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Leslie Wilmot, Project Director
Jeanne Ferguson, Project Manager
Lara Bruce, Coordinator
Rebecca West, Graphic Designer

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Looking Back and Moving Forward in FAR: An Interview with Sheila Poole

By: Gail Haulenbeek, Director, Bureau of Program Monitoring and Practice Improvement

Sheila Poole, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCFS

Gail: What were your initial thoughts about being assigned responsibility for implementing the new legislation allowing a differential response (FAR) back in 2007?

Sheila: *Sheer panic! I had just started my position with OCFS and I knew that the legislation allowing an alternative response was long awaited in New York. The whole country would be watching. I was familiar with the concept from my work in Albany County and I had a sense of how challenging it would be to initially engage key partners in committing to such a profound shift in practice. At the same time, I knew that there were a number of districts already experimenting with new models and had proven track records as progressive thinkers and "doers." The stars had lined up in many ways but the legislation had no money attached…. No pressure, right?*

I remember the hot July day in 2007 when I pulled together a meeting with Jamie Greenberg, Michelle Rafael from our policy office and Gail Haulenbeek from my office. We went outside to a picnic table with blank sheets of paper and I said "So, how are we going to do this?" While I don't recall exactly what we wrote, it was clearly enough to get us started on a journey that none of us knew or dreamed would lead us to where we are today.

Gail: What has been most challenging in leading the implementation of FAR?

Sheila: *It was the knowledge that we need to allow the local districts to have flexibility and independence in creating a model that would work for them while at the same time allowing ourselves and the districts to make mistakes. We needed to maintain fidelity to the core concepts and practices that made alternative response effective in other states while at the same time appreciating and learning from local innovations and experiences. An additional challenge has been the alignment and coordination of how we support FAR values, practices and training with how we currently support overall child welfare practices, values and training. We have had to juggle multiple funding periods, funding streams, contracts, stakeholder and provider organizations, policies, data systems, documentation systems and more. There has been a tremendous amount of behind the scenes work that was and still is necessary to make FAR a real program. OCFS has also been challenged to build its own capacity to lead FAR development, to provide the necessary support to counties to implement and grow FAR as well as to provide the necessary oversight to FAR.*

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From left to right: Jamie Greenberg, Sheila Poole and Renee Hallock at the 2009 FAR Symposium in Albany, NY.

Gail: Most gratifying?

Sheila: *All of the learning! We knew we did not have the expertise, which is not the typical position a state governmental agency likes to be in. While at times that could seem terrifying- we are dealing with child protective services- it was actually liberating and even exhilarating to be learning something new along with our local district partners. We were truly "taking a not knowing stance"!*

Fortunately for us, and for New York's FAR program, our chosen partner, American Humane Association, has been able to teach us a lot. That relationship has been one of the most gratifying aspects of FAR implementation. They have appropriately challenged our thinking and approaches and have supported us in learning the practice as well as sustainability management. They have been ambassadors for FAR to counties in ways we never could be and effective advocates for county needs as well.

My experience at the symposium was also right up there in the list of what has been most gratifying. It was amazing in so many ways. I was so struck by the transformation of FAR from a pilot to a program as I went from workshop to workshop where county presenters were showing their expertise, answering the questions of newer counties. And of course: the families. Hearing their stories of their experiences in our FAR program was concrete proof that we have come such a distance in such a short time.

Gail: You oversaw the development of FAR from zero counties to twenty-three counties and approximately 30 FAR "teams". What are some of the key lessons you learned about successful implementation?

Sheila: *Partnership, partnership, partnership! While it is not always easy or comfortable to be a co-pilot, it is essential to development and implementation. Also, it has not always been smooth sailing. The difficult situations, program quality and fidelity problems and hard conversations among the partners have been very helpful in the long run to coalescing our FAR values, standards and program practices. I also learned that there are a lot of people and organizations who want to help and are incredibly passionate about our work. The financial and general "cheerleading" support from the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, the Marguerite Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs was vital to our early efforts and remains so today. Knowing that we had their support as well as that of our Commissioner and three administrations helped sustain our focus when the going got tough.*

Gail: How has involvement with FAR impacted your approach to managing child welfare?

Sheila: *Managing FAR implementation was an experience like no other. For one thing, I was absolutely certain that it was a better approach for many of our families, regardless of the challenges to implementation. It is rare when you are able to move forward with something with confidence that it is the right thing to do - even if you are not sure how to do it. The value of the continuous cycle of learning with the counties cannot be overstated. I hear counties and OCFS staff refer to FAR as a model for implementing a program because something about it felt so different. FAR implementation also showed us that together we can do a lot without new money when we have clear priorities and are committed for the long haul.*

Gail: What are your hopes for the future of FAR?

Sheila: *I hope that in the future every county has FAR as part of its CPS services. I hope that it is implemented in every county with fidelity. And, I hope that investigation is provided when that is the best way to protect children and to help families, but that most cases are tracked to FAR. I hope to see FAR as the response provided to the majority of families in New York who come to the attention of our system. I hope that families fear us less.*

This interview was conducted on February 10, 2012. The FAR implementation team and partners wish Sheila Poole the best of luck in her new position as Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCFS! Her contributions to the success of FAR implementation in New York State will live on as FAR expands throughout the state.

Stress Management: An Important Element to Our Work with Families

By: P.T. Thomas, FAR Supervisor, Rockland County

Stress is a fact of life. It comes to us due to internal and external factors. The external factors include our jobs, relationships, home, children, various situations, challenges in life, and other difficulties we experience such as sickness, financial struggles and expectations. The internal factors include our ability to respond to stress, overall health and fitness, and emotional well-being, just to name a few. Our response to the stressors in our lives can be the deciding factor behind how stress ultimately impacts our lives, those around us and our environment.

There are numerous ways of managing stress. One simple way is by doing a variety of breathing exercises. Traditionally we are taught to inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. This method only has a positive impact on two parts of your body. This approach is still better than nothing. However, look at any animal in your life, maybe even a family dog. When they breathe their stomach goes up and down. This means that their stomach is involved in their breathing method. When we breathe, we send oxygen to all affected parts of our body and take away all toxic materials in our system. Therefore, a good breathing exercise should cover all important parts of your body.

Every person has seven important power points on their body. In Sanskrit, these power points are called Chakras. They are Crown, Third Eye, Throat, Heart, Solar Plexus, Sacral and Base/Root. Activating all or as many of these power points will help to provide needed energy to your body and thereby reduce or eliminate stress. Instead of taking a deep breath through the nose, take the breath through your base, slowly bring it up through the sacral, through the solar plexus, through the heart, through the throat, through the third eye, through the crown and bring it down and exhale through the mouth. It may be a little difficult to do it at first, but very easy to achieve with regular practice. You can experience a lot of energy in your body upon practicing this kind of breathing. This allows a thorough cleansing of the body and all the built up toxins in the body will be released. The length of time between the inhale and exhale has to be at the ratio of 1:1.5. For example, if you take two minutes to inhale, the exhale should be three minutes or more. Simply stand before a mirror and start practicing... inhale, bring it up, up, up and to your mouth and exhale.

Another simple method of managing stress is through meditation. Again, there are numerous methods of meditation. A simple method is to focus on your inner light. Just stare at a particular object for some time until your eyes close automatically. Once you close your eyes, you can see a light. Just focus on that light and sit until the light disappears. Once the light disappears, open your eyes again and repeat the exercise. As you practice, the light will stay focused for a long time. You can also do the breathing exercise mentioned previously that will deepen your relaxation.

Often a good laugh and time with friends and family can reduce stress. Find yourself in groups that will make you laugh. Live, love and laugh!

Child Protective Service is a stressful job. When a CPS worker knocks at a door, even if you have already spoken with the family, the unknown of what's on the other side can be stressful in itself. From dealing with the unknown to removing a child, these are all stressful activities related to CPS work. FAR practice, in turn, can reduce some of the stress of being a CPS worker. Often, the worker deals with fewer unknowns. However, engaging and assessing families in FAR can still carry its own pressure. Staff can reduce their stress by doing one or more of the above exercises. There are numerous other stress management techniques out there. Follow as many as possible to enjoy decreased wear and tear on your bodies and our psyches in the work that we do every day.

Write for Us!

Do you have a FAR story or case example that you would like to share with others?

Have you been trying new tools or techniques related to FAR that are working well?

Would you like to highlight the good work happening in your county?

If so, we want to hear from you! Articles should be between 500-800 words and can be sent at any time to get into the newsletter schedule.

Please reply to Lara Bruce at Larab@americanhumane.org.

P.T. Thomas has more than a quarter-century experience in working with Child Protective Services. He also supervised Foster Care Programs and Preventive Services for about two years and became a FAR supervisor in May 2011 when Rockland County was approved to implement FAR. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from Drew University and a Master of Social Work degree from Fordham University. He has studied and practiced clinical hypnosis, NLP and other accelerated human change techniques including stress management from Advanced Neuro Dynamics and American Pacific University. With a full understanding of Eastern Philosophy of human life and Western Principles, Mr. Thomas uses a synthesis of both in his approach to help people find solutions to the issues they encounter.

We've Gotta Be Doing Something Right – 2011 FAR Symposium

By: Lara Bruce, FAR Project Coordinator, American Humane Association

"FAR is doing something right, I don't think there has ever been a CPS conference where families would willingly come to talk about their experience" – quote from the family panel

On October 4-5, 2011, over 150 county workers, supervisors, administrators and families, as well as representatives from OCFS and New York City's Administration for Children's Services came together at the Desmond Hotel in Albany to share their experiences. Not only did we work together to invite and develop over twenty workshops, but the event also kicked off with a family panel of representatives from Tompkins and Rensselaer counties.

As one participant responded on their symposium evaluation, a highlight of the symposium was "the networking and parallel process of being the "expert" much like what we want our families to experience".

The majority of participants at the Symposium reported the highlight of this year's symposium for them was the panel of families who had been through the FAR process. The panel was moderated by Marcia Young (Monroe County. The final question posed to the panel asked for their recommendations to the state and counties about how to improve FAR across New York. Their suggestions included:

- Identify ways to connect new families with parents who have been through the FAR experience to act as a peer support/family mentor,
- Include success stories from families within county FAR pamphlets and other brochures; and,
- The state and/or counties should create a FAR website for families to talk with other families and learn more about FAR.

Here's what participants had to say:

"[FAR] changed the focus from looking at what's wrong to looking at what's right."

"There is no parent who wakes up and says, 'I want to do something wrong'. We all want to do something right for our kids."

"This was my first FAR Symposium of any kind (NY or National) and it was truly inspiring. Your words say it all. Having the families start the Symposium set just the right tone (kudos to the planning committee for thinking of this). The energy, excitement, flow of ideas, and learning was awesome. I took away so much and look forward to sharing and developing further with my FAR team."

"I thought Mr. Mandel was absolutely brilliant and very powerful."

"The family panel presentation truly makes my job worthwhile."

Reminder:

All of the FAR resource materials have been moved to the OCFS Intranet, including all of the 2011 FAR Symposium workshop and keynote materials.

Here are the simple instructions to get you started:

- Access the OCFS Intranet/CPS/FAR: http://ocfs.state.nyenet/cps/FAR
- Click on one of the 17 folders
- Click on a document or a subfolder.
- Use the forward and back arrows at the top of the screen to move back and forth.

Monroe County Evaluation

By: Melissa Affronti, LMSW, PhD, Sr. Associate, Coordinated Care Services, Inc.; Marcia Young, LMSW, Administrator, Child and Family Services, Monroe County Department of Human Services; and Cindy Lewis, LMSW, ACSW, Director of Child and Family Services, Monroe County Department of Human Services

At the request of the Monroe County Department of Human Services Child and Family Services Division (DHS), the Coordinated Care Services, Inc. (CCSI) Evaluation and Services Research team in Rochester, New York, designed an evaluation plan that explored both Family Assessment Response (FAR) impact and the processes by which FAR was implemented. Results to date include:

1. Findings from a survey that gathered perspectives from caregivers involved in FAR or Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigations at intake, closing, and 3 months post-closing;

2. A survey that gathered caseworker perspectives six months and one year after FAR implementation began. Surveys from other state and national studies on Differential Response were used as a guide when designing the survey format. Monroe County's FAR implementation evaluation took place with three teams, each of which had the following number of FAR and Investigative caseworkers:

Caseworkers Who Participated in the Evaluation	Investigations	Family Assessment Response
Team 1	3 full-time	2 full-time
Team 2	3 full-time	2 full-time
Team 3	3 full-time	1 full-time 2 part-time

All caregivers assigned to these teams were asked to complete a survey mailed to their home during the April 1, 2010 through March 31, 2011 study period. The final sample is as follows:

Caseworkers Who Participated in the Evaluation	Investigations	Response Rate	FAR	Response Rate
Intake	104	28%	88	24%
Closing	57	41%	40	37%
Three months post-closing	41	38%	22	26%

The caseworker survey was completed by all caseworkers. There was no turnover on the teams, with the exception of one FAR caseworker who had pursued other employment and was not available to complete the follow-up survey. Overall findings indicate that on average FAR caseworkers were implementing the core practice values of FAR to a greater extent when compared to Investigative caseworkers. The table below shows average scores for the extent to which caregivers involved either in Investigations or FAR felt that caseworkers were utilizing twelve family centered principles/principles of engagement (e.g., the worker listened to what my family had to say, the worker was encouraging).

Caregiver Responses: Average Scores Family-Centered Principles/ Principles of Engagement			
1 = Very little, 2 = Some, 3 = Not sure, neutral, 4 = Quite a bit, 5 = Very much so		Investigations (Ave. for 12 Items)	FAR (Ave. for 12 Items)
Family-Centered Principles/Principles of Engagement Intake	Intake	4.1	4.5
Family-Centered Principles/Principles of Engagement	Closing	4.2	4.5

It is noteworthy that caregivers involved in Investigations also reported that on average caseworkers were utilizing these same principles "quite a bit"; however, caregivers involved in FAR on average reported that their caseworkers utilized these principles between "quite a bit" and "very much so." Trends were similar when Investigative and FAR caseworkers were asked to what extent they felt that they are utilizing Family-centered principles/principles of engagement (i.e., 4.3 for Investigative caseworkers and 4.7 for FAR caseworkers in June 2010, six months after FAR was implemented). Additionally, when caregivers were asked if this experience was worse or no different compared to a previous experience, a higher percentage of caregivers felt that this recent experience was better at all time periods.

Percentage of Caregivers Who Had a Previous Experience with CPS Stating "this time was better"	Investigations	Family Assessment Response
This time was better	30%	64%
Closing	39%	74%
Three months post-closing	49%	69%

According to caregivers involved in FAR, as expected FAR caseworkers also appeared to be discussing various family needs and circumstances as described in the following table. One exception is that when compared to caregivers involved in Investigations, a lower percentage of FAR caregivers at intake and a higher percentage at closing reported that the caseworker discussed the allegations in the report with them.

Percentage of Caregivers Stating the Caseworkers Discussed Topics with them		Investigations	Family Assessment Response
My Child's Safety	Intake	60%	69%
	Closing	61%	73%
My Child's Well-Being	Intake	59%	71%
	Closing	68%	78%
My Family's Strengths	Intake	26%	63%
	Closing	39%	63%

Continued...			
Percentage of Caregivers Stating the Caseworkers Discussed Topics with them		Investigations	Family Assessment Response
My Family's Struggles	Intake	40%	64%
	Closing	37%	70%
Parenting Practices (supervision, discipline, etc.)	Intake	36%	52%
	Closing	25%	50%
My Family's Need for Financial Assistance	Intake	13%	30%
	Closing	14%	33%
My Family's Need for Other Assistance of Services	Intake	29%	54%
	Closing	30%	70%
The Allegations in the Report	Intake	74%	68%
	Closing	63%	70%

Given that access to resources is a core tenet of FAR, caregivers were asked if the caseworker provided them with information on how to get the goods or services their family needs or wants. More than half of FAR families were provided with information on how to get the goods or services their family needs or wants (62%) and/or with a written or telephone referral for services to another service provider (58%) compared to caregivers involved in Investigation (25% information, 24% referral). Thirty-nine percent (39%) of caregivers involved in FAR reported at closing that they received help or services when compared to caregivers involved in Investigations (28%).

In order to ascertain caregivers' emotional responses to the FAR or Investigations approach, caregivers were also asked how they felt at the end of the visit. A higher percentage of caregivers involved in FAR reported feeling positive emotions (e.g., comforted, pleased) when compared to caregivers involved in Investigations. Similarly a lower percentage of caregivers involved in FAR reported feeling negative emotions (e.g., angry, irritated) when compared to caregivers involved in Investigations. These trends continued for caregivers when asked at closing to reflect how they felt about all their visits with the caseworker.

% of Caregivers Stating They Felt This Emotion at the End of the Visits	Investi-gations	FAR	% of Caregivers Stating They Felt This Emotion at the End of the Visits	Investi-gations	FAR
Comforted	21%	35%	Optimistic	12%	38%
Afraid	5%	0%	Discouraged	5%	3%
Encouraged	26%	45%	Pleased	30%	43%
Angry	14%	3%	Irritated	18%	10%
Helped	26%	50%	Reassured	26%	40%
Annoyed	19%	5%	Stressed	23%	10%
Hopeful	19%	35%	Relieved	32%	50%
Confused	5%	3%	Worried	11%	3%

FAR and Investigations caseworkers were asked various questions about the approach that they used with families six months into FAR implementation (time 1) and one year into implementation (time 2). In addition to FAR caseworkers reporting a more frequent use of family-centered principles/principles of engagement when compared to Investigative caseworkers, other noteworthy results included:

1. Understanding of FAR goals and philosophies. The average level of understanding of FAR goals and philosophies was "above average" for FAR caseworkers at both time periods. FAR caseworkers provided higher scores in this area when compared to Investigative caseworkers at both time periods;

2. Satisfaction with the approach caseworkers use. Average scores for FAR caseworkers were between "satisfied" and "very satisfied" at times 1 and 2 with the FAR approach. On average FAR caseworkers were more satisfied with the FAR approach than Investigative caseworkers were with the Investigations approach at both time periods.

3. Caseworkers perceptions of family satisfaction. Average scores for FAR caseworkers were higher for the extent to which they felt that families were satisfied with the Child Protective Services system and satisfied with how the caseworker treats them, when compared to Investigative caseworkers on these domains.

Scores were less favorable for FAR caseworkers when compared to Investigative caseworkers on some dimensions, which suggests challenges in some areas over the first year of FAR implementation. These areas include: satisfaction with supervision; and ability to interview all family, friends, and collateral contracts. FAR administrators and supervisors are currently exploring ways to address these issues.

Monroe County DHS Child and Family Services has now added one more FAR team, on which all six caseworkers are practicing the FAR approach. These current findings are quite positive and the FAR teams are working toward more positive outcomes in the future. Administrative and supervisory staff are also considering methods by which the following may result either in improved practice or in follow-up studies:

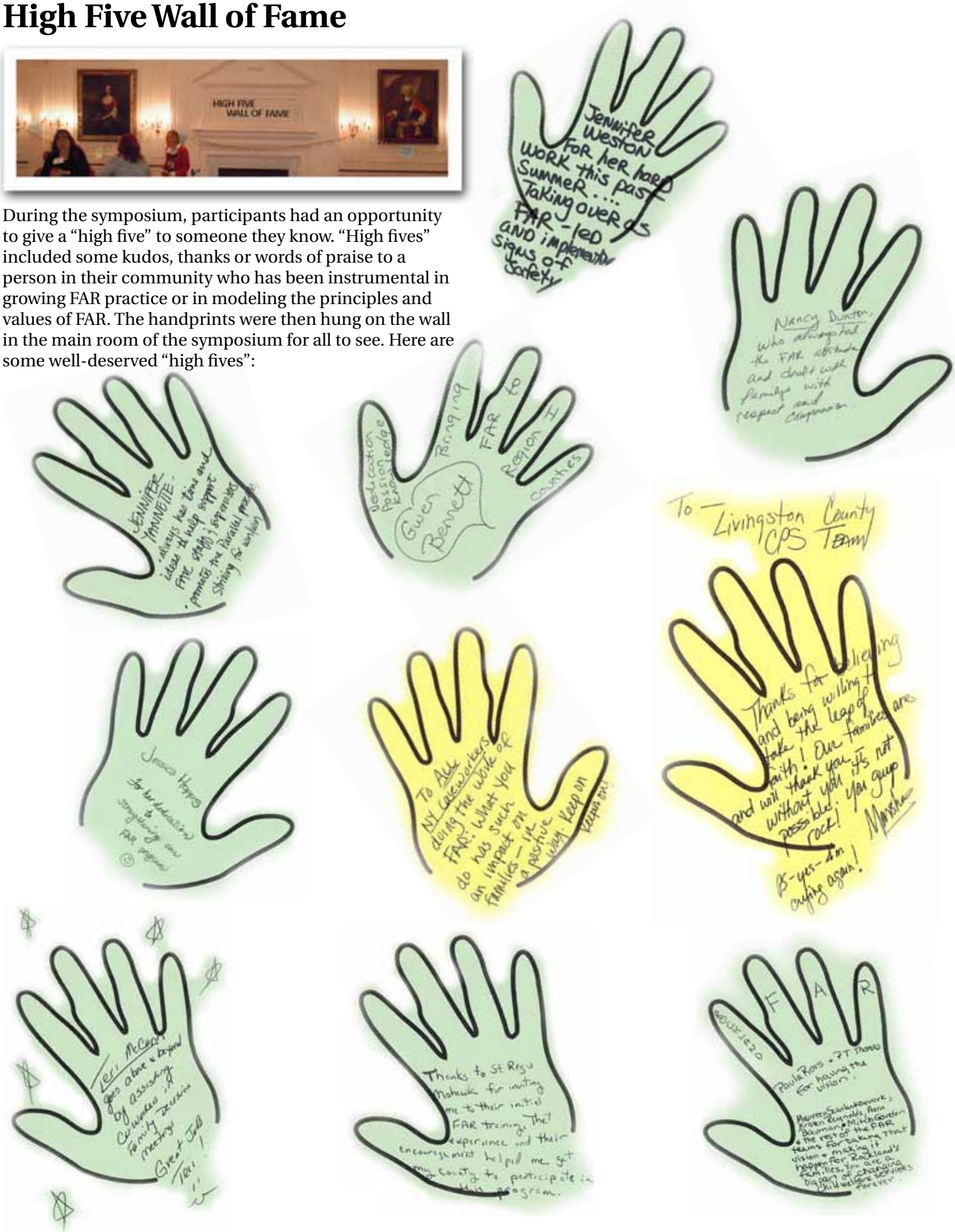
1. A larger percentage of FAR caregivers will report that they discussed with the caseworker and that they were provided with information on how to get good or services their family needs or wants; and that they were provided with a written telephone referral;

2. A larger percentage of FAR families will receive help or services;

3. A larger percentage of caregivers involved in FAR and Investigations will report that caseworkers discussed allegations and child safety with them.

4. A larger percentage of families will feel positive emotional responses at the end of the visit;

5. The unique supervision needs of FAR caseworkers will be met.

High Five Wall of Fame

During the symposium, participants had an opportunity to give a "high five" to someone they know. "High fives" included some kudos, thanks or words of praise to a person in their community who has been instrumental in growing FAR practice or in modeling the principles and values of FAR. The handprints were then hung on the wall in the main room of the symposium for all to see. Here are some well-deserved "high fives":