



DCF COVID-19 Daily Update Supporting Children, Families and Staff

July 1, 2020

CASE REVIEWS GAIN ADDED PARTICIPATION IN THE PANDEMIC

Conference Calls Bring Voices to the Table

For years, it has been a struggle to get all the players around the table for a process -- called an Administrative Case Review (ACR) -- required every six months for children in foster care. The purpose of the ACR is to closely review the child's case plan to ensure it provides for appropriate treatment and services to address the safety, permanency and well-being of the child and that the plan identifies steps to achieve permanency as soon as appropriate. The ACR meeting also affords parents, providers, children and foster parents the opportunity to provide feedback on the case plan, goals and objectives and timeframes for permanency.

The process begins with ACR social work supervisors who review the electronic case record, including the case plan and then gather the other important people in the child's life in the ACR meeting. The meeting, which traditionally takes place around a table located in a physical room, typically includes the biological parents, foster parents, service providers, lawyers for the child, and Department of Children and Families staff, including the social worker for the child and the ACR social work supervisors who facilitate the meeting. For youth who are old enough, their participation is also sought.

The challenge however is that for a variety of reasons it has been historically difficult to convene all those people. Fathers, attorneys, the youth, and service providers are too often not available to participate due to the need to travel to an area office and scheduling conflicts.

When the pandemic hit the state hard in mid-March, the ACR process was suspended due to the requirement for social distancing and the effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

But the Office of Administrative Case Review quickly adjusted and did so with a simple and low-tech solution: teleconferencing.

ACR Program Supervisors Carissa LeBrun and Orlando Cuadrado said that at the onset of the pandemic the ACR facilitators didn't have tablets or the ability to connect to the agency network, so the decision was made for them to use cell phones to conference in all invited parties. It took about three weeks to stand up the new process, and on April 6, 2020 the remote ACRs began. It has worked beautifully.

Ms. LeBrun and Mr. Cuadrado said they expected to see more participation due to the convenience of not having to travel to the meeting. Everyone has been surprised, however, by the degree of the increase.

"We expected more participation," Mr. Cuadrado said, "but we got *a lot* more."

"This meeting is giving everyone a voice and a chance to connect with each other," Ms. LeBrun said. "This provides that opportunity in every case for kids in care."

Ms. LeBrun said it is especially difficult to gain the participation of the older youth in care because they have so much going on. "Typically, their days are filled with school and other activities," she said. Further, "the in-person meetings can be intimidating for a youth and so the phone calls are yielding greater input", she said.

"They're not just giving 'yes' and 'no' answers," Ms. LeBrun said. "They are much more engaged in the process."

Or as Mr. Cuadrado said, "It is much easier to speak your mind on the phone than face-to-face."

The improved participation goes beyond the youth, they said.

"We saw a lot more parents, a lot more providers and even attorneys," Mr. Cuadrado said.

They said ACR participants have been as high as 22 individuals. Ms. LeBrun said it is not easy to facilitate an organized and purposeful meeting with that many people, but that "the skill set of our staff is phenomenal. They deserve a lot of credit."

Further, because of social distancing, many other meetings -- those in court or in a therapeutic setting -- aren't happening now, so the telephone ACR provides an important forum that otherwise would not exist, said Ms. LeBrun.

Mr. Cuadrado said the teleconferencing was an option previously, but not as often used. "It was option B or C," he said. "This made it primary, and now it probably is the future of ACRs. This is the wave of the future. Everyone is liking the greater participation."

I'm pleased to see the increased participation in Administrative Case Reviews because it's critical that parents and children have input into their case plans and their voices are heard. This required shift in practice during the pandemic has reminded us of the importance of having options available for families. If they can't be at the table physically, we can bring their voices to the table through teleconferencing.