



CDSS

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August 17, 2009

ALL COUNTY LETTER 09-31

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS
ALL CHILD WELFARE SERVICES
PROGRAM MANAGERS
CHIEF PROBATION OFFICERS

SUBJECT: SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS

REFERENCE: CALIFORNIA MANUAL OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES (MPP),
DIVISION 31-002(a) (10), (c) (3), (c) (7), (s) (1), 31-105, 31-201, 31-
205; WELFARE AND INSTITUTIONS CODE (W&IC), SECTIONS
16501.1, 16501.2

REASON FOR THIS TRANSMITTAL

- State Law Change
- Federal Law or Regulation Change
- Court Order
- Clarification Requested by One or More Counties
- Initiated by CDSS

The purpose of this All County Letter (ACL) is to emphasize the importance of thoroughly assessing the safety and risk factors that may be present in each child abuse and/or neglect referral investigated by a county Child Welfare Services (CWS) agency. In addition, this is to clarify the requirement for written assessments throughout the life of a child welfare case and to provide guidance and information relative to the safety and risk assessment tools currently in use in all California counties.

Background

In 2000, the California Legislature created a statewide Child Welfare Stakeholders Group to review the state's child welfare system and make recommendations for improvement and change. Over a three-year period the stakeholders group forged a blueprint for overhauling the system, referred to as the CWS Redesign, concluding its work in 2003. The Stakeholders recommended specific strategies aimed at building a system of early intervention that helps families enhance their ability to protect and nurture their children. One of these strategies included a statewide safety assessment approach for evaluating and managing child safety, which is applied universally and consistently to all families brought to the attention of CWS. Specifically, this includes the use of standardized assessment tools to ensure that safety, risk and needs are assessed for each child for whom child welfare services are to be provided, including gathering and evaluating information relevant to the case situation and appraising case service needs.

The implementation of a *Standardized Safety Assessment System* was addressed in the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) first Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in 2003. Results of the CFSR indicated that not all counties apply consistent safety, risk and needs assessments to child welfare cases. This finding became one of the outcome measures in the first Program Improvement Plan (PIP) in 2004.

By 2005, a majority of counties had implemented one of the two safety tools identified for use in California, either Structured Decision Making (SDM) or Comprehensive Assessment Tool (CAT). CDSS requested funding from the Legislature to allow for the expansion of these tools to the remaining counties in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2006-07. This funding was approved and was included in the Governor's budget that year. This allowed for statewide implementation and by June 30, 2007, all 58 counties had selected and implemented the use of one of the tools.

The implementation of the standardized safety assessment system continues to be a part of the current CFSR and PIP. Though not yet approved by the Federal Administration for Children and Families as of the writing of this ACL, one of the primary strategies of the 2009 PIP is to strengthen implementation of the statewide safety assessment system by improving the use of the tools throughout the life of a child welfare case and to ensure the increased use of the strengths and needs assessments.

Written Assessments

The California Manual of Policies and Procedures (MPP) division 31-002 defines an *assessment* as "a written document which contains information relevant to the case situation and an appraisal of case service needs." The manner in which the assessment is recorded is not specifically addressed in statute or regulation. However, each of the 58 California counties have implemented the use of a standardized assessment tool to collect the written documentation as well as to assist social workers and their supervisors in determining the appropriate level of response, assessing safety and risk factors in the home, and gauging the family's strengths and needs. The tools are designed to assist in the decision making process when used throughout the life of a child welfare case.

It is each CWS agency's responsibility to make certain that the tool is being used consistently and accurately in every child welfare referral/case in their county, thus meeting the requirements for written assessments. Each safety and risk assessment tool provides specific assessments for use at critical decision points in the life of a child welfare case.

Value and Benefits

The use of standardized assessment tools ensures that families are systematically assessed for safety, risks and needs throughout the life of the case. In addition, use of the tools promotes a uniform and consistent practice of assessment for each social worker, as well as provides for consistency in service delivery and child protection throughout the state. The tools are designed to support and enhance county staff's existing clinical knowledge and judgment and are not meant to replace the experience, training and education of social workers, supervisors

and agency management. Additionally, the tools provide specific written documentation of the review, evaluation, and decisions made in the case should subsequent issues arise.

It is important that not only social workers understand the proper use of the tool, but that supervisors and managers are familiar with the assessment tool, monitor its consistent use throughout the life of a case, and provide guidance and support to social workers regarding its implementation as well as the interpretation of the indicators.

Important Considerations for Use of the Tools

CONSISTENT USE OF SAFETY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The tools must be used consistently throughout the life of the case. Data from this year's SDM core team meeting illustrated that tools have relatively high compliance rates for initial intervention and placement services but use of the tool decreases as the child welfare case extends. There is a similar pattern noted in counties using CAT. It is critical that tools are used consistently throughout the life of the case to ensure that safety, well-being and permanency are continuously assessed and appropriate services are provided.

ACCURATE USE OF SAFETY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

The benefits are derived only when the tools are used in the manner for which they are designed. Inaccurate use of the tools invalidates the accuracy of an assessment and does not provide a thorough measurement of the current family situation. This may lead to errors in judgment or missed opportunities to ensure a child's safety within the family home. The accurate and timely use of the safety assessment tools is a critical element that assists the child welfare agency in effectively monitoring each child's safety, permanency and well-being.

INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL WORKER SUPERVISION

SDM is equipped with supervisory tools that provide checks and balances to ensure that a second level of review is completed in each case. In addition, supervisor use of Safe Measures and case review/reading improves the accurate use of tools.

CAT includes a supervisory format with tools designed to prompt a discussion between the supervisor and social worker in order to ensure quality assessments are completed in each case.

USE OF TOOLS WITH CLIENTS

Many of the SDM and CAT tools are designed to be used during visits with family. For example, the SDM Family Strengths and Needs Assessment (FSNA), which drives case planning, should be completed with the family's input, as required by MPP Division 31-201.133(a) which states, "Parent(s)/guardian(s) shall be requested to participate in the development of the case plan." Additionally, ACL 06-07 reiterates the need to involve the family in the case planning process as well as extends the time in which the case plan must be completed to up to 60 days, with good cause.

INCORPORATE ASSESSMENT OF ALL ADULTS LIVING IN THE HOME

It is also important to remember to include the assessment of all adults living in the home, including non-relatives, pursuant to MPP division 31-205.1(a)(3) which states that “the social worker shall document the following assessment information: other significant persons, including children and siblings who are known to reside in the home.”

SUPPORT OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS THROUGHOUT THE AGENCY

It is important that the safety assessment tool is fully supported by the CWS agency by ensuring that:

- Training and support are provided to social workers and supervisors who are responsible for implementing the tool.
- The language used within the tool is incorporated into daily use of clinical skills.
- The completed tools are reviewed by supervisors and discussed during individual supervision with line staff to ensure that the tools are being used accurately and that the elements of the *Standardized Safety Assessment System* are incorporated into each case decision.

High compliance and effective use of the safety assessment tools provide CWS agencies with accountability toward meeting their federal and state mandated outcomes.

IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING FOR SAFETY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Training and case review are essential to ensuring accurate use of the tools and should be an integral part of ongoing standardized safety assessment system implementation.

For counties using the SDM tool, in addition to support that counties may receive directly through the SDM contractor, the Regional Training Academies (RTA's) provide training on the use of the tool as part of the critical thinking portion of the Core Curriculum. Advanced SDM courses may be offered for training in the use of specific tools as well as training for supervisors to improve their ability to review social worker assessments more accurately. These courses include:

- SDM for supervisors.
- SDM Substitute Care Provider module, a one-day SDM assessment training curriculum for licensing staff, placement workers, and managers.
- SDM advanced hotline interviewing and advanced emergency response training.
- In addition to training offered by the RTA's, Children's Research Center, the contractor responsible for the development and maintenance of SDM, is available to provide on-site training in field application of SDM to support use of the tools, as well as email, telephone and onsite support to help counties rollout and troubleshoot the SDM tools.

SPHERE, the contractor responsible for the development and maintenance of CAT, is available via email, telephone and on-site support to help counties roll out and troubleshoot the CAT 2.0 tools. Due to ongoing revisions to the CAT tools, the CAT training has not yet been integrated as part of the critical thinking portion of the Core Curriculum.

Summary

The CDSS and the counties share the common mission of ensuring that children remain safe in their homes and when this is not possible, placing children in a safe environment free of abuse and/or neglect. Use of the safety assessment tools throughout the life of a child welfare case assists the social worker and his/her supervisor in monitoring safety and risk factors for children and families.

Should you have any questions regarding this ACL, please contact me at (916) 657-2614 or the Child Welfare Policy and Program Development Bureau at (916) 651-6160.

Sincerely,

Original Document Signed By:

GREGORY E. ROSE
Deputy Director
Children and Family Services Division