

# New York FAR Quarterly

New York Family Assessment Response (FAR) Quarterly

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## Pups Pave the Way for FAR

**Marcia Young, Administrator,  
Child and Family Services,  
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Human Services**

Monroe County received a report from an outlying town. The family had numerous previous reports, and had not exactly welcomed the previous workers in the home. The new report included concerns of inadequate guardianship regarding marijuana use in the home. After several failed attempts to contact the family, two workers took the 32-mile journey out to the country to meet with the family and tell them about the options for response, including FAR.

Upon arrival, the workers found that the children were in school and the

family members in the home were, to use a technical term, “freaking out.” The workers, armed with their recently acquired skills in family engagement, went head-on into the home to find out what all the fuss was about. One family member managed to communicate that the family dog was having a litter of puppies at that very moment. The grandmother was chasing the dog around in an attempt to have her deliver the puppies in one place instead of all over the house, and was finding it to be quite a challenge.

As it happens, the assigned caseworker had previous experience delivering puppies (she formerly questioned whether it was a good idea to put this experience on her resume) and she shared this information with the family. As soon as the grandmother heard this, she knew it was divine intervention and motioned for the worker to get in there and help her out. This newly trained FAR worker rolled up her sleeves and guided grandma through the delivery process. At some point during the process (there must have been a lull in the conversation), the worker was able to explain FAR, and grandma, elbow-deep in puppies, said she would like to participate in this process.

An appointment was scheduled for the workers to return when the whole family would be there. The workers called back later to check on the puppies. The report is that the new mother and puppies are doing well. The caseworkers are a big hit with the family, the children are safe and the case remains open. Yes indeed, engagement was achieved.



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## Raising the FLAG

Michelle Rafael, Senior Policy Analyst  
Joanne Ruppel, M.A., Research Scientist  
III, FAR Program Evaluator

As our program name, Family Assessment Response, indicates and our enabling legislation requires, an assessment of each family is vital to comprehensively addressing family needs, identifying family strengths to support those needs and responding in a way that meets those needs.

When we began pre-implementation planning with Round 1 counties, we reviewed several assessment instruments used by other states (Hawaii, Minnesota, North Carolina) and even other countries (Ireland, New Zealand). The Round 1 counties worked together to determine the best fit for them and they even held a rare face-to-face meeting to review and discuss available tools. An almost unanimous decision was reached to use the Family Advocacy and Support Tool (FAST), an adaptation of a series of outcome management tools collectively known as the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment, originally developed by John S. Lyons, Ph.D., for the child mental health population and later expanded with additional sections for the child welfare and juvenile justice populations.

In the spirit of learning and evolving as we go, OCFS allowed a tryout period of approximately six months once counties began FAR practice. Even after Tompkins County modified the FAST language to be more family-friendly, it became evident by late

spring, 2009, that some were having difficulty completing the FAST (it had 41 assessment areas with separate assessments for each parent and each child in the family). Another option was sought. A committee at OCFS, with significant county input, adapted and shortened the FAST to better meet the collective needs of users. The tool is designed to record family strengths and needs on 23 questions in four general areas (The Family Together, Caregivers' Status, Children's Status and Caregiver Advocacy Status).

Like the FAST, there are four detailed answer options for each question, which range from a clear strength to a need for immediate or intensive service action. In some critical areas, such as mental health or substance abuse, the answer choices now explicitly address the family's current use of services, which the FAST did not do. The tool became different enough from the original to merit its own name: Family-Led Assessment Guide (FLAG), a name that captures the engagement spirit — a hallmark of our FAR approach.

As with most functional assessment instruments, the FLAG is not designed as a checklist to be read to the parents or children, but as a way for workers to consistently record the outcomes of a comprehensive assessment process that includes discussions with family members and other sources of information as appropriate. FAR workers may provide family members with a copy of the FLAG instrument and use it as a conversation starter, reference or discussion guide. They may also use other approaches and tools they find helpful in conducting comprehensive assessments tailored to each family. If workers do not share the FLAG with families, they can use the FLAG items as a reminder to themselves to assess all key areas listed. As each family is unique, there may be other strengths or needs that the worker and family discuss, but an assessment of the areas on the FLAG instrument is considered the minimum that needs to be done for each family on the FAR track.

**Q: Is OCFS writing guidelines for FAR documentation in Connections?**

**A: Great question! When the case review was being completed in December, we all realized that some guidelines for what to include in the record would be very helpful. FAR supervisor Faith Aprilante from Orange County is chairing such an effort to use the expertise of many current FAR supervisors to create a helpful document. Stay tuned for the results, due out before the next newsletter.**

If you have a question you'd like addressed, please send it to [larab@americanhumane.org](mailto:larab@americanhumane.org).

Q  
&  
A

# Creating a Favorable Buzz About Our Work With Families

**Kerron Norman, Director of Child Welfare, Westchester County Department of Social Services**

How did the Westchester County Department of Social Services get favorable press on family assessment response? Timing combined with strategy.

Since early 2007, WCDSS Child Welfare Services has participated in a multidisciplinary Truancy Reduction Task Force. This collaboration started from a shared concern about the high rate of truancy in Yonkers. It involves the Yonkers Board of Education, the probation and police departments, the district attorney's office, Student Advocacy and other community service providers. In alignment with this focus, Yonkers piloted an educational neglect unit in the child protective services program to respond to the majority of truancy-related allegations. The following year, when OCFS initiated the FAR model, we saw it as a natural progression for our work with educational neglect cases.

We announced our plans to the task force and answered their questions. We educated our partners on Social Services Law 427-a, which addresses the legality of a differential response, and referenced the OCFS website for additional review. Extremely helpful to us was that several years ago, WCDSS piloted a differential response approach, so the partners were

familiar with some of the dimensions of this response. This familiarity also created a favorable buzz about our new way of engaging families.

Roughly six months subsequent to launching the FAR model, we decided to celebrate the successes of the families we'd worked with. We were inspired by three things: an 18.6 percent improvement in school attendance over a two-year period since the start of the Yonkers Truancy Reduction Taskforce; a desire to support the Graham Windham foster care agency's Graham Youth Development Program, which trains youths for careers in the catering industry and other fields; and the Governor's proclamation that 2009 was the Year of the Caseworker.

As we planned our celebration, we began to recognize that we were in a good place to announce to the Westchester County community this "feel good, done good" news story about our child welfare work. We consulted with the county's first deputy commissioner and the communications director about our celebration plans and received a favorable response to releasing the story to the press. The press and the community responded quite positively.

The school district also received a favorable community response to FAR and the truancy reduction strategies. The school superintendent

reached out to the press to cover the schools' success story. The press in turn reached out to WCDSS and some of the partners for our input, which resulted in a second article. We later collaborated with the Vera Institute of Justice, which produced a comprehensive document that speaks well of Yonkers' dedication and response to truancy.

In short, good news and good will are worth announcing.

## Helpful Resources

### From the American Humane Association:

- *A Social Worker's Tool Kit for Working with Immigrant Families*, which includes *A Child Welfare Flow Chart* and *Immigration Status and Relief Options*: Download a copy at [www.americanhumane.org/migrationtoolkits](http://www.americanhumane.org/migrationtoolkits)
- *Guidelines for Family Group Decision Making in Child Welfare*: Download a copy at [www.fgdm.org](http://www.fgdm.org)
- The Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services: [www.differentialresponseqic.org](http://www.differentialresponseqic.org)



# FAR Quality Assurance Case Review

Gail Haulenbeek, OCFS, and  
Faith Aprilante, Orange County FAR  
Project Coordinator and Case Supervisor

What is “typical” FAR practice?  
How do supervisors, managers,  
administrators and OCFS know what  
FAR practice looks like with families?  
How do we know if FAR case practices  
and services are providing for  
children’s safety and building families’  
capacities to care for their children?

These questions have been raised by FAR counties and OCFS during conference calls and at the FAR symposium. As FAR has grown from an idea into a significant portion of some districts’ child protection response systems, we have all begun to expand our focus from startup to continuous quality improvement. Now that we know what FAR is and have developed our implementation knowledge and skill set, the time has come for us to ask ourselves, “so how are we doing?” The future of FAR in New York will be determined in part by what we learn now about the quality and effectiveness of FAR practices, so knowing as much as we can about how FAR is being practiced is very important to all of us.

## The Needs and Requirements

We agreed that we need a quality assurance process for FAR. Our tools for assessing the provision of traditional CPS investigation and assessment clearly would not meet the need. OCFS asked American Humane to identify what

other states are doing for quality assurance but nothing met our needs. As a group, the Round 1 counties and OCFS decided that the development of quality assurance tools was needed and that it would be beneficial to everyone to get a better understanding of what we could learn about FAR case practice by a review of casework records.

To get started on the development of a first-generation quality assurance process and tool set, OCFS invited the FAR counties to have a representative participate in a conference call to develop the requirements for a review tool and process. The group agreed that the following dimensions of FAR practice needed to be examined through a case review:

- Model fidelity
  - Case track assignment in line with county criteria
  - First contact: timely call, appointment setup versus unannounced visit
  - Safety: accurate and timely initial and ongoing assessment
  - Re-reporting when danger is identified and/or family not cooperating with FAR after FAR track was chosen
  - Assessments of safety and family strengths and needs (FLAG or other approved assessment tool) are consistent with case circumstances and documented
- Case activity consistent with FAR model is documented in progress notes
- Appropriate use of informal services and family support network
- Case closings or openings for formal preventive services that are within county-targeted time frames and appropriate to case circumstances
- Practice fidelity
  - How well/clearly are caseworkers explaining the two options?
  - How well are caseworkers explaining the issues of concern and engaging all family members in a discussion of their views of those issues and other concerns of the family?
  - How thoroughly are workers exploring/eliciting each family’s strengths and potential solutions to identified issues?
  - Are strengths-based and solution-focused techniques being used?
  - Is there sufficiency/adequacy of engagement and information gathering on areas of family functioning that impact child safety and well being?
  - Are families being supported to make decisions regarding what actions, supports or services might be needed?
  - Do the services or solutions fit the family’s needs and reduce the likelihood that maltreatment will occur?
  - Is the level of casework contacts and efforts commensurate with family strengths and needs?

*(Continued on page 5)*



Training Participants, Livingston and Yates Process & Practice Training, April 6-7, 2010

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- What is the quality of decision making on closing the case or opening it for preventive services, including a warm handoff?
- What is the quality of supervision in guiding staff members' work with families, in coaching their engagement and interviewing skills with families and in setting expectations for the quality of the FAR process?

Based on this agreement, OCFS staff developed a draft case review tool and process in consultation with American Humane and the Round 1 counties. It was important to everyone that all the perspectives of those of us involved in FAR be represented in the review. In order to do that, a process was developed in which a 3-person team, comprising a representative from American Humane, an OCFS Regional Office staff person involved in FAR implementation and a county FAR supervisor or worker, would review case records and come to consensus

regarding answers to all of the review questions.

## The Review

During the week of Dec. 7, 2009, three 3-person review teams met at OCFS to review 94 cases, with roughly equal numbers of cases from each of the six Round 1 counties. Reviewers included Faith Aprilante from Orange County, Steve Grome from Onondaga County and Gina Newlin from Tompkins County; Lara Bruce, Debra Gilmore and Lauren Morley from American Humane; and Margaret Coombs, Sonoma Pelton and Karen Sessions, professional development program associates from the regional offices. Each case was reviewed by all three review team members and one review consensus was reached. The process was challenging, as at this point in the evolution of FAR in New York, no specific standards for case documentation had been developed; thus, documentation varied widely.

American Humane developed a report on the findings and worked with the reviewers to be sure that the findings were accurately represented.

The report was shared with the counties early in February. Individual debriefing conference calls were set up so that each county could discuss its findings with OCFS and American Humane. The findings were mixed; some strengths and a number of practice soft spots were identified. Like everything else related to FAR, it was a great learning experience. We expect that the review will launch a lot of discussion, self-assessment and more work to develop useful tools for the counties and OCFS to assess and promote quality FAR practice.



FAR implementation coordinator Faith Aprilante shares her perspective:

Participating in this case review was a very interesting experience. The perspectives brought to each case by American Humane, OCFS and local district reviewers made for quite thoughtful discussion about FAR practices and how that translates through our current documentation methods. Many of the large themes gleaned from this experience were consistent among each of the districts reviewed, which I did not find surprising but did find reassuring. What became abundantly clear through this process is that the documentation of the great efforts we are making with our FAR families needs more structure in order for the documentation to be useful and present a clear and accurate reflection of our practice. True to the nature of quality assurance, I feel that this review was quite useful in helping us "check in" with ourselves and evaluate our practice as well as our needs. Using what resonated from the review, many of the FAR districts have agreed to collaborate in developing guidelines to follow in documenting within a FAR case. It is hoped that these guidelines will help our FAR staff ensure that their work is clearly demonstrated in their case records and at the same time work to improve casework practice.

What I saw in this review is that there is such great, creative and thoughtful work being done across the state and that continuing to evaluate our process only adds to this innovative work!

## Write for Us!

Contact us with your ideas so we can get them into our schedule. We'll feature one story per issue. Please reply to Lara Bruce at [Larab@americanhumane.org](mailto:Larab@americanhumane.org).



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*The American Humane Association provides this newsletter to New York counties currently implementing Family Assessment Response.*