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Informational Letter

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To:	Commissioners of Social Services Executive Directors of Voluntary Authorized Agencies
Issuing Division/Office:	Strategic Planning and Policy Development
Date:	April 14, 2010
Subject:	Casework Contacts: Best Practice Guidelines
Suggested Distribution:	Directors of Services Foster Care Supervisors Adoption Supervisors Staff Development Coordinators
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Attachments:	No
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Filing References:

Previous ADMs/INFs	Releases Cancelled	Dept. Regs.	Soc. Serv. Law & Other Legal Ref.	Manual Ref.	Misc. Ref.
		18 NYCRR Section 441.21 (c)	Federal Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (Public Law [P.L.] 109-288)		Dear Commissioner Letters (April 18, 2008 & October 19, 2009) Dear Executive Director Letter (Nov.16, 2009) Dear Commissioner / Executive Director Letter December 30, 2009)
			ACYF-CB-PI-07-08		
			ACYF-CB-PI 08-03		

I. Purpose

The purpose of this Informational Letter (INF) is to provide social services districts and voluntary authorized agencies with a set of best practice guidelines for making and documenting required casework contacts between caseworkers and foster children.

II. Background

In passing the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 (Public Law [P.L.] 109-288), Congress noted in its findings that "...Child and Family Service Reviews also found a strong correlation between frequent caseworker visits with children and positive outcomes for these children, such as timely adherence of permanency and other indicators of child well-being." The federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued ACYF-CB-PI-07-08 on May 30, 2007, to advise states of the specific mandate and associated data collection and reporting requirements regarding caseworker visits (contacts). ACF issued ACYF-CB-PI-08-03 on April 18, 2008 which modified and clarified the earlier Program Instruction.

The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) sent letters on the subject of casework contacts to Commissioners of Social Services on April 18, 2008, and October 19, 2009, and to Executive Directors of voluntary authorized agencies on November 16, 2009, and jointly to Commissioners and Executive Directors on December 30, 2009 which in part advised of the requirements of the federal Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006 as they relate to caseworker visits (contacts) with foster children. P.L. 109-288 was signed into law on September 28, 2006, and included requirements for caseworker visits in Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (SSA). Under Section 424(e) (1) of the SSA, a state cannot

receive FY 2008 Title IV-B, subpart 1 funds unless it has provided fiscal year 2007 data which shows:

- the percentage of children in foster care who were visited on a monthly basis by the caseworker handling the case of the child; and
- the percentage of visits that occurred in the residence of the child. The requirement is that a majority of the contacts must be in the child's residence.

Beginning in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2007, OCFS was required to develop annual benchmarks toward meeting a compliance rate of 90% of foster children visited on a monthly basis. OCFS milestones and status of completion are as follows:

2007-2008	15%	√ Achieved
2008-2009	45%	√ Achieved
2009-2010	75%	
2010-2011	90%	

The national standard (90% of foster children visited on monthly basis) must be achieved by all states by October 1, 2011.

As of October 1, 2008, if ACF determines that the requisite progress (the annual milestones established by the state) toward meeting the 90% standard has not been made, there are graduated penalties, as follows:

- Percentage not met by less than 10%, Title IV B Part 1 funds are reduced by 1%;
- Percentage not met by between 10 and 20%, Title IV B Part 1 funds are reduced by 3%;
- Percentage not met by 20% or more, Title IV B Part 1 funds are reduced by 5%.

Visits must be made by the child's caseworker on a monthly basis, which is defined as one visit per calendar month. Only those months in which a child has been placed in foster care for the entire month are reviewed to determine if a visit had been made during that month. If a child has gone home for a trial discharge (still in the Commissioner's legal custody), then the time the child is at home must be included when determining if visits had been made each month. ACF has clarified that the monthly contact requirements apply to foster children placed out-of-state and that months during which a child or youth have run away (AWOL) are also counted (see ACYF-CB-PI-08-03). A "child's residence" is defined as the home or facility where the child is residing while in a foster care setting, or the home from which the child was removed if the child is on a trial discharge.

As a part of ACF's initiative to partner with states in achieving the benchmarks, OCFS was awarded grant money for the past three federal fiscal years. These funds have been designated to three major categories:

- Equipment
- Training and technical assistance
- Reports

As part of the technical assistance component, OCFS regional office staff completed a review of selected case records in each social services district and most voluntary authorized agencies. As an outcome of these reviews, many common best practices were identified that are believed to be critical to achieving a high percentage of successful monthly face-to-face contacts with children placed in foster care and, to supporting that a majority of the contacts be in the child's residence. Consequently, OCFS has put together a compendium of best practice guidelines based on the findings.

III. Program Implications

Best Practice Guidelines

I) Local District / Voluntary Agency Leadership

- Administrators make it clear to staff that monthly face-to-face casework contacts, a majority of which must be in the child's residence, are a priority task to be completed and then properly and contemporaneously documented in CONNECTIONS Progress Notes.
- Administrators incorporate the use of data and management reports to manage workload and to meet benchmarks for completing casework contacts.
- Administrators make certain that agency policy supports the following:
 - all workloads are covered to address situations when staff are out on leave for any length of time;
 - procedures are implemented for completing casework contacts for out-of-state placements or for foster children in the care of another state agency;
 - procedures are implemented for when a foster child is hospitalized or otherwise absent from care in a known location; and
 - AWOL foster children are tracked in order to promptly complete a face-to-face contact when the foster child's location is known or when the foster child returns to placement.

II) Supervisors

Supervisors play a major role in their agency's ability to meet benchmarks for casework contacts to be made and documented every month. Common supervisory tasks include:

- Regular meetings with staff to discuss case activity including actions to visit foster children in their placement or trial discharge setting. These case conferences focus on outcomes for those visits that address the programmatic requirements for safety, permanency, and well-being for the foster child.

- Review of progress notes on a regular basis to determine whether face-to-face progress notes contain the elements to satisfy the programmatic elements of a face-to-face contact and that they are being coded correctly to be credited as a successful casework contact.
- Review of progress notes to determine whether the CONNECTIONS coding matches the narrative written by the caseworker. Discrepancies found between the CONNECTIONS progress notes coding and the narrative content are corrected immediately with the worker, and serve as remedial training to improve the overall performance of casework staff.
- Regular use of data warehouse reports to identify which workers are lagging in completing and documenting monthly required face-to-face contacts with foster children. This information helps supervisors in targeting their own work to guide caseworkers in completing the task each month.
- Make timely assignment of cases to workers in CONNECTIONS and as part of their supervisory role.
- Assign staff to cover workloads of other caseworkers who are out of work for any length of time.
- Arrange for new caseworker staff to be trained to meet the programmatic and CONNECTIONS requirements for properly completing and documenting face-to-face contacts. Encourage all staff to complete the computer-based training course "*Documenting Casework Contacts With Foster Children.*"
- Provide quality oversight and guidance for case processing, especially for key case milestones. For example, for a child freed for adoption, all case notes must be entered into the FSS stage for the months preceding the child being freed before closing the FSS and opening of the CCR.
- Assign responsibility for and oversee updating of CCRS, especially final discharges and timely case assignments to or un-assignments from voluntary authorized agencies, when appropriate.

III) Caseworkers

- Caseworkers clearly understand the required tasks that comprise a face-to-face contact with foster children on their caseload. This includes an understanding of the required elements to address in their interaction with foster children and the corresponding task to correctly document that interaction in a CONNECTIONS progress note.
- A worker assigned the role of case manager or case planner must clearly communicate expectations concerning face-to-face contacts for situations where a foster child is moved to other placement location(s), on trial discharge, or placed with a different agency, and a casework contact is needed to be completed for the current month.
- Considers case circumstances in scheduling casework contacts. For example, scheduling visits with older foster youth earlier in the month to give greater opportunity for rescheduling if a foster youth is unavailable due to school, work, or other important activities.
- Keep CONNECTIONS and CCRS in sync.

IV) Reports

- Data Warehouse (Casework Contacts Reports).
 - For Caseworkers – Caseworker contact activity by Worker
 - For Supervisors – Caseworker contact activity by Unit or by Worker *AND* No Successful Contact Summary (allows for Case Planner Sort)
 - For Managers – Casework contact activity by Unit or No Successful Contact Summary
 - Quarterly Report – District and Voluntary Agency versions (e-mailed to users by OCFS). This new statewide report shows comparative performance data among all local districts and voluntary authorized agencies.
- New CONNECTIONS Open Caseload Inquiry Report (OCI)
 - The new OCI informs the worker with real-time information concerning which foster children on the worker's caseload have not yet had a documented face-to-face progress note completed and documented by the 20th day of the month.

V) Business Process Issues

The following is a listing of process or procedural areas that should be reviewed and addressed in order to improve the rate of documented casework contacts:

- The local district completes timely assignment and un-assignment/re-assignment of Case Planner and Caseworker roles. Further, there are clear lines of communication between the agencies involved in providing services to the children and family in each case, including designation of specific roles and assignments for task completion associated with service provision, including casework contacts and CCRS movement activity entries.
- Timely and simultaneous entry of pertinent case information into both CONNECTIONS and CCRS so that both systems are in sync, including: timely case openings, placement program choice in CONNECTIONS corresponds to in-care status in CCRS, and recording of final discharges from foster care.
- For out-of-state placements and for placements with other New York State public agencies (e.g., OMRDD, OMH) clear instructions for the agency to provide timely written information each month that covers all the elements of a face-to-face contact.
- Procedure for the caseworker to follow in requesting and using information received from out-of-state or public agencies to properly document contact with the foster child.
- For children freed for adoption, a process to make certain all contacts are documented in the FSS stage for the time period prior to being freed and prior to closing the FSS and opening a CCR stage for the child.

- Tracking of foster children that become AWOL, in order to prioritize a face-to-face contact to be completed when the foster child's location is known, or upon return to placement.
- For hospitalized or otherwise absent foster children when the location is known, a procedure to complete a successful face-to-face contact. (Either having the assigned caseworker visit the foster child directly or arranging for a courtesy visit to be completed by a caseworker from the local district where the hospital or other setting is located).

/s/ Nancy W. Martinez

Issued By:

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