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Using Organizational Data to Create the Essential Context for System Transformation in Child Welfare

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MA/DSS has 29 Area Offices organized in 6 Regions; 74,861 consumers (39,913 are children <18 years of age); 10,883 children and youth in placement; and 3,460 employees (FY2005, 2nd quarter).

A comprehensive system transformation initiative is underway, to shift from the traditional “adversarial” child protective model, and translate the core values of “child-driven,” “family-centered,” “community-focused,” “strength-based,” “committed to diversity/cultural competence,” and committed to continuous learning... into an active child welfare agenda. The “learning organization” is the guiding framework.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) is an interactive, iterative, participatory process that reflects change in organizational values, and catalyzes and guides improvements in policy and practice. Data drive CQI, obtained as framed by federal performance benchmarks, and in response to criteria or questions generated by the organization, and the field. CQI embraces both learning and accountability.

To elaborate a coherent child welfare system the new core values must be reflected in selecting and measuring benchmarks, obtaining data from multiple perspectives, and providing feedback to inform improvements and to promote the “new” way of doing business at the clinical, managerial, and system levels.

The Child Welfare Institute (CWI), a public-academic partnership between MA/DSS, Salem State College, and the UMM, is aimed at transforming the system through professional development. The Staff, Family, and Provider Development Centers will offer competency-based workshops, seminars, conferences, and certificate programs. Areas for training and development are emerging via the CQI process.

Staff Comments

"While CQI can be a useful tool to shape organizational change, it may be viewed as an unwelcome 'add-on' when the other things that are changing take so much time and energy...."

"Effective CQI requires a context of trust and cooperation, the shared understanding that the goals are feed- back and learning, and not negative evaluation and criticism."

"Feedback has to be framed as a learning opportunity. When it’s positive, it’s an opportunity to highlight good things... there’s good work being done all over the place. When something doesn’t work we need to say, 'How can we do this differently?' because there’s always room for improvement."

...The challenge is getting the right data to the right people...and helping folks know how to use it. When people are engaged in the process...when they can reflect on practices, and use data to ask and answer larger questions... it builds excitement."

"People need help overcoming their anxiety about data and feedback. For CQI to work requires an open process, where people have equal say in providing and responding to feedback, and making recommendations. When it works well, it’s very exciting."

"Incorporating new ways of relating to families in our practice...while dg the emotional and work demands of eighteen or more families...requires... building a bridge while crossing it."