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Lauren Leikin worked for the Family Representative at the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, dividing her time between assessing parent- and family-involvement initiatives and helping with the redesign of intake and assessment policies. The Family Involvement Assessment Project, which is part of the Family Representative's Action Plan, relied on interviews and an extensive survey to evaluate the various pilot programs underway at the 28 Area Offices in the state. We hope that this project will allow us to (1) gather accurate information regarding the progress of various family-based initiatives; (2) encourage communication and understanding between Central Office and the Area Offices; and (3) focus attention on those initiatives that are determined to be the most effective and successful. The intake and assessment project, renamed as "Right From the Start," also provided Ms. Leikin with an opportunity to work with people throughout the organization to prepare for briefings, a summit, and a long-term plan that will ultimately result in the reinvention of DSS's intake and assessment policies.

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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** SG, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Social Services  
**From:** Lauren Leikin  
**Date:** September 7, 2004  
**Re:** Family Involvement Assessment Project

### Current and Future Obstacles for Increased Family Involvement

Those at the higher levels of administration appear to have developed solid and comfortable support for encouraging practice that involves families in their own casework. There is additional support for the idea of involving families in the policy and decision-making processes at DSS, though this presents its own issues, including time demands, knowledge requirement, and confidentiality barriers.

At the ground level, however, family involvement is complicated, expensive, time-consuming, and difficult. Case loads are already higher than what is mandated by union agreement, and social workers, supervisors, and Area Directors are constantly struggling with issues of quantity and quality. The Department, meanwhile, is struggling to fundamentally transform the policies and practices of social work to align them with the six core values that Commissioner Spence has identified. Though this theory has not been documented in any survey or assessment instrument, it is a widely held belief that, as in most bureaucracies, the front-line workers try to "outlast" the new ideas of any given Commissioner without truly changing their practices. Commissioner Spence has demonstrated awareness of this issue in some of his writings and letters to his employees; it remains, however, the most substantial obstacle the Department will face in achieving improved and sustainable social work practice that engages and involves families.

I also believe, given my experience this summer, that a very real obstacle is how the Department knows when it has achieved its goals. There needs to be continued evaluation of programs that criti-

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cally examine their effectiveness, and details what is behind that success or failure. The evaluations, however, are seriously impaired by some of the issues mentioned above, including self-reporting, inaccurate measurement systems, incentives to lie, and limited time frames for both implementation and evaluation. Communication at the Department is improving with regular meetings held between Central, Regional, and Area Offices, but the brutal honesty of a few Area Directors and other staff members this summer leads me to believe that there is much that goes on at the Area Offices that is either unknown or ignored at Central office. This disconnect, as it persists, is a dangerous thing to the forward movement of all initiatives, including family involvement.

## **Background**

The goals of the Family Involvement Assessment Project, which is being done in accordance with the action plan developed by the Family Representative, and in collaboration with the Division of Planning and Program Development, are:

- 1) to gather accurate information regarding the progress of various family-based initiatives at the Area Offices,
- 2) to encourage communication and understanding between Central Office and the Area Offices regarding the successes and obstacles of the family involvement initiatives, and
- 3) to focus attention on those initiatives that are determined to be the most effective and successful at achieving identified family involvement outcomes.

The process of achieving these goals began with a round of interviews conducted by the Family Representative, and compiled by me (see Attachment 1). These 13 interviews provide compelling anecdotes and stories that reveal the commitment of the Directors to family involvement, but also their frustrations. As a complement to these interviews, I created a survey and a data sheet (see Attachment 2) to get numbers and perceptions on family involvement from a wider circle of participants. There is one data sheet per Area Office, but the web-based survey is being completed by 232 supervisors and managers in 26 of the 28 Area Offices. These people were identified by their Area Directors as possessing the resources and knowledge that would allow them to make a meaningful contribution to the assessment project. The survey closes on September 10, 2004; as of today, 103 people have completed all or part of the survey.

Manuela DaCosta, the Family Representative, has already laid out an action plan with next steps that include the development of additional surveys for social workers and families that complement this first baseline survey. To complete the process of assessment and evaluation, however, I recommend the following steps:

- 1) A reminder sent to the Area Offices regarding the completion of the survey by all selected participants;
- 2) A careful compilation and analyzation of the survey results that takes into account the substantial issues that will arise as a result of the non-randomized and biased nature of the survey;
- 3) A report that identifies the areas of success, as well as specific areas of weakness in the furthering of family involvement initiatives;
- 4) Further evaluation of programs that are identified by the initial report as potentially successful and replicable initiatives to encourage systemic family involvement.

Establishing practice that is “family-centered” has already become a Core Value of the Department. The well-acknowledged difficulty is in making sure that this value is embraced in practice by all social workers and supervisors in every Area Office. This assessment, whose concept and design are explained in detail in the following pages, will help to determine the current level of commitment and operation, while also setting an early course for continuing progress in the future.

### **Context for the Family Involvement Project**

When the Family Representative was brought on at Central Office in January 2004, as part of the Department’s strategy to support its Core Value of “family-centered” social work, she developed an seven-point Action Plan to make families a consistent and highly valued part of the Department’s work. The second part of the Action Plan was to conduct a baseline assessment of the Area Office’s work with families, and to evaluate the various pilot programs underway at the offices. Of the 28 Area Offices in the state of Massachusetts, no two offices look exactly alike; even if, in rare circumstances, they share the same pilot programs, they are executed and measured differently, according to local demand. In evaluating programs, therefore, we had to control for these differences as much as possible, while holding them to the same standards of accountability, a process which is described in detail below. Using the family involvement of families not participating in any specific program as a baseline, we evaluated 9 programs:

- 1) Multi-Disciplinary Assessment Teams (MDAT)
- 2) Family-Based Services (FBS)
- 3) Family Advocacy Initiative (FAI)
- 4) Foster Care Review (FCR)
- 5) Family Group Conferencing (FGC)
- 6) Community Connections (CC)
- 7) Area Boards
- 8) Families’ Role in Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)
- 9) Patch

These nine programs operate on two levels: (1) increasing the involvement of families in their own cases and case planning, and (2) increasing the involvement of families in the policy and decision-making processes of the Department.

### **Components of the Family Involvement Project**

#### *Interviews with Area Directors*

The final report, which analyzes the successes, obstacles, and opportunities for family involvement freely mentioned by 13 Area Directors in the course of an interview with the Family Representative, is attached to this memo, and so will not be explored in detail here. It is worth noting, however, that these interviews, which are useful and important in their own right, also helped to inform the development of the assessment survey, which delved deeper into the structure of the Area Offices.

### *Data Sheet*

The data sheet, which is also attached to this memo, is a three page questionnaire that asks for hard numbers regarding family initiatives. I traveled to 14 Area Offices to meet with their Directors, and discuss the data sheet's requirements and reasons. Manuela DaCosta or I spoke with the other half of the Area Directors on the phone to engage in the same conversations. Although less than half of the data sheets have been returned as of this date, I want to draw attention to a few of the potential issues that we may encounter in analyzing this data.

First, the data is reported using systems that vary in accuracy and consistency from office to office. The first section of the data sheet, which asks about general case planning for all families, posed the most difficulty for area offices, which they dealt with in one of two ways: (1) estimation based on supervisors' knowledge of social worker patterns, or (2) a literal recounting of meetings held with families, based on workers' notes of who was present at given meetings. These numbers, therefore, should be seen as providing nothing more than general guidance regarding the family involvement of families who are not participating in specific programs. The MDAT and FBS data is tracked regularly and consistently, and should prove reliable across all offices. The FCR data comes from Central Office, and is, therefore, not subject to changes from within the various offices. The rest of the data may or may not be completed by each office depending on the initiatives they offer.

Second, the data is self-reported, which may lead to errors in accuracy. Although the Directors were reassured that this data was being collected to "understand the effectiveness of various initiatives, and then, should that effectiveness be borne out, to help [them] get the resources [they] need," surely the Directors had an incentive to report their data so that they are seen in the best possible light.

Even given these flaws, however, the data sheet responses do provide us with a useful context in which to place the data from the assessment survey. For example, if, as we find out from the survey, Family Group Conferencing is particularly effective at achieving family involvement outcomes, but, as we find out from the data sheet, only 10 families a year receive Family Group Conferencing, that helps to inform our evaluation of the program.

### *Family Involvement Assessment Survey*

The survey is the bulk of the project, created and developed by myself, with assistance from Manuela DaCosta, Julie Boatright Wilson (Director of the Malcolm Weiner Center for Social Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government), and many others within Central and Area Offices who offered comments and edits. It was developed into a web-based survey using the website [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com).<sup>1</sup>

The survey is divided into two sections, one of which asks specific, repetitive questions about the nature and accomplishments of each program that specifically encourages family involvement; the other section asks questions directly related to the individual taking the survey. The survey begins with questions about family involvement for families who are not enrolled in any of these programs, as a baseline assessment of how social workers interact with families when programs are not involved. This portion, like each portion evaluating programs that deal with family involvement on a case level, includes a series of ten questions organized around a set of outcomes identified by the Family Advocates. The 14 Family Advocates work in Area Offices at liaisons and supports to families, and they developed a set of outcomes that they would like to see achieved for their families at meetings and in interactions with social workers. I used these outcomes as guidelines for each of the programs trying to improve family involvement, and asked them in each section of the survey.

The second section asks personal questions about the survey-taker's background and beliefs to determine if differences that appear in the program evaluations are attributable to individual or programmatic differences. The survey will undoubtedly suffer from many of the same biases invoked for the data sheet, and the final report analyzing the results will have to take those into account.

The survey can be used to compare across programs, and across Area Offices. It is not trackable by individual, although we can see which Area Offices have participants who have completed the survey and which have not. The data sheets, however, are designed in part to take the characteristics and attributes of each Area and each Area Office into consideration when we make comparisons between them. Census data compiled in Central Office will also help us in this important task.

With less than half of recommended participants responding, I cannot analyze the resulting data from the survey, but the trends are shaping up to be interesting, and, frankly, to reflect and confirm much of what the anecdotal evidence already tells us about how family involvement initiatives work.

### **Next Steps**

The immediate next step is to ensure that all participants complete the current assessment survey so that it can be compiled, analyzed, and reported upon. This also involves the collection of Data Sheets from each Area Office. The final report should lead to several recommendations for improvement, and a particular focus on what programs merit further evaluation. Manuela's plan for implementing several surveys on various levels is an appropriate one because it not only increases data collection, it also familiarizes people with the process of data collection, and prepares them for continued evaluation and assessment, which may ultimately limit some of the issues mentioned above.

In the meantime, the mission support that Central Office provides for family involvement is crucial to the progress of the initiatives; a continued focus on quality improvement and a learning organization style model provide an ideal setting; and regular communication among offices will help to advance the Department's goals and Core Values, and will ultimately result in changes in policy and practice that better serve the families of Massachusetts.

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1. Please note that because the survey is still open to responses at this time, I cannot provide the link for the survey itself, as that would open it up to responses by people other than those who are designated participants.