⁷ This trend is true in Florida. However, based upon available data, private agencies have a greater number of supervisors with Masters Degrees in the area of social work.

Organization/ Management

Each DCF district determines the organizational and management structure of its Family Safety program. Even though there are commonalities in role and function and performance expectations across all districts, there is variability in the processes developed to meet performance expectations. Variability was noted in areas such as numbers and types of staff supervised, caseload distribution, management of overtime, and flexibility in meeting changing organizational expectations.

The impact of variable management practices may be noted in the inconsistent performance across districts and the effects of corrective actions attempted by the department. When performance data is examined by district, it was noted:

- Some districts consistently perform within a targeted range, while others meet goals inconsistently or not at all.
- When specific problem issues have been identified in particular areas of the state and corrective actions initiated, the department has tended to

7 Jones, L.R., & Okamura, Amy, An evaluation of a Title IVE Training Program. 2000.

deploy those corrective actions statewide, including the CBCs, regardless of local performance.

This management approach has contributed to duplicative paper work, additional home visits when children have already been seen, and an increased number of work hours for staff and frequently has not resulted in consistent, sustained improvement.

Departmental supervisory staff indicate that departmental priorities are not always made clear to them. "Everything is a priority." They believe that their input into organizational decisions is not considered, and they do not feel supported by management. Staff from both the public and private sectors state that they feel punished for poor performance in areas they are not responsible for and would like to be recognized for the good work they do. Supervisors from the private agencies report feeling more supported by their management staff than do state employees.

The private agencies have more flexibility than the state has to establish an organizational management structure that best meets the agency's needs. However, current CBC management structures appear to be very similar to those of the department. Some exceptions include the narrowed focus of the supervisory position and the greater clarity of job duties. It is reported that the upper management staff at the private agencies are able to "filter" departmental directives, resulting in supervisory staff experiencing less stress regarding job prioritization than their state counterparts.

Responsibilities of Position

Supervisors employed by state and private agencies report working over 50 hours a week and report spending similar amounts of time meeting with employees to discuss cases, providing new employee training, and completing required paperwork. State employed supervisors report spending more hours reviewing and prioritizing workload assignments and conducting desk audits of case files while community-based care supervisors report spending more time conducting field or case work.

Supervisory staff from both private and public agencies report they frequently carry active caseloads in addition to their supervisory responsibilities. This additional workload is often a result of supervising new counselors who cannot carry a full caseload, staff absences and vacancies, or a sudden influx of referrals that often occurs following media coverage of adverse events in the field.

Supervisors report that management practices they find particularly beneficial include spending time with their employees, getting involved with their cases and providing feedback and guidance, having staff meetings, prioritizing workloads, tracking case assignments and assignment completions. These are frequently skills that are not taught in formal training but necessary to job success.

Supervisors face unique challenges, often faced with long work hours, low salaries, conflicting role responsibilities (carrying caseloads while simultaneously functioning as an administrator), high staff turnover, delays in filling vacancies, and the supervision of inexperienced employees who require intensive supervision and support to perform the job.

Differences were discovered, however, between state and community-based care supervisors. In particular, vacancy rates are significantly higher for state staff than for the CBC sites surveyed.

- At the end of June, the counselor vacancy rate in Florida ranged from as high as 80 percent in some districts to a low of 3 percent. The average state vacancy rate was 21 percent. Counselor vacancies compound the difficulty of supervisors' jobs.
- During the same time period, the supervisor vacancy rate ranged from 71 percent in some districts to 0 percent in others. The average state vacancy rate was 22 percent.⁸
- At the end of designated reporting periods, vacancies (supervisor and counselor combined) in two of the community-based care agencies were 7 and 2 percent.

In contrast, the number of counselor positions supervised by state staff and the CBC staff were the same. Both groups of supervisors provide oversight to an average of seven counselors each. However, only five of the seven state counselors supervised on average were eligible to carry a full caseload compared to six of the seven counselors supervised by CBC supervisors. Also, on average one of the seven counselor positions was vacant in each state work unit compared with fewer than one position in each of the private work units.

It should be noted that vacancies in some districts were impacted by the transition to the community-based care agency.

⁸ Department of Children and Families, Human Resources Situation Report, 6/24/02.

Departmental policy requires new counselors to complete training, pass a certification exam, and “phase in” the number of cases they work with. This requirement is for both state and privately employed counselors and results in a waiting period from 9 to 12 months before a new employee is eligible for a full caseload.

Supervisors from both state and private agencies report that they experience particular difficulty with completing the paperwork and ad-hoc reports while attempting to provide quality services to children and families. The quantity and redundancy of paperwork and data requirements are perceived as impediments to being accessible to counselors who need assistance and conducting the quality of work necessary to lead to improved child outcomes.

Training

Florida has developed training modules for supervisors that include Basic Supervisory Training, Supervisory Effectiveness Training (SET), and Quality Case Management for Supervisors. Community Based Care supervisory staff are also required to meet all state training requirements as well as any additional training required by the lead agency. The department’s goal is for all current supervisors to have successfully completed these modules by December 2002.

- Survey results indicate that 83 percent of state employees have completed components of this training.
- 47 percent of state supervisors and 48 percent of CBC supervisors indicate they do not feel more competent as a result of this training.
- Supervisory training is not always provided close to the hiring date.
- Two of the three CBCs included in this study have developed additional training modules to improve supervisory capacity.

Although the SET training addresses many of the management skills considered to be essential to good supervisors, there appears to be an overall dissatisfaction in the field with training provided by the Professional Development Center (PDC). Interviews with PDC staff indicate trainees surveyed immediately following training report that they are satisfied with the training. Counselor certification training is evaluated using a pre-post test method. However, there is not a complete enough set of pre-post test data to determine trainee improvement resulting from training. Follow up evaluation of counselor training occurs during field reviews and monitoring. The effectiveness of the new

supervisory modules is not evaluated using the pre-post test method.

Data

Across the country, increasing attention has been focused on child welfare outcomes. Therefore, the ability to utilize data in management is an emerging competency requirement in this field. Due to advances in information systems and the development of more user-friendly technology, outcome information is increasingly accessible.

In Florida, an information system referred to as HomeSafenet (HSn) is under development and expected to replace other department information systems and manual record-keeping processes. It will also support child welfare activities such as client intake, determination of eligibility for services, case management, resource management, court processing, financial management, and administration.

There are a number of issues effecting public and private sector supervisors related to the functionality of this system. As currently deployed, data input is time consuming and requires the use of multiple screens. It is not unusual for data edits to exceed an hour to correct errors, or add additional case details. Initial case entry into the system may take up to several hours. When supervisors assume these duties, a large portion of the workweek is devoted to data entry and checking. Data accuracy is problematic as well. Due to management needs, some CBC providers have implemented their own software as well as using HSn. While this practice appears necessary for service and billing purposes, it results in duplicative data entry by staff.

District 1 has piloted a program that is reported to be helpful in navigating the HSn system. This platform, referred to as Unity 1, has introduced the capability of accessing data from multiple sources. It links databases from TANF, Medicaid and the Department of Juvenile Justice. This linking capability reduces the amount of time users (currently supervisors and counselors) spend collecting client information.

Performance Outcomes

A performance measurement system is critical to organizational success in managing outcomes. It is useful for effective strategic planning, performance based budgeting, program evaluation, contract monitoring and process improvement and an essential tool for effective supervision.

One of the goals of performance measurement is to generate information that is usable for improving the operational efficiency and the effectiveness of service delivery. The information generated by performance measurement enhances management's ability to make sound decisions. Due to multiple issues associated with the reliability of performance outcome data, comparisons across districts and agencies for the purpose of this project could not be accurately made.

The department's management has identified key operational measures for Family Safety that link to the Performance Based Budgeting measures. These key measures are "end of process" measures that are useful to upper management in evaluating departmental performance.

Unfortunately, the link between these high level key measures and district business plans and service delivery practices is not always clear. "In process" measures have been developed (such as time taken to commence investigations) for some outcomes that lead logically to the achievement of the target, but this is not true for all measures. "In process" measures are helpful in monitoring performance along the way and making changes to meet the desired "end of process" target.

During previous years, DCF was involved in "process mapping" its key services and identifying common "drivers" or measures that contributed to overall performance. These drivers were beginning to be tracked at the headquarters level in addition to outcome measures. This practice contributed to a better understanding of processes that led to desired outcomes. However, there has been drift to this initiative, and focus has shifted to immediate crisis situations.

District leadership in some areas has continued the efforts to identify internal processes and measures that enable them to meet district and departmental needs and make improvements. These districts have developed internal targets that lead to meeting departmental expectations. Internal targets are also helpful in identifying root causes of problems and establishing standardized processes.

Although issues such as staffing levels, staff turnover, and experience impact performance, districts that have retained the capacity to engage in effective management practices tend to perform at a more consistent level than those that have not.

Best Practices

While researching this interim project, several best practices were noted in the field. These practices are identified based upon demonstration of one or more of the following criteria: the management structure supports consistent and effective communication between staff; there is demonstrated use of performance data in management decision making; management has identified internal goals that result in meeting state outcomes; the management demonstrates flexibility in arranging available resources (time, staff, overtime) in a manner that meets departmental expectations; and finally, a commitment to service initiatives exists that results in positive outcomes for the families served.

Sarasota YMCA (CBC Lead Agency)

This organization has established a management structure with clearly defined roles, responsibilities and performance expectations for staff at all levels. Reports are utilized regularly to gauge agency performance. Effective communication is noted across management levels, and written policies provide helpful guidelines to staff for completing their jobs. Staff at all levels of the organization have access to and utilize performance data for decision making. Supervisors use data reports to effectively track employee performance, manage caseload assignments, and make adaptations to meet performance goals. A teamwork approach is utilized that assures agency goals are met. A unique feature of this agency is its ability to bill for targeted case management. This has contributed to more flexible and integrated service delivery for clients as well as more flexible funding for the agency.

District 2, DCF

Management in this district has clearly defined the roles and responsibilities of management positions in carrying out the department mission. Multiple DCF reports are used daily by all levels of management to realign staffing patterns and caseloads based upon referrals and counselor capabilities. The organizational structure and staff functions in this district mirror the structure of DCF headquarters, which is a unique feature of this district. The district has identified "in process" measures that are being used in a preventive manner to track progress and assure compliance with DCF requirements. Proactive improvement initiatives have been implemented within this district utilizing a team approach, identifying root causes of district problems, and developing countermeasures to help solve problems.

Honorable Mention - CHARLEE Model Program

This is a model program, established by the 2001 Legislature, that utilizes new approaches to solve problems associated with foster care. This program uses a case management approach that includes case staffing by a multidisciplinary team that results in the client being the focus of more than one person. Team members monitor progress. This staffing approach results in more focused attention on the child's needs, improved outcomes, and decreased likelihood of identified issues not getting follow-up. This type of model involves a built-in system of checks and balances that increases staff accountability and reduces the likelihood of cases getting "lost in the system." It also contributes to reduced staff stress because responsibilities for each child are shared, and no one, including case supervisors, is put in a position of identifying and addressing all of the child's needs.

Conclusions

Effective supervisory practice begins with supervisors who have the education, experience, and training to effectively manage and support child welfare counselors and their cases. To some degree, however, the elements of the job in Florida's child welfare system undermine its ability to attract and retain appropriately educated, trained, and experienced supervisors. Florida's salary level is lower than the national average raising a concern for the long-term stability of a critical position; supervisor training is not always timely provided and specific to the job; support for the supervisor's role of job coach and staff mentor needs strengthening as a necessary component of effective management.

Research has indicated that utilization of data and measuring various levels of performance are important components of effective management. In this study, only pockets of areas were found that have effectively incorporated these mechanisms into their management systems, as demonstrated in District 2 and the Sarasota YMCA. Management in both of these areas has identified key internal performance indicators that they measure and track on an ongoing basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The department should establish a plan and implement a system of management that continuously evaluates child welfare outcomes and is used to identify critical goals and develop appropriate interventions. The plan should address the standardization of key departmental processes, monitoring, and systematic improvement of processes throughout the state system. Identification of "in process" and "end process" measures that link

statewide performance to processes at the district and community-based care level is essential. The use of quality management consultants is recommended to assist with the development and deployment of the management plan.

The department should establish a workgroup, (including all levels of staff affected), examine supervisory training contents and address specific skill acquisition and competencies that should result from training

It is recommended that DCF examine the data and reporting needs of district level supervisory staff and improve data reliability, timeliness, and reports.

The agency needs to improve its efforts to address workloads of the supervisor by improving staff retention and filling counselor vacancies in a timely manner.

The department should evaluate the merits of:

- Implementation of a staffing ratio that addresses the utilization of staff positions such as clerical and direct service aides to assume some responsibilities currently being carried out by supervisors and counselors.
- Identification and implementation of strategies to improve the use of resources such as laptops, cell phones, and state cars to more efficiently use staff time, improve staff safety and improve staff morale.

A well-analyzed proposal to implement the best of these strategies should be presented to the legislature.

The department should explore the expansion of targeted case management billing across the state.