New York FAR Quarterly

Fall/Winter 2011

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New York State
Office of Children & Family Services

www.ocfs.state.ny.us

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Commissioner Gladys Carrión, Esq.

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

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A Year in the Life of the NY FAR Movement

What a year for FAR! To honor all the incredibly hard work done by everyone connected to this initiative, we have created the eleven major FAR accomplishments of 2011. Of course, this list should be at least 40 items long, since there are 22 FAR counties that have implemented FAR to date with each having at least one brilliant moment this year that is keeping their candle lit for the work that feels so right to children, families, caseworkers, supervisors and agencies alike.

So here are the 2011 FAR "pats on the back":

1. After three years of temporary legislation that enabled FAR to evolve and grow, the NYS legislature passed permanent legislation unanimously inviting counties to offer families a second choice when responding to CPS. Behind the scenes, Acting Executive Deputy Commissioner of OCFS, Sheila Poole, and Director of the Bureau of Program Monitoring and Practice Improvement, Gail Haulenbeek, as well as the Office of Strategic Planning and Policy Development and the Bureau of Evaluation and Research strategically organized and presented information to the Governor and Legislature. The FAR Evaluation Report demonstrated the efficacy of the strengths-based, solution-focused, family-led model that is the heart of FAR. Shepherding the bill through the legislature with the support of Comm. Gladys Carrion and Dep. Comm. Laura Velez, Sheila and Gail satisfied every concern raised that might have derailed this effort. Bipartisan support of this legislation means that children and families across the state will have access to a differential response child protection system. SSL-427-a is here to stay!

2. The 2nd New York State FAR Symposium debuted in October with 20 workshops, developed and presented by a wide variety of NY FAR county staff and American Humane Association FAR team members. The level of excitement among participants for the lead-off keynote was memorable: two families (from Rensselaer and Tompkins counties) shared their insights and experiences of FAR with participants from around the state. Their wisdom, grace, generosity and humor were obvious to everyone who listened to their stories. Evaluations reflected that experience to be the highlight of the symposium for the majority of respondents. We were all humbled by their willingness to improve FAR practice by sharing their personal experiences with us. FAR in NY will be better for it. Thank you, Brenda, Carolyn, and Maria!

3. As part of the sustainability efforts for FAR within the state of New York, OCFS and American Humane Association staff have initiated a partnership with University trainers at PDP, CDHS, and Stony Brook and several volunteer counties. American Humane Association staff created a 'training-of-the-trainers' (TOT) curriculum for the foundational two-day Process and Practice curriculum as well as the Solution-Focused Practice in FAR one-day curriculum. Twelve trainers and 5 County FAR practitioners have been trained in the Process and Practice training and most have started delivering it in new and expanding counties. Twelve trainers and six county practitioners were trained in the Solution-Focused Practice training and will begin training it as opportunities become available. This year will bring the final two curricula to the "TOT" group. Partners share power, right? Parallel process, right? Absolutely. And it works!

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4. Five new counties came on board with FAR in 2011: Madison, Cayuga, St. Lawrence, Rockland and Niagara. Westchester County has also expanded significantly in their Yonkers office as well, bringing the total of new FAR trainees to nearly 1,000. Thirty-six training days and 24 coaching days later, all five are diving into FAR and are fully committed to the journey. Welcome to the fold!

5. As part of the ongoing tool development that OCFS and their training partners are offering, Gail Haulenbeek, Michelle Heyward-Cooper, Children and Family Services Specialist, and their team crafted the FAR Practice Guidelines that contain all the essentials of good practice for Family Assessment Responses to families that exist currently. What started out as trial balloons for FAR practice have become full-fledged dirigibles of FAR strategy. We will press onward to create additional strategies for families as our FAR work continues to evolve. Stay tuned . . . .

6. For the third year in a row, Casey Family Programs has funded the annual FAR case documentation review, exploring FAR documentation and practice in several round four counties: Livingston, Suffolk, Putnam and Rensselaer. Each time we learn something new that we can incorporate into improving our FAR structures, practice and training. The all-county Round 3 QA results will be made available to all FAR counties through the intranet in late January. Round 3 counties will receive their specific results via e-mail prior to the scheduled Round 3 webinar.

7. In addition to the FAR Case Review, our generous companion in FAR, Casey Family Programs has also funded a fascinating and important review of FAR practice looking through the invaluable DMR (Disproportionate Minority Representation) lens. The work group began looking at key decision making points in FAR during a compression planning session in Albany in June and held the onsite review in December. Results will be available in late January for all FAR counties.

8. As part of OCFS' project with local districts and the Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center at the University of Southern Maine, "Building A Support System in Child Welfare Supervision" (BASSICS), OCFS wanted to test out a peer network for supervisors. American Humane Association developed the peer-to-peer support process during 2011. Supervisors in two cohorts of FAR counties were offered the opportunity to join both in person and via the Community of Practice to discuss how their supervisory skills could be improved by engaging across counties to support best practice. Additional time and energy to fine-tune this work will resume in 2012.

9. Many additional FAR learning opportunities were created in 2011. The computer-based training (CBT) tool for participants attending the two-day FAR Process and Practice training launched this year. The CBT allows participants to enjoy more practice and skill building opportunities and less background information in the two-day FAR Process and Practice training. Four free webinars were offered to NY FAR staff by American Humane Association, whose DR webinars feature national expertise from around the US. Topics each year are selected to enhance local knowledge and address practice challenges experienced by DR/FAR workers around the country.

10. Now that the FAR legislation is permanent, the door has been opened to allow New York City to enjoy the benefits of inclusion in the FAR initiative. ACS is studying how FAR could be piloted in NYC and what supports they might need to make this a reality.

11. The other keynote at the FAR Symposium featured David Mandel of Mandel and Associates. His dynamic and electric presentation of the vital intersection of domestic violence (DV) and FAR inspired all of us to believe that the work of FAR can be extended safely into the complex and too-common world of DV as it affects so many New York families. The prospect of linking solid DV practice with FAR practice is an important and exciting development in the growth of best practice in CPS in our state.

Announcement:

All of the FAR resource material 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.**

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

Reviewing Cases Can Be Fun! Who Knew?

By: Amy Hahn, MSW,
American Humane Association

Kudos, to the Round 3 districts who are working hard at improving their FAR practice, and the culture of social service in their community. The more questions we ask children and family's about themselves and their needs the easier it can be to meet them!

–Karen Sessions

Have you ever dreamt of sitting in a room with 80 FAR case files to read for five days? If you answered no, you and I already have something in common.

As the newest member of the NY FAR team at American Humane Association, I have been brought into the fold due to my work with other states on their FAR/DR implementation as well as my work on the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services.

Initially, the idea of reviewing case files for a week as my introduction to FAR in NYS left something to be desired, but that quickly waned when I read my first case. As soon as I read how a worker described FAR to a parent over the phone and then again at their first meeting, I was hooked. Could good FAR practice actually be captured in case documentation? I wanted to see for myself if that first case was just a fluke. Then I read about a worker asking the source for some strengths of the person they reported after hearing more about the concern. There were several examples of impressive engagement, comprehensive FLAGs, inclusive safety assessments and solution-focused practice throughout the counties. It turned out to be a very encouraging introduction to FAR in NYS.

Four case review teams, each comprised of a representative from American Humane Association, the regional offices and the Round 2 and 3 counties, met in November for a week to do comprehensive reviews of 80 FAR cases from Livingston, Putnam, Rensselaer and Suffolk Counties. This was the third such review and from what I hear, the process and the results have greatly improved since the first round. The first round of reviews was a learning process and resulted in the Documentation Guidelines that contained OCFS expectations for FAR documentation. It is obvious that the development of these guidelines has greatly improved the consistency in documentation across counties. With each round of reviews, it continues to be a learning process for the reviewers, as well as the county, regional and state staff invested in the success of FAR.

To give you a better picture of the review process, imagine four teams of three people, each sitting at a table with a box of 20 case files. Each file is read and independently reviewed by each reviewer. Then the review team discusses their scores and comes to consensus on any areas where there may have been disagreement in scoring. Those final score sheets are put into a database and analyzed by American Humane Association to look for themes from the review and out comes a beautiful report with charts and explanations for each relevant area of review. A county-specific report is also created so that each county has a better idea of what the review found on their cases individually. These reports are used as an opportunity to discuss, at a state and local level, training and coaching needs within individual counties, as well as policy and practice recommendations statewide. The all-county report will be available to all current and interested FAR counties in early 2012 through the shared FAR folders, with several recommendations for the state and the counties to consider. Round 3 counties will each receive their individual data as an appendix to the final report via e-mail from OCFS.

You may not be convinced that reviewing cases can be fun, but hopefully you are considering the possibility. Not only was it a rewarding experience to work with the review teams and get to know a few dedicated individuals in NYS a little better, it was also very exciting to see the state working side by side with the counties to better understand and improve FAR practice in such a transparent and collaborative manner. It is a great model for other states implementing or considering implementing FAR to consider. NYS should be proud of FAR and the progress already made on behalf of children and families. I am honored to work with NYS and be witness to such impactful change.

Special Thank You: We would like to thank Casey Family Programs for their continued commitment to FAR through their support of this quality assurance case documentation review and other activities related to FAR. Much appreciation also goes out to the county and regional staff who took time away from their offices to be a part of the review process and to their co-workers for covering in their absence. The detailed level of analysis associated with this review process could not have been accomplished without the dedication of time and talent of the four review teams including the OCFS Regional Office FAR liaisons Pat Heaman (Region 2), Raquel Wallen and Keyla Williams (Region 5), Sara Simon (Region 4), and the SUNY Albany Professional Development Program's Regional representatives who represented the perspective of OCFS: Karen Sessions (Region 4), as well as the three county representatives: Kelly Barry (FAR supervisor in Rensselaer county), Steve Rapp (FAR Senior Caseworker in Livingston county) and Holly Martin (FAR supervisor in Columbia county). Thanks also goes out to Michelle Heyward-Cooper and Lori Lehner, Children and Family Services Specialists, for their organization of the review process and data entry. Each year we hear that this is a valuable experience from those who participate and American Humane Association could not do it without the support and commitment of OCFS, the counties and the regional office staff. Thank you!

Message from a Mom

By: Brenda Kumpf, Tompkins County, NY

Sitting in the conference centers, both the NYS Family Assessment Response Symposium in Albany, NY and the American Humane Association National Conference on Differential Response in Child Welfare in Chicago, IL, I looked around the rooms and saw faces of people who had dedicated their lives to helping children. Reflecting on those two amazing gatherings I am reminded of my personal experiences both as a foster parent and mother; how sometimes even with the best intentions, I do not always have the necessary tools to do what's best for my child. As social workers, administrators, and policy makers you have faced this same dilemma. Until the implementation of Differential Response, the traditional CPS investigation was the only tool available. While this is a valuable tool – and no doubt thousands of children have been rescued from tragic situations – the defensive posture this approach puts families in often places the parents and investigators in an adversarial relationship. However, for professionals and families like mine who have been beaten down by illnesses, addictions, and a myriad of troubles, the availability of Differential Response bestows hope and fosters collaborative responsibility.

The most important piece I came away with from both conferences is that we need each other. Ask parents to sit on hiring committees. Allow parents and teens to review potential policies. Don't be afraid to put us in leadership roles because of our weaknesses. Acknowledgment of our strengths advances an atmosphere of respect, it empowers parents; it empowered me to believe I have value and a voice worth hearing – that I can do well by my child. This holiday season, I am thankful for each of you who have dedicated your lives to the support of families. I am certain I speak for parents everywhere Differential Response has been implemented…Thank you for listening.

A "Jack of All Trades" – Honoring Stephen Rapp

By: Marsha Mitchell, FAR Supervisor, Livingston County

Stephen Rapp is a Senior Caseworker at Livingston County DSS within the Child Protective Unit since 1997. Since 2010, when Livingston County began implementing FAR, Steve has been the lead supervising senior caseworker on the FAR team. He is always willing to learn new tasks and he accepted this challenge with great eagerness. Steve is the muscle behind the scenes and is always able to step in and fill in gaps where they may be. Steve is the definition of the "good guy." He has a kind and generous heart and will often go out of his way to help anyone who needs it. He is a very giving person.

Growing up in a very small rural community where his family owned and operated a small farm, that early hard-working lifestyle has helped make Steve who he is: a full time CPS/FAR caseworker, a part-time Sergeant in his local Police Force, an avid downhill skier, a community volunteer, and he is currently working on hiking to the top of all 46 Adirondack Mountains. Steve loves animals and recently adopted his second rescued border collie who had been badly abused by its previous owner. He is so patient and loving with his new friend, it warms your heart to watch him encourage and nurse this damaged animal back to doggie happiness!

To top it all off, Steve was recently honored as Volunteer of the Year by the National Honor Flight Association. Steve has volunteered for several years within this organization helping US veterans travel to Washington, DC to attend memorials and events there honoring them for their service to our country. He is a passionate history buff and loves being a part of something that is so important to the veterans he is assisting. He takes time out of his busy schedule to perform this service, but he always does it with a smile. It truly brings him great joy.

Steve approaches the families he meets through his FAR work in the same fashion. He cares about what happens to them and he has a natural ability to develop good relationships with the people he comes into contact with.

We are blessed to have Steve a part of our team here at Livingston and in helping the families that we serve.