

Improving Outcomes for Children and Families



PIP TIPS Item 17: Assessing Needs and Services

Each issue of Program Improvement Plan (PIP) Tips focuses on one aspect of the safety, permanency and well-being of children in Minnesota. This issue examines assessing needs and services, included in well-being outcome one.

Well-Being Outcome 1

Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.

Related Performance Items

Item 17: Assessing Needs and Services

Item 18: Involving Families and Children in Case Planning

Item 19: Worker Visits with Child

Item 20: Worker Visits with Parents

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Review evaluates assessing needs and services based on the following criteria:

- Needs of children, parents and foster parents are adequately assessed and identified
- Identified needs are addressed through appropriate services to children, parents and foster parents.

Assessing needs and services is essential to overall achievement of safety, permanency and well-being outcomes. According to national findings, common challenges to assessing needs and services are conducting assessments that are sufficiently comprehensive to capture underlying family problems, and providing sufficient services to meet the needs of children and parents. Providing services that adequately support foster parents or relative caregivers is another common challenge.

Statewide performance on assessing needs and services measured by the Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews in 2003 declined by two percent from performance measured by the federal Child and Family Service Review in 2001. This trend of declining performance has continued in 2004!

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews rated assessing needs and services a Strength in only 67 percent of the cases reviewed in 2003. In a ranked order of performance on all items, assessing needs and services ranked 22 out of 23.

**The Minnesota Department of Human Services and County Social Service Agencies:
Working Together to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families**



Putting Good Practice Into Practice

Comprehensive family assessment is a process founded on family-centered practice principles that support improved outcomes for children and families. A comprehensive family assessment employs a holistic approach that incorporates initial safety and risk assessments, but goes beyond to obtain a more complete picture of the family and the circumstances that brought them to the attention of the child welfare agency.

Social workers, in partnership with families, identify child and family needs along with their strengths. The assessment provides the basis for case planning and service delivery that addresses child safety, while meeting individual needs and promoting family stability.

Supervisors provide guidance on gathering assessment information and linking the information to decisions about services. Case consultation is provided at key decision points to review and incorporate ongoing assessment information in the case plan as needed.

Assessing Needs

Assessing needs begins with the social worker's first contact with a family and continues until the case is closed. Thorough and accurate assessment is accomplished in partnership with children, parents and foster families who provide essential information on what is impacting the safety, permanency and well-being of children.

Assessments identify individual and family needs along with their strengths and protective capacity. Culture, ethnicity, language, development and other unique characteristics of the child and family must be carefully considered when assessing their needs.

Assessments should target presenting issues and individual needs of family members and be sufficiently comprehensive to identify underlying

factors, such as domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness affecting children.

Initial and ongoing assessment is carried out by social workers in their regular contacts with children and families. Specialized assessments might be completed by professionals and service providers with a contractual relationship with the agency.

Assessing needs is essential to the permanency and stability of children in foster care. Children may have needs for specialized services and support. Foster parent needs and services are related to what they require to provide appropriate care for the children in their home.

Providing Services

Decisions regarding services should be directly linked to assessments of child and family needs, and be reviewed and updated based on ongoing assessments of the family's progress toward meeting case plan goals.

Individualized services that include an array of formal services and informal supports are most likely to help families achieve meaningful and sustainable change. Providing services that meet the needs of children and families is supported by access to an adequate service array. A comprehensive child welfare service array should include a continuum of services from early intervention and prevention to services that help children achieve stability and permanency.

Services must be available where families live, be adequate to prevent lengthy waits, and be appropriately matched to meet individual needs. Supportive services such as transportation or child care are necessary to assure families have access to needed services.

Minnesota Requirements

- Structured Decision Making

Statewide implementation of Structured Decision Making (SDM) was completed in Minnesota by the end of 2003. SDM uses standardized and research-based assessment tools to provide structure to critical decision points in the child welfare case. Different assessment tools are used at each stage of the child welfare case and provide a foundation for planning and reviewing the effectiveness of service interventions (Children's Research Center).

- Child Well Being Tool

The Minnesota Department of Human Services developed and implemented the Child Well Being Tool (CWBT) in 2003 to provide a process for screening for potential needs across eight factors associated with child well-being.

- Alternative Response

Guidelines for conducting Alternative Response assessments, including completion of an assessment of family strengths and needs, are provided in DHS Bulletin #03-68-02, *DHS issues amended guidance on Alternative Response to reports of maltreatment*.

- Keeping Children and Families Safe Act

Referral of children under age three, involved in a determined case of abuse or neglect, for a developmental assessment is a recent requirement under the Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003 (DHS, 2004).

- Minnesota Rules and Statutes

Case planning requirements for children in out-of-home placements are found in Minnesota Statutes 260C.212, Subdivision 1. For children receiving protective services and remaining at home, requirements are located in Minnesota Rules 9560.0228. Both citations include requirements for assessing needs and planning for services based on the child and family needs and goals of the case plan. Reviews and updates to the case plans based

on ongoing assessments of needs are also required and defined in statute and rule.

Improving Performance

County agencies can improve performance on assessing needs and services by addressing key systemic issues, focusing supervision on critical areas of practice and implementing quality assurance practices, including use of data. Strategies for improving performance on assessing needs and services include the following:

- Define clear expectations and policies that support a process for conducting comprehensive family assessments.
- Assess and make efforts to align caseloads to allow adequate time for conducting thorough and ongoing assessment of needs.
- Ensure access to specialized assessments through contractual agreements or other resource development efforts.
- Assess the agency's service array to determine availability, adequacy and accessibility of services.
- Train and prepare staff to conduct assessments and use assessment information to make decisions about services and case plans.
- Support and guide assessment practices and decisions about service planning through supervisory oversight and consultation.
- Conduct regular case reviews that target assessment of needs and provision of services.
- Conduct periodic surveys of parents, children and foster parents to determine whether services met their needs.
- Use data systems and reports to monitor performance on assessing needs and services.

Resources and Technical Assistance

- *Case Review and Consultation Guide* (Based on Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews) available on: DHS Supervisor's Web site
http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs_id_000308.hcsp
- Children's Research Center: www.nccd-crc.org.
- *Minnesota Child and Family Service Review, County Self-Assessment* document, available on: DHS Supervisor's Web site
http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs_id_000308.hcsp
- DHS Bulletin #04-68-02, *Refer Abused and Neglected Children for Developmental Assessment*, issued March 2004.
- DHS Bulletin #03-68-02, *DHS issues amended guidance on Alternative Response to reports of child maltreatment*, issued March 2003.
- Recommended reading: *Conducting the Family Assessment*, Field Guide to Child Welfare, Volume II. Rycus, Judith and Hughes, Ronald. CWLA Press, 1998.
- Recommended Web site: National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Permanency Planning:
<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/crcfcpp>
- SSIS Resources:
 - Access to all SDM assessment tools
 - Access to the CWBT, coming with Version 3.8.
 - General reports: Service Plan Report, Work Groups without Open Service Plans, Placements without Open Out-of-Home Placement Plans.

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