Many children in residential care have been exposed to a potentially traumatizing event or situation such as abuse, neglect, or violence. As more becomes known about the effect of trauma on children in care, the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) is supporting more thoughtful approaches to treatment that both respect the impact of trauma and decrease the use of restraints in handling crises.

The workgroup for the Child and Family Services Review strategy, Safety and Well-Being of Children in Residential Care, is looking forward to working together on phase two of the strategy. This phase involves implementing what the group initially explored, including (1) reducing the use of unnecessary restraints in residential care facilities; (2) identifying promising models of care designed to enhance the safety of residents and staff; and (3) introducing the significance of trauma theory in relation to residential child care practice.

Charged with identifying ways to support staff development and training to improve staff/child interactions and reduce instances of crisis intervention, the workgroup has examined research comparing past approaches with new methods. The need to replace the single-person approach to a crisis and use of physical interventions that may re-traumatize children was clear given the extent of institutional abuse (IAB) reports arising from staff restraints.

"The old level system used for controlling and managing youth is being replaced by individual behavior treatment plans," says Daniel Melnick, Ph.D., Director of Residential Support Services–Clinical, at The Children’s Village. "Slowly, the strengths-based approach is seeping into the fabric. Thanks to the Cornell TCI (Therapeutic Crisis Intervention) model, we now look at the triggers that may lead to conflict: how can we prevent the behavior and intervene..."
Caseworkers have many questions and concerns about searching for absent fathers: What if the father is a drug user or in prison? What if the mother does not feel good about the father nor want him back in her life? How do you manage if there is more than one father? What is in the child’s best interest? “Finding an absent parent and any extended family members can be a challenge—one that requires values clarification, casework skills, and an understanding of family dynamics,” says Linda Kurtz.

In September 2005, the Office of Children and Family Services released an Informational Letter (INF) with a Guidance Paper on Locating Absent Fathers and Extended Family—05-OCFS-INF-05. The guidance paper provides local departments of social services (LDSS) and voluntary agencies with a framework of practice for identifying and locating absent fathers and extended family of children involved in the child welfare system. With the enactment of the Governor’s Permanency Bill, these efforts are required when the child is first removed from his or her home and must be recorded in the child’s uniform case record.

Engaging families early in the life of a case when a child is placed in foster care is essential to planning for the child’s permanency and well-being can be achieved more effectively and efficiently. Topics include the importance of locating fathers and their extended family and recommendations for local districts and voluntary agencies to improve their practices and permanency results.

The paper’s primary message is that locating an absent father has the potential for enhancing a child’s life. When children know who their parents are, they gain understanding of their own identity and sense of self. Their medical history becomes clearer. They may gain support, connection, and placement with extended family members. The presence of fathers in the lives of their children influences the child’s overall well-being, emotional stability, sense of belonging, and cultural identity. Finally, if the permanency goal is adoption, parental rights of both birth parents will need to be addressed.

Another important message is that fathers may not be involved in their children’s lives for many reasons. Although caseworkers realize that fathers who have actively participated in their child’s life have a valuable influence on the child’s well-being, they may have a different attitude toward fathers who have been absent from their child’s upbringing. However, it is possible to engage fathers who may have left their families for a variety of reasons and, through effective casework, help them establish a meaningful relationship with their children or be considered as placement options if such a plan is needed.

The guidance paper includes a list of methods for locating absent fathers (also known as conducting a diligent search), as well as acknowledgment of paternity forms, definitions of father, information on the Putative Father Registry, and a list of databases as part of the Federal Parent Locator Services. For a copy of the INF, go to the OCFS website, www.ocfs.state.ny.us.

There is no aspect of family engagement that causes more apprehension than finding absent fathers.

Linda Kurtz, Director, OCFS Rochester Regional Office, and Strategy Coordinator for Family Engagement
Enhancing Safety

before conflict starts? And if conflict does erupt, what works for a particular youth to help him or her de-escalate? This is a big challenge—a change in thinking across the board from top administrators to child care staff.” As a result of implementing a strengths-based and team approach, the Children’s Village Crisis Residence has had a fifty percent reduction in the number of restraint holds used within the past three years.

To provide a forum for exchanging ideas about these issues, the workgroup helped coordinate two Leadership Symposiums, sponsored by OCFS and the Residential Child Care Project of Cornell University. Held in Auburn and Tarrytown in October 2004, the symposiums addressed the need to reduce physical interventions and restraints in residential care and the impact of trauma on youth. Well attended by voluntary contract agency and local district executives and senior staff, the symposiums featured national speakers on restraint reduction and gave participants an opportunity to share ideas about restraint in a frank and open exchange.

As a follow-up to the symposiums, OCFS held teleconferences on November 7 and 21 to present more information on trauma theory and program models. Other projects in the works include a reporting system to study the frequency and use of restraints and a pilot database to collect information on elements associated with each kind of restraint used.

William McLaughlin, Director of OCFS Regional Operations and Practice Improvement, and Patricia Sheehy from OCFS are coordinating the strategy workgroup. As such, they are “committed to improving collaboration with voluntary contract agencies and encouraging participation by youth.” Building on the original workgroup’s success, new members have joined the group, which met in June, August, and October to identify priorities. Says Linda Mappes, Executive Director of Vanderheyden Hall and member of the current workgroup, “OCFS, local districts, and voluntary contract agencies are working in partnership to improve child safety and well-being throughout the foster care system. Vanderheyden Hall is pleased to be a part of this important initiative.” For more information, contact William McLaughlin, (518) 474–9465; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us; or Patricia Sheehy, (914) 377-2080; patricia.sheehy@dfa.state.ny.us.

Key Themes to Improving Interactions

The strategy workgroup embraced the findings of the research conducted by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). Six key themes were identified as crucial to improve staff/child interactions and reduce instances of crisis intervention in residential settings:

1. Leadership—prioritizing the effort to eliminate unnecessary incidents of restraint, taking responsibility, setting a tone, being a model to staff.
2. Organizational culture—where clients are the priority, staff are empowered, and families and youth are actively involved in every aspect of treatment and care.
3. Agency policies, procedures, and practices—clearly defined and supported.
4. Staff training and professional development—in prevention and de-escalation techniques, culturally sensitive care, trauma awareness, etc., with support, opportunities to practice, and supervision.
5. Treatment milieu—encouraging and demanding safety, while providing a routine, predictable environment in which children can develop the skills necessary to manage their own behavior.
6. Continuous quality improvement—monitoring performance, evaluating services, and documenting and examining outcomes.

The six themes were presented in Reducing the Use of Restraint and Seclusion: Promising Practices and Successful Strategies, published by CWLA Press in 2003.

Local solutions

Consolidated Investigations Make Sense

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### Challenges

The rate of repeat maltreatment since the capa-workgroup will begin examining the state's response to the SCR. In the coming months, the need to enhance initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584

**B.** Family conferencing and early engagement. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200

**C.** Enhancing family supports. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200

**D.** Strengthening Case Planning and Service Plan Review processes. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373

**E.** Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care). Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200

**F.** Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children's behavioral and mental health needs. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106

**G.** Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being. Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726

**H.** Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice. Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

### Solutions

#### OCFS’s Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which addresses the federal Child & Family Services Review (CFSR), contains 13 strategies to improve child safety, permanency, and well-being. The strategies and eight specific areas under #1 are listed here along with the OCFS coordinator for each strategy.

- **1 Support for Strength-Based, Family-Focused Practice**
  - A. Enhancing initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584
  - B. Family conferencing and early engagement. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
  - C. Enhancing family supports. Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
  - D. Strengthening Case Planning and Service Plan Review processes. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
  - E. Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care). Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
  - F. Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children’s behavioral and mental health needs. Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106
  - G. Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being. Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726
  - H. Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice. Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

- **2 Concurrent Planning Implementation**
  - Jack Klump (315) 423-1200; Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

- **3 Safety and Well-Being of Children in Residential Care**
  - Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080; Shelley Murphy (518) 402-6546

- **4 Permanency Options: Mediation**
  - Michelle Rafael (518) 474-4352

- **5 Adolescent Services and Outcomes**
  - Linda Brown (716) 847-3145; Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

- **6 Development and Piloting of a Differentiated Protective Services Response to Allegations of Child Maltreatment**
  - Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

- **7 Workforce Development: Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Development**
  - Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879; Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645
  - Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

- **8 Workload Management Support**
  - William McLaughlin (518) 474-9465; Fred Levitan (212) 383-1788

- **9 Improving the Statewide Information Systems**
  - Lillian Denton (518) 474-6947

- **10 Tribal Consultation**
  - Christine Heywood (518) 474-9465; Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

- **11 Improve Relationships and Interface between the Family Court and the Child Welfare System**
  - Gail Gordon (518) 473-8418; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743
  - Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

- **12 Improve Cross-Systems Collaboration and Increase Service Array and Access**
  - Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

- **13 Adoption**
  - Lee Loubsbury (518) 474-9406; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743

For general information about implementation of the CFSR PIP, contact William McLaughlin at (518) 474-9465; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us.

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### What’s going on...

**Sharing Success III: Courts and DSS Working Together to Hard-Wire Best Practice**

December 6-7, 2005
Desmond Hotel and Conference Center, Albany, NY

Sponsored by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and the New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children in partnership with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Sharing Success III, the third in a series of statewide trainings for court and local departments of social services personnel, is part of an established cooperative relationship between the courts and the social services system. Teams of two from each district and court were selected to participate; eighty percent attended.