

Background

A Superintendents Group was formed in 2017 under the leadership of CiTi to increase collaboration between the Oswego County Department of Social Services (OCDSS) and school personnel. The Child Protective Advisory Council (CPAC) membership, appointed by the Oswego County Board of Legislators, was strengthened this same year with additional school districts represented. The Chair of CPAC is the Director of Student Support Services at Fulton City School District. OCDSS sought input from the Superintendents Group and CPAC to develop a Quality Assurance process to solicit feedback from school personnel who work directly with caseworkers investigating State Central Registry (SCR) Reports of child abuse and/or neglect.

During the 2018 – 2019 school year, OCDSS contacted thirty-nine (39) sources of a report which accounted for 83 separate SCR reports. All nine school districts were represented in source contacts. School staff were asked for feedback regarding OCDSS caseworker’s communication, professionalism, and service when investigating child abuse/neglect reports. School staff were asked about their interactions with caseworkers, what worked well and what OCDSS can do to improve our professional partnership.

What School Districts Reported

School personnel in all 9 districts were generous in expressing their respect and appreciation for all that caseworkers do under extremely demanding conditions.

- 64% of the sources voiced their understanding of caseworkers being overwhelmed; and noted that they felt the relationship between school staff and OCDSS has improved greatly;
- 18 sources reported that they felt the communication and interactions with the Department was “good” and had no suggestions for improvement or changes;
- 16 sources described communication with caseworkers as poor on 29 of the 83 reports and request better follow up communication from casework staff.
- Several sources noted that while the caseworker made initial contact with the source, follow up was either sporadic or lacking altogether.

All sources cited the importance of follow up and ongoing communication between caseworkers and school staff to best meet the needs of the students and their families. School staff expressed feelings of being unable to effectively support the student due to a lack of information and communication with

2018 – 2019 QA Findings

- *More school personnel are engaged in collaborative efforts with OCDSS and 64% observe a better working relationship.*
- *OCDSS caseworkers are inconsistent in having regular communication with school personnel who are the source of a State Central Registry Report of Child Maltreatment.*
- *School personnel do not consistently respond to OCDSS calls / contacts.*
- *More school personnel who are sources of a report are providing alternative phone numbers so CPS can reach them outside school hours.*

caseworkers. When discussing other ways to improve relationships and interactions, several of the sources suggested that caseworkers schedule interviews ahead of time, rather than a caseworker arriving unannounced to see a student. **Scheduling appointments to interview children at school avoids further trauma, reduces missed or interrupted specialized services such as speech, OT, and PT, and helps to ensure the stability of the child(ren)'s school day.** All expressed their understanding that this cannot always be the case but appreciate the efforts whenever possible.

This is valuable feedback and compels us to ask why caseworkers are not calling schools on reports they receive. OCDSS has provided clear directives to caseworkers and their supervisors that contact with schools is a high priority case task. It is evident that a lack of capacity in the Child Protective Services unit, high caseloads, a backlog of case notes, and high workforce turnover impacts OCDSS ability to consistently provide best case practice standards.

CHILD PROTECTIVE INVESTIGATION UNIT NEEDS TO BUILD CAPACITY IN ORDER TO COLLABORATE WITH SCHOOLS AND PROVIDE CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION.

Further, **33% of sources reported no communication with the caseworkers and several sources**

had no information regarding conclusions on more than half of CPS reports. Six sources noted that because they did not know the status of a case and were unable to reach the caseworker, they made new reports due to their ongoing concerns for the student and family.

Several schools reported that they thought they were speaking to OCDSS when making a report of child abuse and neglect. All expressed dissatisfaction with their initial communication with the person on the other end of the phone. Sources were advised that the State Central Registry is a centralized call center in Albany.

OCDSS DEVELOPED A HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS ON THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES AS MANDATED REPORTERS, HOW TO REPORT, AND WHAT TO EXPECT FROM CASEWORKERS.

OCDSS Efforts to Engage School Districts

- Many contacted praised the email communiques sent by OCDSS but have noticed a decrease in emails, much like overall communications from caseworkers. Some school personnel did not know about the email communication policy. There were many conversations alerting school staff to the Department's email policy, and it was suggested school staff check with their principals to determine the practice within their schools.
- Beneficial to caseworkers and the safety assessments they are required to conduct upon the receipt of a CPS report; **is an increase in the number of school staff who left alternative**

phone numbers with the State Central Registry where they could be reached other than their work number. When unable to reach a source, caseworkers must often proceed with incorrect and/or incomplete information that may create additional steps and/or difficulties in trying to get a timely safety assessment completed for a child(ren). In October, 3 sources provided an alternative phone number and by March there were 11 sources who left alternative contact information. These sources represent all nine school districts. **Many thanks to school staff for this effort.**

Barriers to Consistent Communication between OCDSS & School Districts

- Case notes indicate that OCDSS placed calls to 10 school sources, left messages and did not receive a return phone call. Gaps in communication occur with both OCDSS and school personnel. Everyone is busy doing their jobs to the best of their ability and can, at any given time, lose sight of a phone call or an email. This does not reflect a lack of diligence or care, but rather an overwhelmed system.

OCDSS Child Protective Unit

Caseworkers continue to face record numbers of reports and a significant increase in the number of court petitions being filed. Between October 2018 and April 2019 an average of 61% of caseworkers had average caseloads of 30, more than double the 15 cases recommended by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). About 61% of all reports are initiated by mandated reporters, including law enforcement and schools. About 60% of all reports are unfounded. There was a 10% increase in the number of reports referred for investigation in the past 5 years. **In 2018 there were 3,318 reports of child maltreatment in Oswego County.**

Total number of SCR Reports by School District for the 2018-2019 school year:

APW: 47 Central Square: 81 Fulton: 187 Hannibal: 70 Mexico: 67 Oswego: 244
Phoenix: 39 Pulaski: 29 Sandy Creek: 20 CiTi: 46

An increase of 40% in the number of court petitions filed in 2018 over the previous year reflects the serious nature of investigations. 163 petitions were filed in the first quarter of 2019 – more than half of the 243 petitions filed in all of 2018. DSS seeks Family Court orders to protect children through mandated community-based services and/or out of home placement of the children / youth to foster care or with relatives / Kinship Care.

Over a 7-month period for the 2017-2018 school year there were 588 reports called in by school sources while the 2018-2019 school year saw an increase to 623 reports over the same 7-month period. **There was a total of 805 reports called in by school staff for the entire school year. This number accounts for approximately 30% of the total number of child abuse/neglect reports received by the Department during the school calendar year.**

OCDSS Designated Central Contact for School Districts

In 2018 OCDSS deployed a Community Services Coordinator as a liaison to school districts, this position conducts the QA telephone calls and case reviews. All district personnel have a central contact when issues arise. The Coordinator has been called by districts on many occasions and immediate issues and concerns have been addressed quickly with the appropriate supervisors and managers. This position reports directly to the Director of Services, with directives and training strategies implemented based on the schools' feedback.

COMMUNITY SERVICES COORDINATOR CAN BE CALLED TO ADDRESS IMMEDIATE CONCERNS BY SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

DIANE GODFREY: 315.963.5524

Diane.Godfrey@dfa.state.ny.us

The Superintendents Group and OCDSS set a goal of the Community Services Coordinator meeting with all school districts during the 2018 – 2019 school year. It was observed that districts have unique issues / needs and may want different topics addressed. The Community Services Coordinator sent emails in September and January to offer meeting, as well as numerous calls to Superintendents and School Principals. Several school districts responded with meetings held as follows:

- Central Square Superintendent, Tom Colabufo and key administrators met in October 2018 for a question and answer session with OCDSS. Feedback was that the session was helpful and follow up phone calls to OCDSS for clarification and direction resulted.
- Mexico High School Principal, Ryan Lanigan and two school representatives met in January 2019 for a question/answer meeting with Youth Services staff. OCDSS and Liberty Resources representatives provided information on PINS Diversion / Court Process. School personnel were not aware of the email communication policy. Principal Lanigan agreed to come up with a plan to assure that email communiques on students from Child Protective Services unit would be distributed appropriately and timely.
- Fulton City School District Superintendent Brian Pulvino, Director of Student Support Services Geri Geitner, and Executive Director of Instruction and Assessment, Betsy Connors met to discuss CPS process, regulatory boundaries, and specific topics impacting their students – including chronic absenteeism and home schooling.

The Community Services Coordinator:

- attended the ESSA training at the Phoenix Training Center in October 2018;
- attended with two Liberty Resources caseworkers a staff development session with CiTi staff at Pulaski Elementary providing information handouts and a 2-hour Q & A session;
- met with Oswego High School Assistant Principal Tara Cook and 3 school counselors in May 2019 at Oswego High School for Q & A addressing concerns about youth services.

OCDSS looks forward to increasing our presentations / Question and Answer Sessions with school districts on issues or topics that impact them. Positive feedback from the districts who availed themselves to this opportunity was received and stronger relationships were fostered. Principals, administrative staff and faculty all reported that learning the processes and limitations of Child Protective and Preventive Services was helpful.

Together we can do what not one of us can do alone. We look forward to our work together this coming 2019 – 2020 school year.

Respectfully Submitted,
Commissioner Stacy Alvord
Director of Services Carey Benzing
Community Services Coordinator Diane Godfrey