



Array of Best Practices Strengthens the District Safety Net

The District of Columbia is using a host of best practices to strengthen the safety net for abused and neglected children and troubled families. Some are nationally recognized while others stem from local innovation.

Case Practice

Support for Good Judgment

Structured Decision Making[®] is an actuarially-based model for assessing safety and risk and for making decisions from intake through closure of child welfare investigations and cases. It is an evidence-based best practice that has been shown to increase consistency and validity of case decisions, reduce subsequent child maltreatment, and expedite permanence. Since 2007, social workers at the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) have used SDM[®] instruments to be more objective and consistent in assessing whether situations pose a low, moderate, or high risk to the children involved. SDM also allows CFSA to target the agency's intensive services to children and families at high risk of maltreatment while helping to ensure service plans reflect both the strengths and needs of the family.

Families Decide for Themselves

Family Team Meetings engage parents and extended family members in planning for the safety, permanence, and well being of their children with professional support. Since 2005, CFSA has used a unique model to convene a Family Team Meeting when removal of a child from home is likely or within 72 hours following emergency removal. In a recent study of FTMs at CFSA, independent researchers found that children who had an FTM were much more likely to be placed in kin foster homes, have family support for their permanency goal, exit care faster, and be discharged to parents or relatives.

On the Same Page for Kids



A **practice model** articulates child welfare values, principles, and approaches and serves as a guiding statement that supports shared understanding and collective action throughout a child welfare system. At a minimum, a practice model defines the philosophy of and protocols for engaging children, youth, families, and the community; delivering services; and achieving desired outcomes. With extensive community input, CFSA has developed practice models for serving families at home and children and youth in out-of-home care. They make social worker-led teams the centerpiece of child welfare case practice in the District.

Shorter Trip to Get Home

High-impact teams are one approach CFSA is using to move more children and youth to permanence more quickly. Borrowed from the private sector, a high-impact team has a focused charge to remove barriers, innovate, and stimulate performance leaps around a specific issue or challenge. The Permanency Opportunities Project (POP) partners social workers from CFSA with counterparts from local private agency Adoptions Together to develop and implement new methods of finding permanent homes for children and youth via reunification with family, legal guardianship, or adoption.

Quality Help Near By



Community-based services conveniently assist people where they live with the added benefit of knowledge and sensitivity that come from being part of the neighborhood. In the District, the six neighborhood-based Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives represent a unique source of free or low-cost services for families in need. Job training, support groups, assistance with housing, and parenting classes are just a few of the services the Collaboratives offer. In 1997, District child welfare was instrumental in establishing the Collaboratives and continues to support them through financial and cooperative partnership. In 2008, CFSA co-located all units of in-home child welfare social workers with the Collaboratives in community-based locations. CFSA and the Collaboratives now partner

to serve families who remain together at home while involved with the child welfare system, effectively preventing the children from entering foster care. For more information, visit <http://dccollaboratives.org/>.

Meeting High Standards

Keeping individual **caseloads within national standards** supports social workers in providing quality service. While many jurisdictions accept a variety of degrees as a qualification for employment as a child welfare social worker, case-carrying social workers at CFSA must have a bachelor's or master's degree in the field of social work (BSW or MSW). They must also pass a licensure examination to practice in the District even if another jurisdiction has previously licensed them.

One-Stop Help for Child Victims

Safe Shores/The DC Children's Advocacy Center is the place where District agencies charged with responding to child abuse come together to share information, gather facts, and assist child victims of severe physical or sexual abuse. A multidisciplinary team with representatives from law enforcement, legal, social services, and medical organizations (including CFSA) watches a single forensic interview that puts young victims through the trauma of telling their story just once and captures it on videotape. Multidisciplinary team members then participate in semi-monthly case reviews that ensure support for victims and their families and aggressive action to arrest, charge, and prosecute alleged abusers. For more information, visit <http://www.safeshores.org/>.

Supports

Great Care for Kids



CFSA's **Office of Clinical Practice** (OCP) is a unique approach to a universal challenge: improving the well being of children, youth, and families in the child welfare system. Under the direction of a board-certified pediatrician, OCP administers physical, mental, and behavioral health programs in cooperation with community partners. A team of nurses conducts in-house medical screenings of children and youth entering care, assembles medical histories and records, and coordinates ongoing health care with social workers and foster parents. To meet client needs, social workers can consult with in-house experts on education, substance abuse, and domestic violence and obtain referrals to a wide array of supportive services. OCP also coordinates and facilitates Family Team Meetings.

Continuous Quality Improvement

CFSA has developed a robust **internal quality assurance function** that regularly reviews and evaluates various areas of social work practice. The Quality Improvement Division reviews all fatalities of District children and youth known to CFSA within the current year or during the previous four years. Since 2005, the QI Division has performed Quality Service Reviews (QSRs), a best practice for in-depth examination of a sample of cases to determine client status and well being and the quality, consistency, and effectiveness of the service system against specific indicators. The QI Division publishes findings and recommendations, which CFSA uses as a basis for policy decisions and practice improvements.

Foster Care all in the Family



The **Mockingbird Family Model** supports selected foster parents in the District in becoming an "extended family" for one another. An experienced foster parent serves as the "hub" home for eight to 10 "satellite" foster homes within a 10-mile radius. This "constellation" of foster homes meets regularly for business, educational, and social activities, encouraging relationships to develop into a supportive mini-network for the foster families and children and youth in their care. A major benefit for Mockingbird foster parents is ready access to respite care from the hub parent or other families in the constellation. To date, CFSA has established six Mockingbird constellations of family foster homes in the District—the largest number in any jurisdiction outside of Seattle, WA, where the model originated. For more information about the Mockingbird Family Model, visit <http://www.tndev.net/mbs/mfm.php>.

Technology

Tracking Every Child

In 2005, the District became one of the first eight jurisdictions in the U.S. to achieve federal approval of its child welfare case management database as a **State-Administered Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS)**. In 1993, Congress mandated that each state and DC must develop a SACWIS as the basis for reporting child welfare statistics to the U.S. Department of Health of Human Services (DHHS), which administers major federal funding streams for child welfare. Federal approval, which many states have not yet achieved, came after CFSA's automated case management system (known as FACES) met 90 standards for soundness and data reliability. In 2007, CFSA changed FACES from a server-based to a web-system (FACES.NET) and became the first child welfare agency in the nation to gain federal approval of a web-based SACWIS.

Taking Every Call



In 2008, CFSA launched new **telecommunications technology** that put the District's 24-hour hotline for reporting child abuse and neglect on par with the most modern systems in the nation. The system gives callers several options for directing their call. Behind the scenes, it allows supervisors to monitor calls in real time for quality assurance, quickly retrieve recordings of specific calls for review, and generate management reports. If a disaster required evacuation from CFSA headquarters, the system is fully portable to an off-site location.

Free Training Online

Comprehensive **online training for mandated reporters** teaches designated professionals everything they need to know to fulfill their obligations to report child abuse or neglect under District law. The course is conveniently available at no charge from work, home, or any computer with an internet connection at <http://dc.mandatedreporter.org>.