

## **The Casework Process**

### **Initial Referral:**

During this phase, the agency receives reports of abuse or neglect from the community and conducts investigations to assess the safety and risk of all children in the home. The County Children and Youth Agency (CCYA) receives referrals in two ways – directly to the agency or through ChildLine. The CCYA is responsible for investigating suspected child abuse and neglect, assessing the need for general protective services (GPS), as well as for providing services to children and families to prevent harm to children. The Child Protective Services Law (CPSL) (23 Pa. C.S., Chapter 63) includes the parameters for investigation of reports of suspected child abuse as well as reports of children in need of General Protective Services (GPS).

Regulation classifies referrals received that allege physical, sexual, or mental abuse, imminent risk of physical or sexual abuse and serious physical neglect of a child as Child Protective Service (CPS) cases. The majority of reports that come to the attention of the county agency involve non-serious injury or neglect. Regulation classifies these cases as GPS cases. GPS cases may include allegations of inadequate shelter, truancy, inappropriate discipline, hygiene issues, abandonment, or other problems that threaten a child's opportunity for healthy growth and development.

In a CPS investigation, the CCYA has 24 hours to begin its investigation and see the child. If agency representatives cannot determine from the report that the child is safe, representatives must immediately begin the investigation and immediately see the child. In GPS assessment, the agency representatives must adhere to any GPS response times established by the Department.

Regardless of the type of referral, the CCYA assesses and ensures the child's safety at every contact. Safety is the primary and essential focus that informs and guides all decisions made from intake through case closure, including removal and reunification decisions. The in-home Safety Assessment and Management Process focuses on identifying safety threats, present and/or impending danger, protective capacities, and working with caregivers to supplement protective capacities through safety interventions. The process leads to making informed decisions about safety planning and implementation of safety interventions that will control identified threats. Safety analysis and decision making uses all available information to conduct a thorough analysis to decide if a safety plan is needed and what specific interventions are available and accessible to control identified threats. These safety interventions are used to supplement the caregiver's protective capacities. The interventions provided may be in-home, out-of-home or a combination of the two.

### **Assessment/Investigation:**

During the assessment period, the caseworker visits the family's home – some of the visits may be unannounced – as often as necessary to complete the assessment and to ensure the safety of the children. Additionally, agency representatives will ensure the provision of services or will arrange to ensure the safety of the children during the

## **The Casework Process, Cont'd**

assessment period. The CCYA may petition the court for removal of the child if the family refuses to cooperate. Regardless of the type of investigation, the CCYA must complete the safety assessment and management process, (which consists of four phases: Safety Assessment, Safety Analysis, Safety Decision, Safety Plan and Management) as well as the Risk Assessment process. The information gathered and the conclusions drawn through both processes become the basis for the Family Service Plan – discussed in a moment. While Safety Assessments consider immediate or impending danger, Risk Assessments determine if the child is at future risk of harm.

During the assessment/investigation phase, the focus of the Safety Assessment and Management Process is on maintaining child safety while gathering additional information to analyze safety threats. When safety threats are identified, caseworkers conduct a Safety Analysis. The purpose of the safety analysis is to identify and explain what is associated with or influences a safety threat or protective capacity. If protective capacities exist that mitigate safety threats, the child is considered safe and no plan is needed. If protective capacities do not exist or are not sufficient enough to control the threats, then a safety plan is needed. The Safety Plan includes all safety interventions necessary to control the safety threats (e.g., supervised visitation between child and caregivers of origin). If individuals in the home cannot maintain the child's safety with a comprehensive safety plan in place, the local CCYA may petition the court for placement of the child. Within 60 calendar days, the caseworker completes the Safety and Risk assessments to determine if he or she plans to accept the family for services, refer the family to a community agency for services, or to close the case.

Caseworkers typically complete the investigation within 30 days and submit the results to ChildLine. If agency representatives cannot complete the investigation within 30 days, the CCYA must document the reasons and complete the investigation within 60 days.

Pennsylvania's Safety Assessment and Management Process is extremely complex. More research and training on the subject is recommended to become fully aware of what the process entails.

### **Status Determination:**

An In-Home Safety Assessment worksheet must be completed at the conclusion of the assessment/investigation for every child in the family to identify the presence of present and impending safety threats and protective capacities. Protective Capacities are specific and explicit strengths that manage and control safety threats. Furthermore, Safety Assessments are completed as part of every contact, regardless of where the child resides. Safety Plans are developed for the following in-home safety decisions: Safe with a Comprehensive Safety Plan and Unsafe.

## **The Casework Process, Cont'd**

### **Accepted for Services/Service Planning, Delivery and Monitoring:**

Regulation requires that the Safety Assessment and Management Process continue during this phase. When agency representatives accept a case for In-Home services, the caseworker must continue to manage safety plans and work with the family to develop a Family Service Plan (FSP) that addresses the issues identified during the intake/investigation phase that brought the family to the attention of the agency. The caseworker must include family members and service providers in the development of the FSP – through Family Group Decision Making meeting and/or other engagement methods. The FSP document outlines the nature of the issues and strengths as well as the goals, objectives, and actions that families must take to lower or eliminate risk of abuse or neglect to the child in order for the agency to close the family's case. This is an integral part of the casework process because it sets a direction for the case and establishes the services that the agency offers – in most instances through providers. Regulations require the caseworker and supervisor to conduct a formal written review of the FSP a minimum of once every 6 months with the family. It is important to know that the agency may initiate court action during any phase of the casework process if it becomes necessary to assume custody of a child for the protection of the child. Fiscal staff will begin to receive bills from service providers once a caseworker develops an FSP and initiates services.

If a child is considered unsafe through the In-Home Safety Assessment, CCYAs are required to formally place children temporarily in Out-of-Home care. The child's safety continues to be assessed at the onset of placement and at regular intervals. If children are placed outside the home, CCYAs are required to complete a Child Permanency Plan (CPP) that outlines services offered to seek methods of achieving a permanent living arrangement for the child. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) outlines five possible permanency goals for the child. In the order of most-desirable to least-desirable, the options include:

- return to parent;
- adoption;
- legal guardianship;
- permanent placement with a fit and willing relative; and
- another planned permanent living arrangement (APPLA).

Whether the child remains in the home or is placed outside the home, caseworkers must visit families and children face-to-face at least once a month – more frequent visits if the risk of abuse or neglect is higher. During service delivery, other service providers may work with the family and visit the family's home. Courts hold a hearing a minimum of every 6 months to review the case when parties initiate court action.

## **The Casework Process, Cont'd**

### **Case-Closing or Other “Permanency” Outcomes:**

Caseworkers and Supervisors evaluate and assess the progress of families while cases remain open for services. Various outcomes to a case occur. Case teams decide whether it is in the best interest of the child to reunify the child with the family and close the case. This decision to reunify a child hinges on whether the family ultimately achieves the goals and objectives outlined on the FSP and can assure the child's safety. During the case-closing phase, caseworkers try to prepare families for termination of services and empower families to use other community resources on their own.

It is important to note that under ASFA, if a child has been in care 15 or more of the past 22 months and the necessary reunification services have been provided to the child's parent, a termination of parental rights (TPR) petition must be filed unless there is a case-specific “compelling reason” documented in the case record why filing a TPR petition is not in the child's best interests. Filing a TPR allows partner agencies to consider the child for adoption. In other cases, the agency may file a petition to place some children permanently with relatives if adoption is not an option. Some children, who remain in the system beyond the age of 18, eventually “age-out” of their placements.

CCYA representatives, at all levels, play an integral role in protecting the lives of children in the Commonwealth by providing the services necessary to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children. Equally important in the process is the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (Department).

The Department is responsible for ensuring the availability and provision of public child welfare services, providing oversight and technical assistance to each CCYA, and establishing and enforcing policy and regulation that supports the achievement of Child Welfare goals and outcomes. The Federal Government vests this authority in the Department through Articles VII, IX, and X of the Public Welfare Code (Act of 1967, P.L. 31, No. 21). In addition, the Department is responsible for the licensure of public and private Child Welfare Agencies and the investigation of complaints received regarding these agencies.