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ENHANCED UTILIZATION OF REVIEW
BOARD STATISTICAL DATA

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE
DIVISION OF FOSTER CARE REVIEW

Submitted by

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ENHANCED UTILIZATION OF REVIEW BOARD STATISTICAL DATA BY THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

OVERVIEW

In 1994, members of the General Assembly requested that the South Carolina Legislative Audit Council (LAC) audit the activities of the Governor's Office Division of Foster Care Review. One of the recommendations made by the LAC in their final report dated January, 1995, was that the Department of Social Services should identify ways that the statistical information generated by the Review Boards could be used more effectively. (See Appendix A). The need to respond to this recommendation presented the Review Board and the Department of Social Services with an opportunity to address the broader need for enhanced communication between the two agencies, specifically targeted to the front-line worker as to the mission, roles and responsibilities of the Review Board. Working together, Review Board staff and administrative staff from the Department of Social Services began studying ways to achieve this goal.

Based on the broad scope of the problem to be solved, Certified Public Manager candidates realized that a solution must be one linked to a strategic plan. Strategic planning was selected because this type of planning is linked to long term solutions rather than short term fixes and seeks ways for the organization to maximize strengths and opportunities while minimizing weaknesses. The Certified Public Manager candidates also recognized that this strategic plan may serve as a foundation for future operational and project planning. It was important that the plan be linked to the Review Board's ability to achieve the vision and fulfill the mission of the Division.

USE OF IN-HOUSE TEAMS TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE USE OF REVIEW BOARD DATA AND ENHANCE COMMUNICATION

The first action taken towards developing a strategic plan was to meet with staff to identify concerns related to the Departments of Social Service's ineffective use of Review Board data at the county level and the lack of positive communication between local Review Boards and county staff. This approach would allow staff to give their perspective and lead to useful discussions about possible solutions. Team approaches to problem solving had been successfully utilized before with Review Board staff. The informal team approach was the plan for the next step.

The two Certified Public Manager candidates worked together to discuss the level and type of direction that they, as team leaders, would need to implement with the current staff. It was agreed that a Facilitating Style would be best. This approach was taken due to the moderate to high independence level of current staff.

An in-service for Review Board program staff was scheduled and ground rules were established prior to opening the floor for discussion. A force field analysis was the technique used to identify communication problems with the Department of Social Services. The two overall restraining forces identified at the end of this process were: 1) the defensiveness of front line workers due to the inappropriate, punitive use of Review Board data by their superiors; and, 2) no community collaboration between the county Departments of Social Service staff and local Review Boards due to inadequate communication.

The need to identify the intensity of the restraining forces in each county required another method of evaluation. Each Review Board Coordinator was given a chart and was asked to plot each of their assigned county's level of communication by comparing

two variables, honesty and cooperation (See Appendix B). This data was then used in preparation for the next step in the process.

INVOLVING STAKE HOLDERS IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE USE OF REVIEW BOARD DATA AND ENHANCED COMMUNICATION

The second step in the strategic planning process was to involve the rest of the identified stake holders in order to identify issues that they saw as barriers to the effective use of Review Board data and enhanced communication. An opportunity for meetings of work groups comprised of local Review Board members, county DSS directors and supervisors, and Review Board staff was scheduled. These work groups met in various regions around the state and participation was limited to the specific counties in each region.

Both CPM candidates made a brief presentation at each location on the mission and vision of the Review Board. After a short lecture on the difference between bureaucratic and collaborative thinking, the large group in each location was divided into smaller work groups. Groups were given the task of identifying the top three barriers to effective communication and collaboration in their region. They also were instructed to formulate possible solutions that would enhance communication and collaboration. Review Board Coordinators served as group leaders for this exercise. The consensus process worked well in that all participants were given an opportunity to clarify what they saw as barriers to communication and to air frustration or concerns about how Review Board data was used in their county.

Small work groups were reconvened and asked to share their work product with the large group. The large group was then asked to identify workable solutions to the

most frequently identified barriers to effective communication and effective use of Review Board data. It was clear that the lack of effective communication translated directly into the ineffective use of data.

The top three barriers and solutions identified in each region for more effective use of Review Board data were very similar. The process showed that the primary barriers to effective use of Review Board data were: 1) a lack of understanding on the part of DSS workers as to why the Review Board gathers statistical data; 2) DSS worker's lack of understanding as to how this data could be used to improve the child welfare system; and, 3) the ineffective use of the data as a management tool by supervisory staff. Rather than using the data to identify county training needs, in some areas it was being used in a punitive manner by Department of Social Services management staff.

IMPLEMENTATION OF PILOT PROJECT

In an attempt to incorporate proposed solutions identified by Review Board staff and county Department of Social Service workers, a pilot project in three judicial circuits was developed. The pilot project had specific goals focusing more attention on use of Review Board data, as well as enhanced communication between local Boards, Review Board staff and county supervisors and caseworkers.

The three specific objectives for the pilot project were:

- 1) Pre-review reports would be provided to county staff in an effort to reduce the number of technical Areas of Concern cited by the Boards. The pre-review reports would be compiled based on required information sent to Review Board staff three weeks prior to the review date. This report was to give county

supervisors an opportunity to review missing documentation with workers and have them better prepared for the upcoming review;

2) Pre-review reports would be sent to local Review Board members one week prior to the review. Required documentation would have been reviewed by staff and important points summarized in the report for Board members to read prior to the review. It was anticipated that by eliminating time spent reviewing required documentation, local Boards would have more time at reviews to spend on quality issues such as safety and permanency; and,

3) The Area of Concern definitions were revised and streamlined in an effort to reduce concerns related strictly to the Review Board System. This would more clearly delineate programmatic and legal barriers impacting permanency for children.

EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

Two types of statistical comparisons will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project. One will be to compare percentages on selected variables in participating counties prior to, and after the pilot. The other will be to compare the selected variables of counties participating in the pilot with those counties not participating. The time frame of the pilot will be used for the second comparison.

Baseline statistical information will be used on the selected Areas of Concern cited by local Boards in the counties chosen to participate in the pilot project. The variables selected for analysis are the concerns related to legal issues and programmatic issues. The effectiveness of the pilot project components would be determined by reduced percentages of Areas of Concern in the Legal and Programmatic

groupings. (See Appendix A). County sub-totals in the Legal and Programmatic Areas of Concern noted at reviews prior to implementation of the pilot project will be compared to percentages cited during the project time period.

Sub-total percentages of Areas of Concern in the Legal and Programmatic categories in the pilot project counties also will be compared with those same categories for Boards not participating in the project. This will enable the Review Board to determine if there is value in the receipt of pre-review packets, and the preparation of pre-review reports by Review Board staff.

Analysis of all identified comparative data should determine if the benefits of the pilot project warrant statewide implementation. Recommendations for other systemic changes identified as a result of this pilot also will be addressed.

PROJECTED OUTCOMES

The statutory and programmatic procedural safeguards tracked by the Review Board as Areas of Concern have been enacted over the years, on both the state and national level, to prevent children from languishing in the foster care system. These safeguards were not established at random. Each one plays an important part in the child's progress through the system towards resolution of his permanent plan and the location of his forever family.

More effective utilization of statistical data gathered by the Review Board in the categories of legal and programmatic safeguards, as well as enhanced communication between the Review Board and the Department of Social Services should facilitate more timely permanence for children that must be removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect.

The statistical information tracked by the Review Board should be used by the Department of Social Services to address identified system deficiencies in the foster care system and to support policy revisions or legislative proposals impacting permanency planning initiatives. By achieving the main goals of the pilot project: 1) enhanced communication between the Review Board and the Department of Social Services; and, 2) more effective use of Review Board data by the Department of Social Services, it will be possible for these two entities to work collaboratively to increase community awareness about the foster care system and to develop community resources on behalf of children and families involved with the foster care system. Working together, permanent homes for all children in a timely manner can become a reality.

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