



**THE
CHILD WELFARE
POLICY & PRACTICE GROUP**

Iowa Department of Human Services

Report of Findings

Observation of DHS Training Sessions

Performed by

The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group

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Consultant Biography

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Lu Missildine served as a public school classroom teacher, the child welfare training manager for the Alabama Department of Human Resources, and as a county child welfare administrator before joining The Child Welfare Group.

Her CWG experience includes facilitation of training groups and trainer development in curricula related to Family Engagement, Family Team Conferencing, Assessment, Planning and Intervention, Making Visits Matter and Supervised Visits. These efforts have been conducted in a number of states, including Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, Utah, Virginia, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. Lu has also provided coaching and mentoring of the Family Teaming Process in Florida, Indiana, New Jersey, Illinois and Wyoming. Another area of Lu's service at CWG has been assisting states in implementing Qualitative Service Reviews. She has served as a reviewer and mentor in Florida, Indiana, Iowa, New Jersey, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Lu is particularly interested in the intersection of child welfare and education and enjoys helping families improve their communication with one another, particularly as it relates to understanding and managing the emotional and educational needs of their children.

The following training sessions were observed:

CP200 -Basic Child Protection-March 4-6; April 1-3, 2019

SW020 –Foundations of Practice- May 6-9; June 5-7, 2019

FTDM (for Caseworkers) – June 4, 2019

CP200 Training was conducted in the DHS Computer Training room, located in the Hoover Building. The curriculum content was delivered in two 3-day sessions held about a month apart. There were 8 participants in the group, which was reported to be smaller than the usual 20+. Staff attending were based in various counties in the state. Some participants had prior casework experience in Iowa; a few were entering the Iowa work force bringing experience from bordering states (Illinois, Nebraska, and South Dakota), and one had worked as far away as Florida. One or two had previous experience working in Iowa's FSRPs. The conversations about similarities and differences in their experiences enriched the group interaction.

Trainers -Two trainers co-led the training: one, an experienced worker and supervisor with the agency and recently appointed as a DHS trainer; the other, an experienced contract trainer. The trainers were a strong team, even though they hadn't much experience working together. They shared responsibilities equitably and supported each other, based on their professional knowledge and experience. The contract trainer had trained the curriculum numerous times and used her expertise in the mental health field to offer important and useful perspectives which enriched the training experience. The DHS trainer, while new to the training position, used her years of work experience to offer practical expertise and useful examples of cases and procedures, all of which were beneficial to participants. She described families and their situations with empathy and modeled an ability to see situations/attitudes from the family's perspective, all the while balancing legal requirements and offering a range of ways to ensure safety and lowering risk for children.

Training Materials – The Trainer's Guide materials were filled with innovative ways to capture the attention of the group and offer them opportunities to bond and share the learning experience in small groups. Participant materials included 1) printouts of the power point slides, 2) a separate participant manual with many pieces of information essential to guiding their work in a way that meets federal and state laws and standards, and 3) numerous laminated flowcharts and checklists to guide workers in safety and risk assessments and in decision-making regarding removals or, for children who could remain at home, safety plans to ensure that they were safe. Pre- and post-tests were administered for the training course. The support for training provided by Iowa State University (ISU) was excellent, from making the power point display properly to providing support materials, such as printed materials, charts and markers, and even "fidget" items for those who needed them.

The Training Experience - In this training, in addition to the presentations of information by the trainers and the abundance of printed materials offered, there were a few group-sharing activities. Also, some outside contributors came to the group to offer specialized presentations. These will be noted by day of occurrence.

Week One – On Day One, a DHS administrator, who had been an agency trainer prior to her appointment, spoke with the group. Her welcome to staff entering service in this critical part of the agency was warm, genuine, and encouraging. She had “walked in their shoes” and was honest about the difficulties and challenges of the work. She emphasized the administration’s commitment to equipping them with the resources they need to do their jobs, including filling vacancies and reducing turnover.

On Day Two, a team from CWIS demonstrated and coached use of the JARVIS information system. The group used the computers in the room to practice. This lasted 1 hour 30 minutes.

On Day Three, a Forensic interviewer made a presentation describing her job and provided a brief model of an interview, using a volunteer from the group. She then conducted and processed an interview practice with pairs of trainees interviewing each other. The topic was sexual abuse, and each member of the dyad was to play both roles: victim and interviewer. It was concerning that the instructions did not acknowledge the possible discomfort of playing the role of a sexually abused child and did not provide an opportunity to opt-out.

Week Two - On Day Four, the major focus was reporting and processing the field work participants had conducted between training weeks. Eight cases were presented, and the group asked questions and offered suggestions. The trainers facilitated the discussions and used opportunities to help the group think about best practice, e.g. making notes on the visit immediately afterward, looking for underlying needs, and arranging for FTDMs. The trainer told the group about a useful book that each office has (Tough Problems, Tough Choices), which contains guidelines for Needs-Based Service Planning.

On Day Five, two CWIS specialists came to teach the workers how to “join applications” of FACS and JARVIS. The group used the computers in the training room and practiced use of the two systems. This exercise lasted 1 hour 45 minutes.

On Day 6, two teams of outside contributors visited the group. The first were two specialists from the Help Desk who provide staff assistance with case consultation and decision-making. Their presentation covered such issues as how to categorize findings in cases in which CBD oil is being used, knowing how “serious injury” is defined and how long such findings have to remain on the state registry. Several pictures were shown to the group to illustrate serious injury. The group was advised that criteria for “serious injury” are now on a drop-down menu in one of the information systems. The presenters provided instructions on how to access their help through the social workers’ supervisors. In addition, they discussed several areas in which staff most often request help.

The second presenters were a worker/supervisor team who gave the group suggestions on how to organize their work and how to use the available computer systems to help them in working their cases: JARVIS, FACS, WISE, and another computer site, through which workers can access information related to criminal records a client/family might have, were presented. The group seemed to find this presentation practical and very helpful.

SW020 (Foundations of Practice) was conducted in the DHS Computer Training room, located in the Hoover Building. The training content was delivered in one four-day session and one three-day session, held about a month apart. There were 18 participants in the group. Most group members had some exposure to child welfare work, some from other states (primarily states bordering Iowa) and a number who were coming to DHS from FSRP. Staff attending were based in various counties across the state. The questions and conversations among the group reflected similar programs and experiences across state lines, and gave rise to interesting comments regarding ICPC experiences, in particular. The former FSRP staff appeared genuinely interested in gaining a perspective of the work from the standpoint of agency workers.

Trainers- Two trainers co-led the course. The agency trainer, as indicated above, had great depth of empathy for families and children, combined with years of field and supervisory experience. These were tremendous assets in handling participants' questions and in anticipating what group members would need to know/consider in given situations. The ISU co-trainer has expertise in Mental Health and is also a foster/adoptive parent, both of which gave her invaluable experiences to share and a perspective that was very beneficial to the group. The trainers worked together seamlessly.

Training Materials – The Trainer's Guide materials contained some exercises to capture the attention of the group and offer them opportunities to bond and share the learning experience in small groups. Participant materials included 1) printouts of the power point slides, 2) a separate participant manual with many pieces of information essential to guiding their work in a way that meets federal and state laws and standards, and 3) numerous laminated flowcharts and checklists to help guide workers through major decision points in the course of their work. Supplemental books and guides (e.g. Tough Problems; Tough Choices) which will be available in their County Offices were shared with the group and made available for their perusal during training. Pre- and Post-tests were administered for the training course. The support for training provided by ISU was excellent, from ensuring the power point displayed properly to providing support materials, such as printed materials, charts and markers, and even "fidget" items and candy for the long, busy days.

The Training Experience – The experience in the training room was somewhat different in this training, as the group was larger and the subject matter broader, making time management a greater challenge. As in the previously described curriculum, there were ample printed handouts and laminated guides provided, in addition to trainer presentations of information. There were also outside presenters who brought useful information to the group. A brief description of these presentations is included in the following paragraphs.

Week One:

On Day One, there was an “add-on” presentation in the morning by a representative of the office which processes worker-submitted travel/expense invoices. Apparently, several invoices submitted following a recent training contained errors, which delayed reimbursements, as all invoices were required to be submitted in one batch. This presentation was given as an effort to prevent such occurrences in the future. The presentation lasted approximately 1 hour 30 minutes.

On Day Two, the CWIS Help Desk team taught and coached the group on how to use FACS. This presentation lasted a total of 3 hours 30 minutes. A lunch break was given about half -way through the presentation.

On Day Three, the administrator who spoke to the CP200 group addressed the SW020 group, welcoming them to the agency and offering encouragement. She spoke briefly about supports available to them from several sections of DHS leadership.

In addition, the CWIS Team returned and presented/coached participants in the use of FACS and JARVIS. This presentation lasted 2 hours.

On Day Four, trainers presented remaining Day Three material regarding Risk Assessment and Case Planning, which could not be covered due to time issues. Day Four material included Culture, Trauma, and Worker Self-Care. Participants were given an interim assignment to select one of their cases for presentation to the group in Week Two. They were given a handout to help them plan and prepare for their presentations.

Week Two: On Day One, a county supervisor visited the group to conduct and coach a Group Supervision exercise, using the cases participants brought for presentation. The group supervision followed a multi-step outline to guide the processing of case information: Background, Safety/Risk Constructs, Strengths and Needs of the family, Questions and Brainstorming, and Next Steps to be taken in the case. The first case presented was processed by the entire group as a model, after which the group was divided into two smaller groups in an effort to comply with the time allotted for the activity. The guest supervisor led one group; the group’s trainer led the other. This was a practical and useful activity, and the guest supervisor who presented was energetic, effective, and encouraging. Group Supervision is a process used in multiple counties in Iowa and appears to be an excellent shared-learning tool.

On Day Two, the remaining group supervision cases were processed before and after a presentation by the CWIS team on claiming IV-E funds, which lasted 1 hour, 30 minutes. Little time was left to address the remaining scheduled training topics for the day: “bed days,” safe case closure, transition planning, and ICPC - before guests arrived from “Achieving Maximum Potential” to present their program for youth, which has reportedly proven very beneficial to those who participate.

On Day Three, the day began with a quick, 15-20 minute overview of trauma and vicarious trauma – the group was advised that training on this subject is available quarterly. Beginning at 8:45, the CWIS team presented the process for calculating and generating Foster Care and FSRP payments, which workers are required to execute on a monthly basis. This instruction took most of the morning. Remaining on the agenda for the afternoon were a visit by a Parent Partner (a valuable resource for family members involved with DHS), administering the training post-test, and completing travel invoices.

FTDM Fundamentals Training- This one-day training was for SW2 caseworkers (vs meeting facilitators) and was held at the Euclid Avenue DHS location. The goal of the training curriculum is to acquaint caseworkers with the philosophy and process of Family Team Decision Making, so that they can fulfill their role in the FTDM process, which is to make referrals for meetings, provide the neutral facilitators with pertinent information about the family and their case, participate as a member of the family's team, and document the case plan made by the team. There were approximately 30 participants in the room, including many who were also participating in the second session of SW020 training later in the week. The training room was set with tables grouped together, so that 4-6 people could sit facing each other. When asked for a show of hands of trainees who had attended or observed an FTDM, a fairly large number indicated that they had been to at least one meeting.

Trainers -This training was co-led by the person who co-led the CP200 course which was observed. She has had years of experience with FTDMs and was involved in the beginning stages of choosing and implementing family teaming in Iowa. It was not clear to this observer whether the co-trainer was an ISU employee, a DHS supervisor, or an approved FTDM facilitator. They both presented well and worked together as a team.

Training Materials – The Facilitator's Guide is well laid out, and is supported by the robust, nicely bound Participant's Guide. The Participant Guide is a most useful reference book regarding FTDMs. The ISU support was excellent – the materials for training (manuals, charts, markers, name tents) were provided, as were baskets of "fiddle" gadgets and snack items.

The Training Experience – This writer had the opportunity to observe several FTDMs in the Des Moines area prior to this training and gained some understanding of how meetings in Iowa are conducted. The elements of FTDMs described and included in the handouts were familiar and faithful to the principles of agency and family partnership. In several examples, a trainer would describe what should be happening in meetings and would ask the group, "Is that what you saw?". The answer would often be, "No," which was clearly disappointing to the trainers. At one point, there was a lively discussion about the frustrations arising from having attorneys in FTDMs; for example, it becomes "their" meeting when it has to be set by their schedules instead of the family's, and the fact that meetings are more likely to become contentious when the attorneys engage in discussions with each other. The training went smoothly, and time management was not a factor. The group was somewhat distracted by their phones when their only task was to listen; they were more engaged when they were doing group work at their tables, and they did an amazing job when asked to present an FTDM Standard assigned to them "in any way they chose." This was a great afternoon assignment, and the presentations were clever, creative and fun!

Summary of Findings and Considerations

The duty to prepare staff to do the work of coming alongside families in circumstances which are not ideal, assessing, making decisions, and taking actions that will protect and hopefully preserve those families is an awesome responsibility. It is necessary to teach and coach staff how to enter families' lives in ways that keep staff safe, as they attempt to sort out the confusion and disorder they frequently find. To simply dispense information is not enough; to prepare caseworkers adequately requires that trainers have knowledge of the work to be done, knowledge of the laws and policies that frame the work, and experience sitting with families, asking difficult questions, and making informed decisions that are sometimes excruciatingly difficult. Iowa DHS is fortunate to have such a trainer. She not only speaks from her experience; she speaks with empathy and concern for families. While observing these training sessions, it was learned that another DHS trainer is being hired. This is a positive step and an encouraging beginning.

Even with the support DHS has from ISU, an agency can burn through trainers (and staff) quickly unless it is understood that quality Child Welfare training cannot be achieved through lecturing alone; it must involve engaging and interacting with participants around sometimes intense content, assessing their strengths and needs with regard to the job they have been hired to do, and creating ways to help them develop the attitudes and skills needed to be successful in helping families make needed changes. This requires physical, mental, and emotional energy, all of which can run low if asked to train back to back weeks for a long period of time.

When comparing the Trainer's Guide received prior to observing CP200 with the material being presented, it was clear that some of the most effective activities were being left out— the ones that anchor a new group and quickly build trusting relationships among them, so that they are willing to take risks and learn with each other. Upon inquiry, it was learned that there had been a revision, which was provided promptly. Those particular steps, and a few others similar to them, had been deleted. In the SW020 Trainer's Guide, there were similar activities that were included in the guide and were skipped. It appeared that these deletions might have been made because of time issues. While it can be tempting to reduce or delete activities which are designed to help groups bond, explore, and "struggle together," and to eliminate quick quotes or games to open the day and to return from lunch, it is important that trainees exit training with greater self-confidence about their abilities and comfort in having practiced, in the safety of a group, the skills they will need to employ in the field. It is also important that while in training, trainees build a group of colleagues to whom they can reach out when they need support.

Without such experiential group activities, training can become a torrent of information and procedural steps, that at best, teach participants what to do...but not how to do it. Considering that in some schools of social work, interviewing skills are no longer emphasized, combined with the minimum requirements for a person to apply for a position with Iowa DHS, it is even more important that new hires learn skills that enable them to talk with families in a way that engages and builds trust. They need to learn to ask questions in ways that help family members believe that their caseworker cares about them and allows them to feel safe enough to share openly what's troubling their family. Such skills are

essential for developing relationships with families that encourage them and enhance their ability to make deep, lasting changes.

Although the foundational conditions for helping (empathy, genuineness, and respect) were modeled consistently by the DHS trainer during recent observations, they were not specifically identified and taught as such, nor were they practiced in SW020 or CP200. CP200 had several pages of handouts listing types and examples of interviewing questions. These were not addressed by the trainers. ISU offers many worthwhile training opportunities, including Motivational Interviewing, which is an excellent interviewing method. It is found in the last group of courses listed – those required within the first 12 months on the job. Thus, a new employee may possibly work up to a year without focused learning on how best to interview a family. **This situation merits immediate and careful attention.**

A training model like that described above could include the steps of Information, Modeling, Practice, and Feedback, giving trainees the opportunity to develop the skills of interviewing in a safe environment and to receive from their colleagues and trainers feedback intended to help them recognize what they did well and to identify ways they can improve. This level of training requires a commitment of time, which is always a challenge in the economy of training. It seems important to look at the current curriculum and search for ways to invest time in developing these important skills. When taught and practiced in training, and *supported in supervision*, positive results accrue over time for families and the agency.

This leads to considering the amount of time consumed in training for teaching the use of information systems – a total of +/- 4.25 hours in CP200 and +/- 9.25 hours in SW020. While learning to use these system applications is necessary (“if it isn’t documented, it didn’t happen”), it appeared to be given priority over development of actual social work skills. In terms of the training offered on IV-E funds, it was informative and concerning to learn that social workers are tasked, not with just making sure their narrative includes the necessary IV-E language, but also with accounting for the hours children spend in foster homes and for costs for FSRP services, calculating these costs and submitting them for payment for each family/case they work with on a monthly basis. This required another detailed, lengthy systems instruction session during training.

The social work training content related to practice was condensed and rushed: important information on handouts was merely referenced, key information was presented in summary fashion, exercises designed to build group cohesiveness, develop empathy for families, and improve practice skills were minimal. For example, four critically important practices in successful work with families –1) Interviewing Skills (based in the Core Conditions for Helping), Exploring, Focusing, and Guiding skills; 2) use of the Working Agreement to reach an understanding with families about what needs to change for them; 3) identifying and addressing Underlying Needs (vs identifying services as needs); 4) understanding and using the Process of Change to guide their work with families –which, while contained in the curriculum, were presented briefly, without meaningful discussion or practice.

The training site (computers-in-desks, lined up in rows) suggested the priority given the documentation aspect of the work. The option to move furniture, in order to group trainees around a table and offer them opportunities to experience small group work and explore together ideas about ways to meet important practice challenges, simply was not possible.

The distraction created by cellphones in training rooms around the country is noticeable and similar, based on the experience of the training consultants in our organization. There was considerable cell phone “checking” during parts of FTDM training, with perhaps a little less during CP200 and SW020. There seems to be no perfect solution to this problem, and it creates an unfortunate situation, as it interrupts the learning process for the trainee and is frustrating and discouraging to the trainer. One method frequently used to try to reduce calls is to ask the trainee’s supervisor to assign someone to cover for the trainee during training days. This is helpful, yet does not guarantee that the person covering will not have to call the trainee for additional information. Sometimes the supervisor offers to cover, and when trying to fulfill the offer, finds it impossible to spare the time from her/his work. So, occasionally, the supervisor *is* the one who is calling the worker. Also, there are other, less significant reasons for cell phone distractions (e.g. office news that “must” be shared with the trainee, lunch planning, etc.). Since participants are adults, trainers can request mature behavior from the group, reward it with a “thank-you,” and to try to keep the group interested and busy enough to make them want to stay involved. Supervisors and local administrators can support the learning process before the training by establishing clear expectations with their staff relative to attendance and attention.

The training groups observed often seemed overwhelmed with the amount of information being given them, and there was little “thinking time” to absorb it. Members of one group said, “We’re sure to fail the post-test; nothing is sticking.” At one point, several workers in another group told the trainers, “We need you to take care of us,” meaning provide afternoon snacks. These statements reflect, in part, the stress of moving through material quickly and without enough time to absorb concepts, which are retained better if an experiential activity is provided to “make it real.” The DHS trainer did a wonderful job of answering procedural (What do we do if...?) questions with clarity, followed by a case example, the tone of which was respectful and empathetic toward the family. These were the moments when the groups were truly engaged, because they could connect the content to reality. One hopes they were able to hear and appreciate the tone the trainer used and will replicate that in their work with families.

What makes the above paragraphs important to consider? While the FSRPs are in place to provide a range of services, and the FTDM facilitators are in place to facilitate team meetings, the “hub of the wheel,” if you will, remains the DHS caseworker. In order to carry out the tasks that are theirs to do, which include (but are not limited to) the following, they must: know the family/case well enough to assess with them what needs to change for their family (fundamentally, not merely behaviorally); inform the FTDM Facilitator of the above information as well as the family’s strengths and underlying needs; develop a plan with the family and their team to address the underlying needs, offer services that address the needs; track and assess family progress in follow-up meetings; determine where the family is in progressing through the stages of change and identify what might help them move forward; present the case accurately in court; contribute to decision-making about safe case closure. To successfully do all this and more, the social worker needs the essential skills outlined above. In the training sessions observed, it appeared that the time needed to learn and practice these skills was sacrificed in the interest of making time for Information Systems training.

Recommendations

A. Since all of the above-described aspects of work are important and necessary, the department might consider a couple of options: 1) reducing what is being asked of caseworkers in the non-practice areas of their work, or 2) revising training in a way that allows for Information Systems Training to be offered separately from Social Work Practice Training. There might be other, better options. In whatever ways the agency chooses to proceed, it is recommended that a better balance between the two types of training be actively pursued. Ultimately, the social worker's ability to join with families, prevent unnecessary removals, and support timely permanency will positively impact documentation results.

B. Review/revise the current CP200 and SW020 Trainer's Guides, making sure that introductory activities, small group work, and practice opportunities followed by feedback (from the person taking the risk, the group, and the trainer) are returned to or built into the curriculum and used. Ensure that the topics of Interpersonal Helping Skills, Working Agreement, Underlying Needs, and Stages of Change are taught and practiced. Create a bound Participant Guide and when discussing material in it, remind the group that it is meant to be a Handbook to assist them in their practice after they leave training.

C. Explore ways to manage cell phone distractions during training, so that valuable information and learning opportunities are not missed.

D. It is understood that a mentoring program for new staff is being planned. This is a wonderful idea, as new workers often feel "at sea," when they begin and tend to consume more of the supervisor's time than is reasonable to give. Choosing mentors will be a critically important decision: it is assumed that they will be modeling practice for the new hires, in which case they need to be highly skilled in the four areas described earlier and listed in paragraph **B**. Perhaps a refresher training on these practice pieces might be included in their preparation for the mentoring role.

E. Consider adding more DHS trainers with field experience to the contingent of available trainers, so that rotations are possible. Over time, training feels repetitious, and trainers become weary. Some of the ways trainers tend to deal with their fatigue are: 1) to condense their presentations, 2) skip group activities that don't have immediate and obvious impact on trainees (and take energy to conduct), 3) use lecture only, rather than posing questions to get the group engaged and thinking, 4) refer the group

to handouts versus involving the group in looking at and discussing them. These possible changes might indicate a trainer's need to conserve energy and/or relieve time constraints.

F. Consider investing in DHS trainers by sending them to a "Training of Trainers" workshop, of which there are many around the country. These demonstrate techniques for use in training that will enhance the experience for everyone in the room.

Conclusion

Iowa has been forward-thinking in their work with families for years, and the commitment to partnership with families has been and continues to be strong. Family situations have become more dire in recent years, and the work force today faces challenges that are greater than ever before. What seems to have happened with training, and perhaps in FTDMs, might be described as "slippage." It is difficult to maintain high standards over a long period of time, and for trainers and meeting facilitators, the repetitive nature of their work can become an energy drain.

Even as new demands on the agency seem relentless, it is clear that dedication and commitment are still alive in Iowa! Sometimes, a new spark is needed – perhaps a celebration of how long and how well the agency has functioned. And then possibly a re-boot campaign, live and in person (by regions if necessary), with a thank-you to the new staff who are joining the agency and an appreciation of the long-term employees. Renew the administration's commitment and request the same from everyone - to model excellence in their individual roles in the agency. Provide administrative support for this effort with intentional, regularly scheduled recognition and appreciation of excellence, everywhere it is found!

