

Continuous Quality Improvement Quality Service Review

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

August 21 – 25, 2006

*Barron County Department of Health and Human
Services*

**Child Welfare Continuous Quality Improvement Program
The Bureau of Programs and Policies,
Division of Children and Family Services,
Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services**

*A Report by
The Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Team*

October 30, 2006

I. Introduction

The Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Program, within the Bureau of Programs and Policies (BPP), a Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS), uses the Quality Services Review (QSR) protocol to evaluate the case practice models of Wisconsin's county child welfare programs. The overarching goal for selection of this particular quality improvement model is to be able to generate useful information for staff at all levels of the county as to the outcomes for children and families served, the strengths of local practice and the opportunities for improving system performance.

It should be noted that the QSR process also provides an opportunity to gather additional information, which the department will use in reporting some federally required information, which is part of Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) and the state's Performance Enhancement Plan.

The Continuous Quality Improvement Team conducted a Quality Service Review in Barron County during the week of August 21st. During the same week, staff from the Children's Court Initiative (CCI) conducted a review of the Juvenile Court. CCI is a comprehensive, ongoing, collaborative project designed to strengthen court processing in Chapter 48 cases.

II. The Barron County Review

Reviewers

In the Barron County review, twelve reviewers participated in reviewing the twelve cases selected. Two Continuous Quality Improvement Specialists, one State staff person, one Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare staff person, one retired county human services director, and one training partnership manager were observed and coached in their development as lead case reviewers. All the lead case reviewers who provided coaching have extensive experience in child welfare. One Area Administrator served as a Shadow 1, a role created to allow child welfare stakeholders to experience a QSR review.

Case Sample

Twelve cases were randomly selected for review in Barron County. In each case, one child was selected as the "focus child." Every attempt is made to stratify the case sample across workers, as well as ages and genders of children. A family must agree to participate in the review process and sign releases for participants to be interviewed by

the review team, or the case is not selected. In the Barron County Review, a total of 111 persons were interviewed. Of the twelve cases, five children were in their birth homes, three were in kinship placements, three were in foster care, and one was in treatment foster care. Five children were in the 0-4 age range, three children were in the 5-9 age range, one child was in the 10-13 age range, and three children were over the age of 13. There were seven males and five females in the sample.

Stakeholder Interviews

As a complement to the individual case reviews, focus groups were conducted with stakeholders from the local child welfare system. CQI Specialist Janet Poff, serving as site leader, conducted these sessions. In addition, Bridget Bauman of the Children's Court Initiative conducted sessions jointly with the Site Leader for many of the focus groups. The external perspectives that were gathered provide a valuable source of perspective, insight, and feedback about how all the systems with which families are involved interface and perform with the child welfare agency, thereby affecting and influencing outcomes. The stakeholder focus groups and their perspectives are briefly described next.

The Systemic Perspective (Macro View)

Strengths:

Health and Human Services (HHS) Staff: Barron County HHS has experienced, dedicated frontline staff. The agency enjoys low turnover rates in child protection and there are many workers with several years experience. Frontline staff are supportive of each other and generally work well together.

Quality of Services: Although Barron is a small county with limited resources, services that are available are of high quality. Focus group participants specifically mentioned intensive parent aide services and supervised visitation through a contract with Children's Service Society, as well as in-home family therapy and YES wraparound services through Lutheran Social Services. These services were described as highly valuable, flexible resources for children and families.

Drug Endangered Children (DEC) and Drug Court: Many focus group participants identified this task force as a positive step in building partnerships to combat substance abuse and child abuse/neglect in the community. Although DEC is relatively new, focus group participants spoke highly of efforts to date and were looking forward to continued collaboration. DEC has been especially important due to the tremendous rate of methamphetamine abuse in Barron County.

Relationships with Service Providers: Service providers spoke favorably of agency staff and management. Workers were viewed as making great efforts in engaging families. Community partners enjoy teaming and face-to-face communication with agency staff. Providers enjoy an open, positive relationship with the agency and it was felt that the relationship has improved over the past year. Providers identified that the change in the agency director and supervisor/manager had a positive impact on communication and the overall relationship between the agency and community partners.

Relationship with the Court: As with providers, the agency shares a positive, open relationship with the court. Focus group participants also noted an increase in communication between the agency and the court since the change in the agency director and supervisor. Workers are viewed as prepared and knowledgeable in court and "good partners."

Agency Transition: The past year has been one of major transition for the agency as a new director, Child Protective Services (CPS) supervisor/manager, and fiscal director were all hired in 2005. While this has been seen as positive overall for the agency, it also has not been without challenges. As noted previously, focus group participants feel there has been more open, collaborative communication with the agency in the past year. The agency director and management have worked on rebuilding relationships with community partners and acknowledge there is still work to be done. There have been some changes in expectations of staff, especially in scheduling work hours. Challenges

of the transition include a re-evaluation of contracted services and the development of new resources to better serve children and families in the child welfare system. There is also the challenge of developing consistency in policy and practice on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps a bigger challenge is in communicating not only the agency's changes, but also the vision for the near and distant future.

System Challenges:

Relationship with St. Croix Tribe: The relationship between the agency and the St. Croix Chippewa is tenuous, at best. There appear to be challenges in interpreting the 161 Agreement on the part of the tribe and the agency. Communication is sometimes strained and this is exacerbated by the almost constant turnover in the St. Croix Indian Child Welfare office over the past several months.

Foster Homes: While there are some high quality foster homes in Barron County, focus group participants identified the need to recruit and retain more county licensed homes. Specific issues that were discussed included county licensed homes becoming treatment homes licensed by private agencies, burnout of foster parents, and lack of support and open communication.

Service Needs: Although there are excellent services available in the community, focus group participants identified several needs in this area. Many participants identified the Child Advocacy Teams (CAT's) that are no longer functioning as very helpful. It was felt that the teams that replaced the CAT's are not as effective and or of the same quality as the CAT's. Focus group participants also expressed a desire for mentoring services, Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) treatment (especially for adolescents), group homes, and residential care centers in the community.

Worker Safety: Agency staff had increasing concerns about the safety of frontline workers due to recent incidents involving aggressive dogs and physical and/or verbal aggression by clients. Management was well aware of this issue and had already arranged a mandatory training addressing worker safety for staff to be held in October 2006.

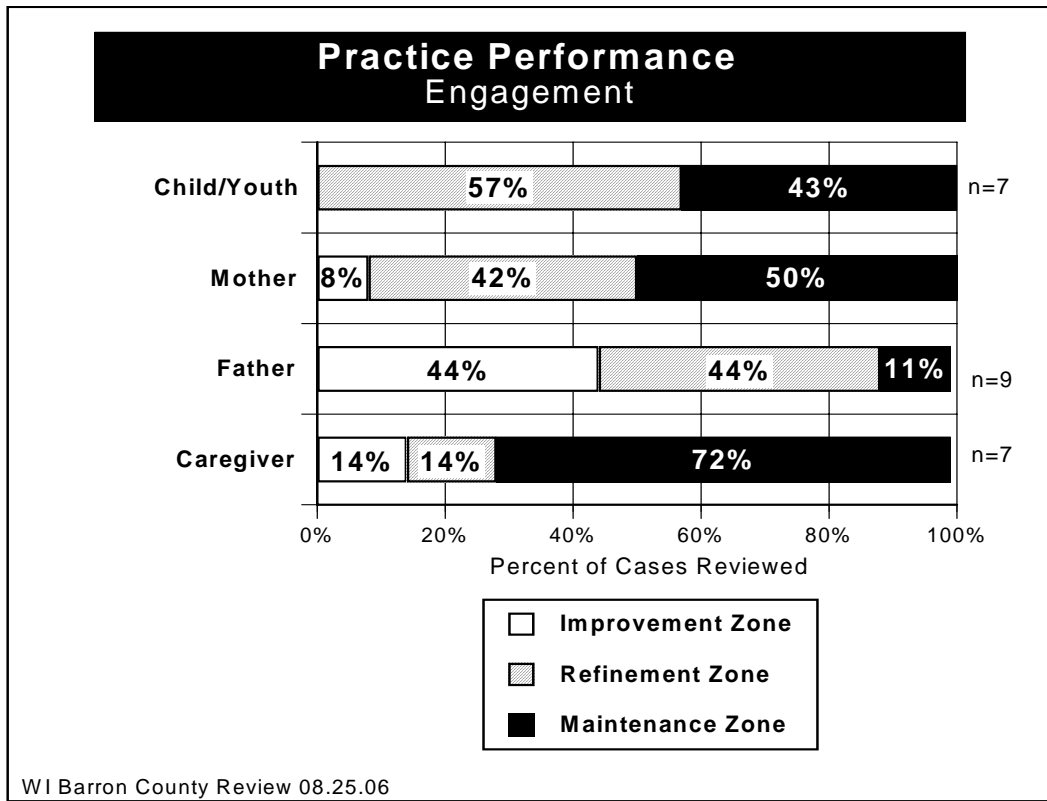
The Elements of Case Practice (The Micro View)

The Quality Service Review (QSR) case practice model contains evidence based elements of best practice. The elements are found in the QSR protocol and were applied in rating the twelve cases that were reviewed. There is an ample body of research that documents their efficacy and contribution in helping families develop, pursue and complete successful strategies of change. The scores on practice performance are presented to point out opportunities where HHS can focus their efforts in improving outcomes for the children and families they serve.

Definitions of Scores:

- **Maintenance zone:** Favorable status, efforts should be made to maintain or build upon this practice element
- **Refinement zone:** Minimal or marginal status, further efforts are necessary to refine this practice element
- **Improvement zone:** Problematic status, opportunity for strategic plan to improve this practice element

Note: n = (x) next to a bar in a graph signifies the number of cases meeting the specified criteria for the measurement. For some indicators, not all cases in the sample are scored

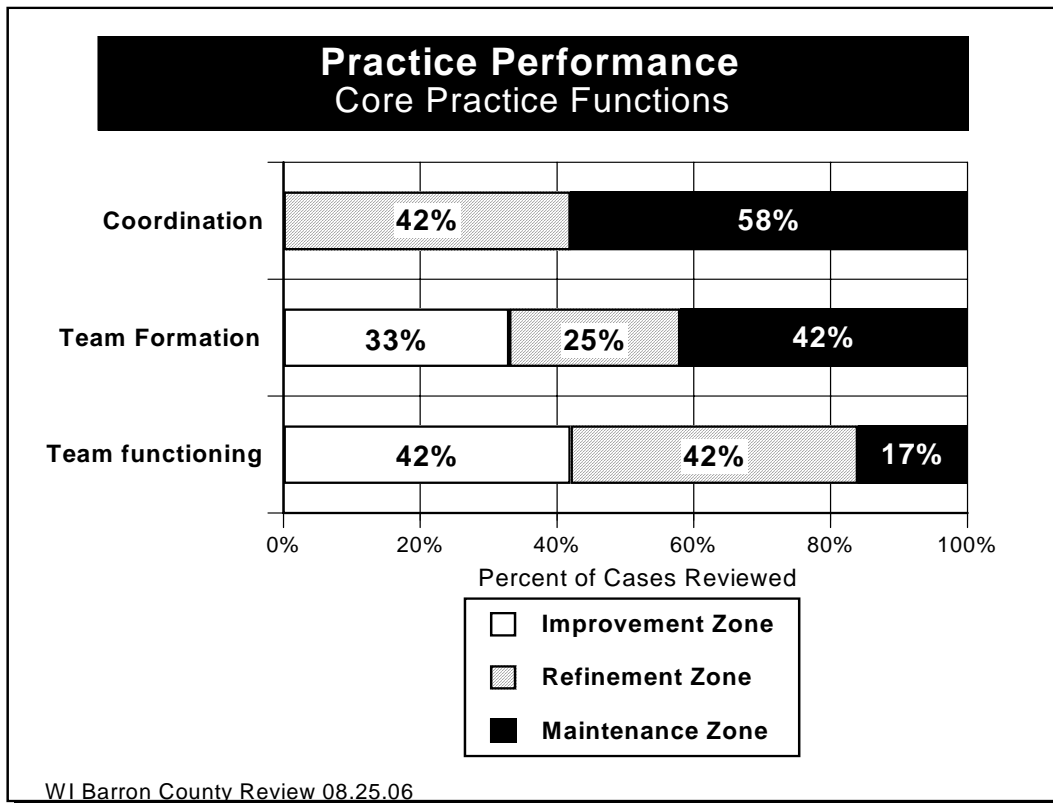


ENGAGEMENT: To what degree have the caseworker and other interveners involved with the family used engagement strategies, including special accommodations with any difficult-to-reach family members, to increase family engagement and participation in the service process? Have they built a trust-based working relationship with the child, family, and/or others to support ongoing assessment, understanding, and service decisions? Have they built a mutually beneficial partnership with the child, family, and/or others to sustain their interest in and commitment to the change process?

Comments: Engagement is crucial in helping families through the change process. The scores in this area indicate that caregivers are engaged for the most part. Mothers and children are also fairly engaged, although this is an area that could be refined. Agency workers and other providers are having difficulty engaging fathers in the change process. As evidenced by the scores in the federal Child and Family Services Review, engagement of fathers is a concern across the nation in the child welfare system.

In one case story where the engagement score for the mother was high, the reviewer noted, “The engagement and case management/case coordination has been outstanding with regular team meetings, communication, and input from the family and providers. The assessment and understanding of the goals and what needs to be done to achieve reunification were shared by all involved in this case.”

In another case where engagement scored in the refinement zone, the reviewer wrote, “The team has not engaged the parents in developing the change process to meet their needs and the needs of the children. Dad attends all the team meetings but he does not feel like he has been heard, especially about visitation and involving people he chose to provide services.”



COORDINATION: To what degree was a single point of coordination and leadership necessary for convening and facilitating effective family change planning and service decision processes used for this child and family? How effective was the coordination, integration, and continuity in the assessment, planning, organization, and provision of services to this child and family?

Comments: 58% of the cases reviewed scored in the maintenance zone for this indicator, while the remaining cases scored in the refinement zone. There were several examples in the case stories of good coordination. One case story indicated, “Most team members expressed great satisfaction with the leadership provided by the worker and the amount of communication that occurred. Supports were readily available when requested.”

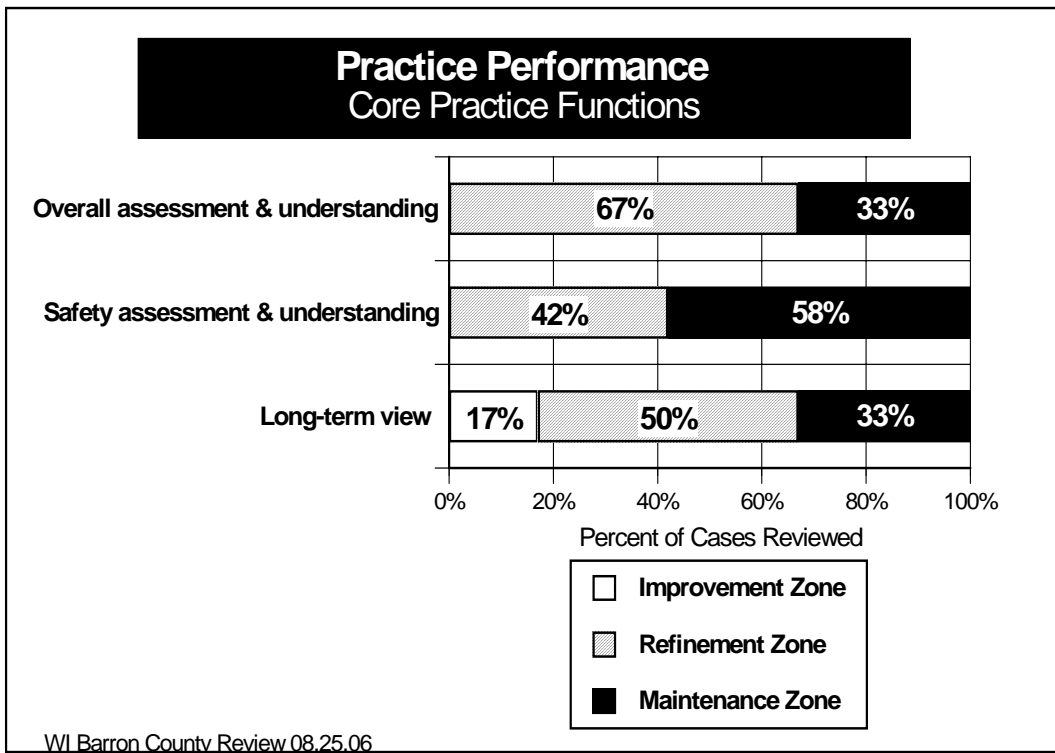
TEAM FORMATION: To what degree have persons who provided support and services for this child and family formed a working team that met, talked, and planned together? Did the team have the skills, family knowledge, and abilities necessary to organize effective services for the child and family?

TEAM FUNCTIONING: To what extent did the members of the family team collectively function as a unified team in planning services and evaluating results? Did the team’s actions reflect a coherent pattern of effective teamwork and collaborative problem solving that benefited the child and family?

Comments: Scores in team formation and functioning indicate that there are opportunities for the agency to refine practice in these areas. While some of the families whose cases were reviewed are benefiting from the team process, other families were not being assisted by well-functioning teams with all necessary people participating in the process. In one case that scored well in team formation, the reviewer noted, “This case has benefited from consistent and effective teaming from early in the process. The appropriate members were identified and worked over time to stabilize the children in their grandfather’s home and to get the brother placed with his biological father.” In another case where the score was in the maintenance zone in team functioning, the story indicates, “There has been a wonderful use of teaming in this case with monthly meetings taking place at the caregiver grandmother’s residence for everyone involved in the case. All team members felt that they were active participants and that there was an equal distribution of power, with the ongoing caseworker coordinating service provision.”

Another case illustrated the need for a team approach to helping a family be successful in planning a change process. The reviewer noted, “There is a need for immediate and intensive work on the part of the agency to formalize a team to come to the table at the same time to discuss and formulate a concrete plan based on an understanding of where they are going and what actions and behaviors are expected of each of them. Goals, strategies and timelines for implementing the plan can then be implemented by the team.”

The scores in this area appear to correlate with comments heard in focus groups regarding the move from Child Advocacy Teams to another team approach. Focus group participants indicated that the new approach often did not include all persons who should be present and part of the team. Participants also felt that the teams were often “staffings” where members were reporting and updating rather than using the team for assessment of needs, planning, and implementation of plans.



OVERALL ASSESSMENT & UNDERSTANDING: To what degree was there a shared big picture understanding of the child and family's strengths, needs, risks, and underlying issues that must change for the child to live safely and permanently with the family of origin, guardian, or adoptive family independent of agency supervision? Were these understandings used in the family change process to help the family achieve safety, permanency, and well-being (via protective provisions in the home, demonstrated behavioral, emotional, and cognitive changes)?

SAFETY ASSESSMENT AND UNDERSTANDING: To what degree was there a shared big picture understanding of the child and family's strengths, needs, risks, and underlying issues that must change for the child to live safely and permanently with the family of origin, guardian, or adoptive family? Were these understandings used in the family change process to help the family achieve safety, permanency, and well-being (via protective provisions in the home, demonstrated behavioral, emotional, and cognitive changes)?

Comments: Overall assessment and understanding is an area where there are further opportunities to enhance practice. 33% of the 12 cases reviewed scored in the maintenance zone for this indicator, while the remaining 67% scored in the refinement zone. One case story in which the score in this area was in the maintenance zone illustrates the connection between a good assessment and engagement. The case story indicates, "The social worker's overall assessment and understanding of this family's

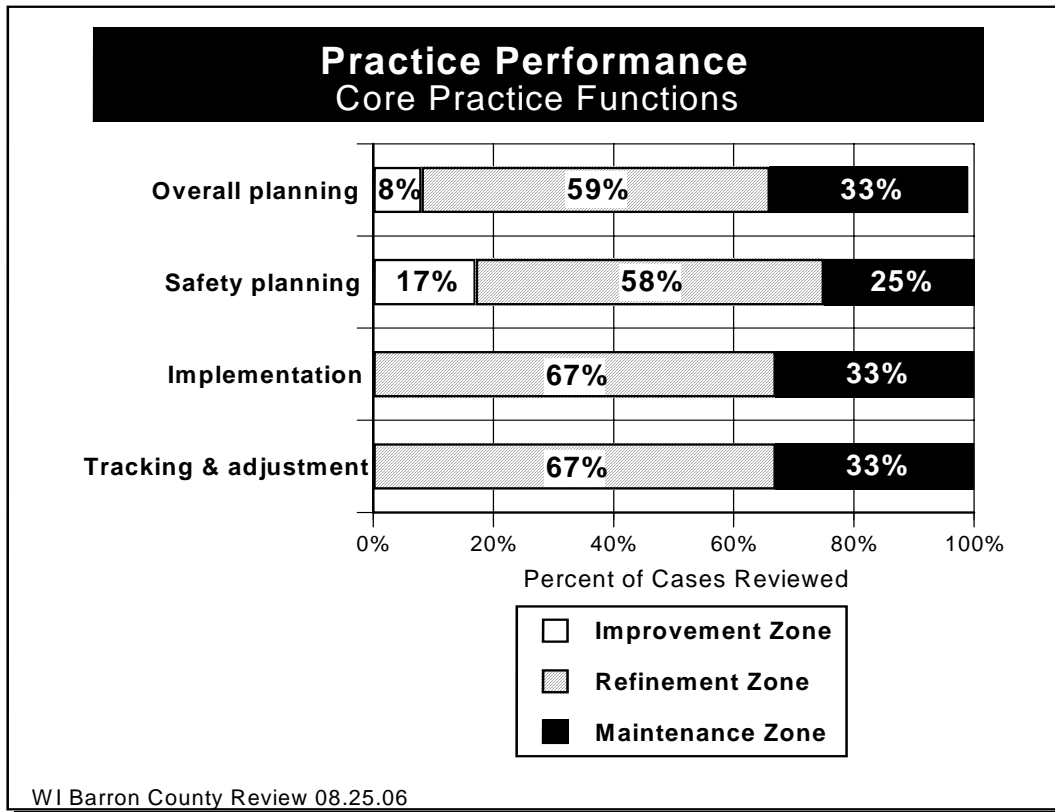
strengths, needs, dynamics, and underlying issues has been strong. That has helped to facilitate good engagement.” It is noteworthy that in the cases that scored in the maintenance zone for teaming, scores were also high in the area of overall assessment.

Slightly more than half the cases reviewed scored in the maintenance zone in the area of safety assessment and understanding. Workers appear to have a fairly good understanding of this area. One reviewer noted in the case story, “Safety assessment and understanding scored very well. The intervention of HHS services with a safety plan has kept the focus child safe by only allowing supervised contact with her brother over the past months. While an awareness of the safety concerns is maintained, a plan is starting to develop which would begin the reunification process for the focus child and her brother.”

There was another story in which the reviewer noted a concern for the future safety of the child due to a lack of safety assessment. The case story reads, “There was no big picture common understanding of what the child and family strengths and needs were, and no shared understanding of the threats to safety and safety needs. Supervision issues have not been dealt with directly by the agency so providers did not express awareness of the issues for risk or safety. There was no focus on supervision issues, yet that was what mom stipulated to in court. The case plan provided no clear direction for supervision for people that are in denial of the situation, which does not bode well for future safety.”

LONG-TERM VIEW: To what degree were the change requirements for family independence defined, shared, and understood that clarified what protective provisions must be present in the home to keep children and parents safe? What behavioral, emotional, or cognitive patterns must be demonstrated and sustained for reunification or support of the guardian/adoptive family so external supervision may be safely concluded?

Comments: Development of a long-term view is crucial in helping families move through the change process so that cases can be safely closed by the agency. Questions that should be answered include, “What do we want this family to look like when we’re ‘done?’” and “What do we need to do to get there?” Long-term view is one of the areas of practice in which the county should focus efforts on improvement. The scores in long-term view indicate that while in some cases there is an understanding of what the family needs to look like in order for safe case closure to occur and a clear plan on what must be done to get there, this is an area that needs to be addressed in other cases. In one case that scored in the improvement zone, the reviewer indicated, “No one could articulate what the plan was, what needed to be done, and how to get there.” In another case, the reviewer noted, “The question, ‘How will you know when your (the team) work is through?’ was responded to by most interviewees with uncertainty.”



OVERALL PLANNING: To what degree was a well-reasoned ongoing process used for planning that drives strategies and actions for the family change process that provides, as needed, for: attainment of protective conditions for safety in the home; acquisition and demonstration of required parent behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive changes; securing sustainable family supports; concurrent alternatives for child permanency; meeting any special needs of persons (children/parents) in the home; and achieving successful transitions and life adjustments?

SAFETY PLANNING: To what degree was a well-reasoned ongoing process used that analyzed and planned a strategy that ensured the safety of all children in the home? Did the plan attain the protective conditions for safety in the home; plan for parents to acquire and demonstrate required behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive changes; secure sustainable family supports; concurrent alternatives for child permanency; meeting any special needs of children/parents in the home; and achieve successful transitions and life adjustments?

Comments: Overall planning and safety planning are also areas in which the agency should focus efforts at improvement. Successful planning is built on accurate assessments of family strengths, needs, and underlying issues. There appears to be a correlation between scores in the refinement and improvement zones for overall assessment and overall planning, as well as safety assessment and planning. Cases that

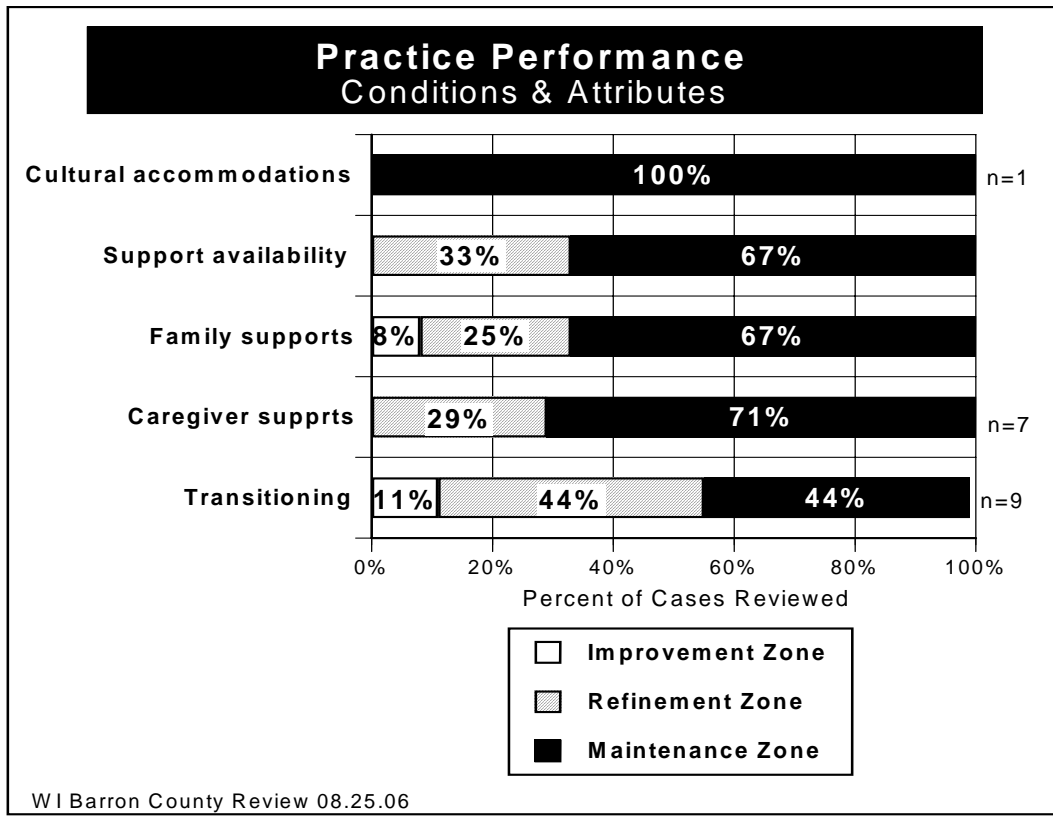
scored well in assessment generally scored well in planning, while cases that did not score well in assessment generally did not score well in the area of planning. One case story in particular illustrated the correlation between teaming and case planning. The story reads, “This lack of a more detailed plan is in part due to the absence of ongoing face to face team meetings and a written document that could guide the overall planning process. The court order of required services basically functions as the case plan and seems to have contributed to a larger perception that there are no other issues in the family that need attention. For example, there is no measurable outcome for parenting capacities despite Mother’s therapist recommendation for further work in this area”. Another case story notes the importance of a proactive plan for safety: “There is no safety plan or crisis plan in a family situation that could move into crisis mode at any time.”

IMPLEMENTATION: How well were the actions, timelines, and resources planned for family change strategies being implemented to achieve: attainment of protective conditions for safety; acquisition and demonstration of required parental behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive changes; securing of sustainable supports; concurrent alternatives for attaining permanency; meeting special needs of parents and children; and achieving successful transitions and life adjustments? To what degree were these timely, competent, and adequate in intensity and continuity?

Comments: While one third of the cases reviewed scored in the maintenance zone in the area of implementation, there is room for refinement in the other two thirds of the cases. These scores are in line with the scores in the areas of overall and safety planning. It is anticipated that if the agency focuses on enhancing case practice in the area of planning, practice in the area of implementation will also improve.

TRACKING AND ADJUSTMENT: Have the child and family status, service process, and change results routinely been followed along and evaluated? Have services been modified to respond to the changing needs and knowledge about service efforts that have been applied to create a self-correcting service process for finding what works for the child and family?

Comments: Again, one third of the cases scored in the maintenance zone in the area of tracking and adjustment and the other two thirds scored in the refinement zone. In one case where the score for this indicator was in the maintenance zone the reviewer wrote, “There has been good utilization of tracking and adjustment with constant assessment and re-evaluation of services. This has resulted in a natural, gradual stepping down and removal of services as needed which has been appropriate in moving this case forward.”



CULTURAL ACCOMMODATIONS: Have significant cultural issues of the child and family been identified and addressed in practice? Have the supports and services been culturally during the family engagement, assessment, planning, and service delivery processes?

Comments: Only one case was scored in the area of cultural accommodations and the score was in the maintenance zone. At this time, this indicator is narrowly defined and pertains only to issues of race and ethnicity.

SUPPORT AVAILABILITY: To what degree has the formal and informal array of supports, services, and other resources been adequate and available to support implementation of the child and family planning process? Are resources available in a timely manner at the appropriate frequency, duration, and setting conducive to the needs of the child and family? Did the child and family have a choice of the type of services and providers?

Comments: Support availability is an area of strength in Barron County. During the “grand rounds” case presentations and in focus groups, it was often noted that there is an array of quality supports and services to meet the needs of children and families.

FAMILY/CAREGIVER SUPPORTS: To what degree was the family or out-of-home caregiver provided with the training, in-home support, supervision, resources, support-development assistance, and relief necessary to provide a safe and stable living arrangement for the child that meets the child’s daily care, development, and parenting needs?

Comments: This is another area of strength in Barron County. As noted previously, despite the small size of the county there are quality services available to meet the needs of the children and families with whom the agency is working. One review team noted the quality of services for a young child and parents: “Services provided by Birth to 3 and the parent aide have been exceptional. The aide knows and respects the parents and made true efforts to support the reunification plan. She had realistic expectations and took into consideration their overall intellectual functioning and impoverished status.” Another case story notes the support one family is receiving from informal sources: “The maternal grandparents and Mom’s younger sister are willing to help as much as they can. They could be a good source of respite or day care for the children. The parent’s church has many informal supports and resources available to the family: day care, parent education, counseling, and access to a new group of friends.”

TRANSITIONING: To what degree was the current or next life change transition for the child and family planned and implemented to assure a timely, smooth, and successful adjustment after the change occurs?

Comments: Scores in this area indicate the agency is doing a fairly good job in identifying and planning for transitions for children. In one case in which a child has been doing well after being reunified with his family the reviewer noted, “A good plan for transitioning is in place, which includes 30-day aftercare with the in-home therapist.” The importance of identifying and planning for transitions was illustrated in another case story where there is concern that a child who was recently returned home after a group home placement could sustain positive behavioral changes made while in placement. The reviewer wrote, “One of the most significant factors contributing to unfavorable results involved the lack of a transition plan for the focus child upon her return home from group care. Upon discharge from the group home, little work or effort was put into devising a plan to help maintain the focus child in her parental home, especially in light of the fact that it was summer—a time with little formal structure in the focus child’s life.”

SUMMARY

The results of Barron County's first Quality Services Review show that the agency has many strengths in case practice upon which to build. Strengths were identified in the areas of engagement of mothers, children, and caregivers; coordination; safety assessment and understanding; support availability; family and caregiver supports; and transitioning. The scores from this review are meant to be used as a baseline to measure progress.

Agency workers, supervisors, management, and the director were encouraged to use the results of the review to formulate and implement an action plan to address enhancement of case practice and systems issues, which will ultimately result in improved outcomes for children and families with whom the agency works. Agency staff identified the following as areas of potential focus for system and practice improvement:

- Modifying team philosophy to meet needs of families; broaden teaming
- Training and Implementing Family Group Conferencing
- Sharing creative ways of using community supports
- Partnering with Child Support, law enforcement in developing protocol and locating absent fathers
- More efforts to reach out to school systems to build relationships
- Be creative in how we are partnering with the tribe (St. Croix)
- Developing consistency in practice and policy, decision making
- Evaluating use of the Wisconsin Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (WiSACWIS) for more efficiency and eliminating duplication
- Continuing to support each other and work on agency morale
- Continued focus on methamphetamine epidemic and treatment issues
- Communicate what we need and what families need to service providers

The final "next steps" meeting of the review was used by agency leadership to identify areas in which the agency should first focus on improving. Agency leadership identified the following:

1. **Teaming.** The agency would like to develop a philosophy of teaming all cases and moving from staffings to family team meetings. It is felt by staff that improved teaming will also result in improved overall and safety planning. Suggestions were that the agency work with the training partnership and the YES program supervisor on developing training for workers on family based teams. In addition, the CPS supervisor/manager will be attending a supervisor's training on family based teaming.
2. **Agency Morale and Support.** There was recognition among staff that it is not just the responsibility of the manager and director to improve morale. Ideas were to continue the staff retreats that are already being held and invite speakers on topics such as self-care and setting goals. Another idea was to encourage staff to become involved in other functions, such as board memberships and speaking engagements.

3. Tribal Relationship. The agency hopes to involve Area Administration, Department of Children and Family Services staff, and perhaps staff from other counties who also interface with Native American tribes in assisting the agency to improve the relationship with the St. Croix tribe.

It was also decided to have monthly meetings to evaluate progress made on the above issues. The agency is also encouraged to adopt the QSR practice model in daily work with children and families. Along with the changes that will most likely occur because of action planning, it is hoped that improved outcomes for children and families will be also be seen.