

**NEW YORK CITY CHILD WELFARE ADVISORY PANEL
REPORT ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

AUGUST 2003

In March 2002, the Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel (Special Panel) concluded three years of work having advised the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) on reform and having provided court-ordered public accountability regarding the progress made in improving child welfare services in New York City. The Special Panel's *Concluding Report* underscored significant progress made by ACS and identified numerous challenges to bear in mind as reform efforts advanced.

Several areas of unfinished business were identified in the *Concluding Report* as necessary next steps for ACS and the city to take in the process of improving child welfare services for children, youth and families. Areas of unfinished business included: developing neighborhood-based services; involving families in decision-making about their children; continuing to improve the quality of front-line practice and services to children and families; strengthening services for teenagers and their families; working with the Family Court to ensure permanency and safety for children; and working with the New York State Office of Children and Family Services to improve the way child welfare services were funded and regulated.

The Special Panel also noted the transition in city leadership with the election of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and his appointment of ACS Commissioner William C. Bell in January 2002. In its *Concluding Report*, the Special Panel encouraged the new administration to continue and expand upon reform and improvement efforts and characterized the appointment of Commissioner Bell as an encouraging sign "... that these important [child welfare reform] efforts would function as a foundation for future progress."¹

The Special Panel provided the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) with an independent review of agency operations, child welfare services and policy directions and served an invaluable function by offering objective appraisal and guidance through its regular reports to the public. This approach to reform and quality improvement had value for Commissioner Bell and at his request a new, independent panel, named the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel (the Panel), was convened to continue a process of independent review and public reporting of ACS activities, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel (NYCCWAP) was established in March 2002 to continue the successful process developed between the Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel and the Administration for Children's Services to improve child welfare services through management, practice and policy reforms. The New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel is chaired by Gail B. Nayowith, Executive Director of Citizens' Committee for Children of New York (CCC). Nine other national and local experts serve on the independent panel including: Steven D. Cohen, Senior Consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Jorge Colapinto, Director Foster Care Project and Faculty in the Clinical Externship Program at the Ackerman Institute for the Family; Dr. Kathryn Conroy, Assistant Dean, Director of Field Education at the Columbia University School of Social Work and Co-Chair of the ACS Advisory Board; Hon. Richard J. Fitzgerald, retired Chief Judge, Jefferson County Family Court and Commonwealth of Kentucky District Judge; John Mattingly, Senior Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Team Leader for Child Welfare Policy; Ruth Mayden, Director, Program for Families with Young Children at the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Martha Olson, Esq., former President, Citizens' Committee for Children of New York; and David B. Sanders, Director, Department of Children and Family Services, County of Los Angeles. Jennifer March-Joly, Associate Executive Director for Program and Policy at CCC, staffs the panel.

The goal of the newly created New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel was to maintain the focus on and promote child welfare reform and system improvement. The new Panel took on responsibility for the unfinished business identified by the Special Panel, of publicly reporting

¹ The Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel. *Concluding Report*. March 2002, page 2.

findings, and providing ACS with an independent review, ongoing consultation and advice to help improve child welfare services through management, practice and policy reforms.

This is the first report of the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel.

BACKGROUND

Guided by the strategies and goals outlined in *Protecting the Children of New York*² and *The Renewed Plan of Action*,³ the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) benefited from six years of high-level commitment to child welfare reform. This commitment was evidenced by increased investments in child welfare funding that supported quality improvement and accountability, staff development and training, neighborhood-based services, child protective services (CPS) reform, and the creation of a new Children's Center. These improvements set a solid foundation to reshape the way that children and families enter the child welfare system and experience child welfare services. And they represented a new starting point for reform for a new city administration and a new ACS Commissioner.

Taken together, these improvements represented the longest, greatest resourced, and most sustained effort to improve the child welfare system in New York City's history. Phase I of child welfare reform, which occurred from January 1996 through December 2001, reflected a big vision in its focus on system improvement, accountability, public reporting, planning and quality monitoring. Less visible during Phase I was the simultaneously occurring and ongoing work to create ACS as a new city agency: separating it from the Human Resources Administration (HRA), winning a ballot measure that established ACS in the City Charter and creating ACS as a stand-alone, permanent children's agency with an internal management, information systems and operations structure to conduct the programmatic and support functions of the city's child welfare system.

Phase II of child welfare reform began in January 2002 with the appointment of Commissioner William Bell. In contrast to Phase I of reform, during which the agency benefited from more than \$600 million in additional funding, Phase II has been marked by the city's fiscal crisis and loss of resources totaling \$300 million between January 2002 and June 2003. In this context, Commissioner Bell has undertaken a number of new initiatives, integrating child care and Head Start services into ACS operations and consolidating contract, fiscal and facilities functions in ACS' central office, beginning a federal revenue maximization initiative and realigning foster boarding home rates. Other projects underway or planned include targeting Neighborhood Based Services to high need Community Districts, establishing Clinical Consultation Teams to enhance Child Protective Service assessments, reducing congregate care beds, and most recently permanency initiatives for teens and infants.

The ACS reform plan, *Protecting the Children of New York*, first released in 1996 and then updated in 1998, provided the initial framework for structural and managerial changes needed in the core areas of child protection, family permanency, and training. Improvements in child safety occurred as the Division of Child Protection was reorganized with the hiring of additional caseworkers, reducing protective services caseloads, aligning protective service staff along Community District lines, restructuring caseworker supervision, and establishing child safety conferences. Advances in

² *Protecting the Children of New York: A Plan of Action for the Administration for Children's Services*. First Printing December 19, 1996; Second Printing October 1998.

³ *A Renewed Plan of Action for the Administration for Children's Services*. July 2001

family permanency were also achieved as the reform plan established community-based services, expanded foster and adoptive parent resources, and rewarded contract agencies for expediting reunification and adoption. Reform efforts also improved training and accountability by increasing education, skills, and compensation for ACS staff and establishing accountability standards for ACS and contract agency performance.

The Renewed Plan of Action, released in 2001, built on earlier structural and managerial improvements. The plan identified ways to support continuous quality improvement in services provided and enhance the skills of the workforce; make services more accessible and neighborhood based; and create more effective relationships with families. Efforts to improve the quality of services provided and strengthen the skills of the ACS and contract agency workforce were defined by the development of practice standards and accountability benchmarks that promoted the sharing of data and outcomes and the development of a training curriculum for contract and ACS workers. Attention was also paid to implementing new ways to increase parent involvement and improve case conferencing including the development of Family Team Conferences (FTCs) and a redesign of the Service Plan Review conferences (SPRs).

Today, guided by the strategies and goals outlined in *Protecting the Children of New York* and *The Renewed Plan of Action*, the city's child welfare system is more accountable, children are better protected, ACS workers are better trained, voluntary agencies are more accountable, the services provided are increasingly neighborhood based, and the use of FTCs and SPRs are more prevalent than was previously the case. ACS reports that these improvements account for a fundamental reversal of child welfare trends in New York City that has occurred over the past seven years, as record numbers of children are receiving preventive services while remaining at home with their families and far fewer children are placed in foster care. According to the most recent caseload data, 29,000 children now receive preventive services compared to 24,900 placed in foster care.⁴

While real progress has been made at ACS since its inception in 1996, the gains made are fragile.⁵ More work is needed to ensure that reforms are maintained and that improvement will continue into the future. Areas of work needing particular attention include: firmly rooting improvements in the frontline practice of ACS and contract agency caseworkers (arguably the most challenging aspect of reform), reshaping the experience of children and families who come into contact with ACS and its contract agencies, improving case management and care coordination functions, strengthening ACS internal operations and accountability systems and supporting service quality and contract agency performance.

While ACS' commitment to progress and reform has continued, the fiscal environment required to support this commitment has changed dramatically. ACS is under enormous and growing pressure to ensure child safety, support children and families, provide quality care, and increase oversight and accountability with fewer resources. In this climate, child welfare reform will mean planful program reductions while at the same time preserving core child welfare services, controlling costs, identifying alternative revenues and supporting quality improvement and accountability initiatives.⁶ At the same time, the city's fiscal crisis provides an historic opportunity for ACS to articulate a new vision for improving child welfare services in New York City, rethink operations and management

⁴ Monthly, quarterly, and annual caseload statistics are maintained on www.nyc.gov/html/acs

⁵ Special Child Welfare Advisory Panel. Concluding Report. March 2002

⁶ The CFY04 Adopted Budget included a full restoration of cuts to Child Protective Service staff, preventive services, and a partial restoration of cuts to foster care rates, foster parent and adoptive parent stipends, substance abuse prevention and independent living programs. Full funding for programs that have been partially restored at adoption, is contingent on ACS's ability to maximize federal resources through improved claiming and eligibility.

functions to support reform goals, review performance standards and strengthen contract agency relations. Most important, in managing change in this complex fiscal environment, ACS will also need to prioritize and determine which of the many program and policy initiatives underway will lead to real improvement in the day-to-day work of front line staff with children and families.

Among the key issues for ACS to address, the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel believes that strategies designed to improve family engagement practice so that workers interact more effectively with families and in doing so improve permanency for children, is critical to moving forward the city's child welfare reform agenda.

PANEL DECISION TO EXAMINE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Members of the New York Child Welfare Advisory Panel met for the first time in May 2002 and identified the first issue area for review. As noted earlier in the report, family engagement was one of several areas of unfinished business identified in the Special Panel's *Concluding Report* and on which ACS sought guidance. The Panel and ACS agreed that it would be useful to look at the effects of reform on front-line practice through the lens of family engagement.

“Permanency for a child is the ability to grow and thrive with a sense of belonging to a family who provides unconditional commitment to him or her. ACS believes that when a family in need comes to our attention, every effort should be made to explore options with the family that would allow the child to stay safely at home. A child's family is the first, and most likely best, place to support healthy growth and development. If a child must come into care to ensure his or her safety, ACS believes that foster care, a temporary intervention, must be planned with relevant family members involved as partners. This is necessary to ensure the best placement for the child which will address safety concerns and restore him or her most quickly to permanency.”⁷

In Phase I of reform ACS established a new approach to family engagement and parent involvement including the development of a new parent-child-sibling visiting policy, producing The ACS Parent Principles and information guides (The Parent Handbook), establishing parent representation on the ACS Advisory Board and creating opportunities to engage and work with parents to expedite permanency through a new approach to case conferencing. ACS invested significant resources to develop a training curriculum and training plan, develop an accountability system to track the frequency of conferences and parent attendance at them and developed other strategies to make the case conferences happen regularly.

ACS developed a new model for case conferencing through the development of Family Team Conferences (FTCs) and a redesign of Service Plan Reviews (SPRs). This new way of conferencing cases was codified in ACS protocols describing 72-hour safety and 30-day permanency FTCs and six month SPRs.⁸ ACS developed the 72-hour safety and 30-day permanency FTCs and the SPRs as opportunities to engage families in decision-making. The intent of the new approach to case conferencing was to partner with families during the time that their children are in foster care. The FTCs and SPRs were designed to improve communication with and information available to parents at the time of and during placement, increase parent involvement in permanency planning for their children, and ensure that service plans and visiting schedules were individualized to meet the needs of children and their families.

⁷ A Renewed Plan of Action for the Administration for Children's Services. July 2001. Page 67.

⁸ The 72-hour elevated risk conference is held within 3 business days following an assessment that risk has increased. The 72-hour post-removal safety conference is held 3-5 business days after a protective removal of the child to foster care. A 30-day family permanency conference is held 30-35 days after a protective removal.

The key functions of the FTCs and SPRs outlined in the ACS protocols are to: 1) set and meet permanency goals for children in care; 2) identify the needs of children and parents; 3) identify and secure services needed to meet those needs; and, 4) expedite timely permanency. The conferences and SPRs envision active participation by parents and other family members as essential to success. Parent participation was explicitly built into the FTC and SPR protocols to influence all decisions made: 1) identifying safety risks and efforts to reduce them; 2) establishing the permanency goal; 3) identifying family strengths; 4) determining the availability of relatives or kin; 5) identifying the service needs of child and parents; and, 6) establishing parent-child-sibling visiting arrangements.

The New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel wanted to learn how the case conferencing improvements undertaken by ACS affected the quality of the day-to-day interactions between ACS and contract agency workers and families and how the new conferences were used to engage parents in practice. In particular, the Panel wanted to be able to advise ACS and report to the public about the impact that the new case conferencing model had on family engagement and by extension on expediting permanency and otherwise improving outcomes for children in foster care. The Panel sought to better understand the dynamics of attendance and participation in FTCs and SPRs and the best use of these opportunities for planning and decision-making around safety, permanency and service needs.

We agreed that front-line practice, and by extension ACS central operations, should support family engagement. We defined family engagement as creating and using every opportunity to promote positive contact between the child welfare system and the families it serves to increase parent involvement in decision-making, strengthen the parent-child relationship and improve family functioning as the best way to expedite permanency and otherwise improve outcomes for children. The child welfare literature supports this view in its emphasis on the importance of strong parent-child bonds as necessary to promote healthy child development, increase the possibility that a child will be reunified and return home faster, and also to provide the child with the best chance for developing a healthy sense of belonging even when reunification is not possible.⁹

The Panel focused its fieldwork on these specific points of engagement because the new case conferencing model through FTCs and SPRs was central to ACS child welfare reform efforts and because they provided a concrete opportunity to observe front-line practice in engaging families. In its review, the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel sought to answer four questions 1) how have FTCs and SPRs been operationalized? 2) what methods are being used to encourage parent attendance and participation in decision-making and service planning? 3) to what extent has

⁹ Research suggests that parent involvement hastens family reunification when that is the appropriate goal and that parent involvement happens when the agency is committed to it through policy, practice, and training, and supports staff parents and foster parent in such activities. Aldgate, J. (1976) The child in care and his parents, *Adoption and Fostering*, 84, 29-40; Blumenthal, K. & Weinberg, A. (eds) (1984) *Establishing Parent Involvement in Foster Care Agencies*, Child Welfare League of America, New York; Bowlby, J. (1969) *Attachment*, Basic Books, New York; Fanshel, D. & Maas, H. (1962) Factorial dimensions of the characteristics of children in placement and their families, *Child Development*, 33, 123-144; Fanshel, D. & Shinn, E. (1978) *Children in Foster Care: A Longitudinal Investigation*, Columbia University Press, New York; Hess, P. (1987) Parental visiting of children in foster care: Current knowledge and research agenda, *Children and Youth Service Review*, 9, 29-50; Jivanjee, P. (1999) Professional and provider perspectives on family involvement in therapeutic foster care, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 8(3) 329-341; Jivanjee (1999) Parent perspectives on family involvement in therapeutic foster care, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 8(4) 451-461; Millham, S., Bullock, R., Hosie, K. & Haak, M. (1986) *Children Lost in Care: The Family Contacts of Children in Care*, Gower Parker, R. (1966) *Decision in Child Care: A Study of Prediction in Fostering*, George Allen and Unwin, London; Sanchirico, A. & Jablonka, K. (2000) Keeping foster children connected to their biological parents: The impact of foster parent training and support; *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17(3) 185-203; Sherman, E., NeuMan, R., & Shyne, A. (1973) *Children Adrift in Foster Care: A Study of Alternative Approaches*, Child Welfare League of America, New York; Tam, T. & Ho, Mary (1996) Factors influencing the prospect of children returning to their parents from out-of-home care, *Child Welfare*, LXXV(3) 253-268.

parent-worker interaction improved? and, 4) has this new approach to engaging families led to improved outcomes and faster permanency for children?

METHODOLOGY

In its examination of family engagement policy and practice, the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel held 81 meetings with stakeholders including parent support groups (parents and parent advocates), legal professionals (law guardians, parent's counsel, and City Bar Association Committees), Family Court Judges, ACS front-line and management staff (Child Protective Services (CPS) case workers and supervisors, field office managers, direct foster care case workers and supervisors, Third Party Reviewers, Office of Contract Case Management (OCACM case managers) and Division of Legal Services Adoption case managers (ACM case managers), academic faculty and researchers from local Schools of Law and Schools of Social Work, child welfare advocates, the Social Services Employees Union Local 371 and elected and appointed policymakers, as well as front-line staff and managers in contract foster care and preventive service programs (including Executive Directors, case workers, supervisors, and clinicians), and the Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies. We returned to stakeholders for follow up discussion, clarification and advice as we conducted our fieldwork and developed this report.

In preparing for field observations, the Panel reviewed:

- ACS protocols, educational material and guidelines, including protocols for 72-hour Risk Assessments, 72-hour Safety and 30-day Permanency FTCs, SPRs and Discharge Planning (Appendix A),
- ACS visiting guidelines (Appendix B),
- Materials developed by ACS for family members and foster parents including the Parent's Guide to ASFA and The Parent Handbook.
- ACS data on parent attendance at FTCs, SPRs, and parent/child/sibling visiting.
- ACS practice guidelines for foster care supervisors as well as Common Core Training curriculum and material related to family engagement.
- ACS's *Renewed Plan of Action* and the *Reform Plan Status Report*.

Background research was also enriched through weekly calls with our ACS liaison and numerous meetings with ACS executive staff - 10 meetings for information, clarification, and dialogue with Deputy Commissioners, Associate Commissioners and select staff on training, FTCs, and SPRs, and three meetings with Commissioner Bell and ACS Deputy Commissioners for discussion and reaction as the Panel developed its recommendations.

To conduct our fieldwork, the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel developed conference observation and meeting guidelines – one for 72-hour and 30-day FTCs and another for SPRs (Appendix C). Panel members were paired in teams of two and sent out to observe FTC and SPR proceedings. ACS flagged agencies holding FTCs and SPRs during the period of review and assisted the Panel in scheduling field observation visits. ACS also assisted the Panel in identifying contract agencies implementing innovative approaches to family engagement.

The Panel visited five ACS Protective Services Field Offices, met with caseworkers, supervisors, and CES workers and observed five 72-hour and 30-day FTCs.¹⁰ We visited seven contract agencies and one Direct Care Field Office, met with caseworkers, supervisors and parent

¹⁰ Approximately 750 Family Team Conferences are held monthly (400 72 hour conference and 350 30 day conferences).

advocates and observed 10 SPRs.¹¹ Panel members began field visit observations with an hour long discussion with CPS or Direct Foster Care Field Office staff or contract agency staff (CES, CPS case workers, supervisors, field office managers, direct care caseworkers, supervisors, and or contract agency supervisors and caseworkers) followed by observation of 72-hour and 30-day FTCs and SPRs which took place over an approximately two hour period.¹² In addition the Panel held three focus groups with parent advocates and parents, and one focus group with ACS and contract agency staff. The Panel also developed a list of questions that were incorporated into a survey of Parent Advocates administered by the ACS Office of Advocacy at its Parent Advocate Consortium (Appendix D).

Panel findings are characterized as observations to prevent over-generalization from the small sample of FTCs and SPRs studied. Panel observations distinguish between family engagement practice viewed in 72-hour and 30-day FTCs and that occurring in SPRs. Since ACS has undertaken a number of initiatives to improve family engagement practice that the Panel did not observe firsthand, they are discussed in the recommendation section of the report.

Panel observations characterize the implementation of the 72-hour Safety and 30-day Permanency FTCs and SPRs, identify barriers that limit or affect parent involvement in decision-making and highlight the need to improve the family engagement practice of front-line workers. The observations also identify promising approaches underway at ACS and in the contract agencies that promote parent participation and encourage the active participation of youth in care.

Many of the issues raised by the Panel in this report are known to ACS, it's contract agencies, and to Family Court Judges, attorneys, parents, advocates and others. It is our hope that this awareness coupled with our observations and recommendations will increase attention paid to and strengthen family engagement practice.

ACS GOALS FOR PARENT PARTICIPATION IN FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS

ACS has made great strides in implementing a new case conferencing model and efforts are underway and planned to increase parent participation and improve practice in the FTCs and SPRs. In the three years since this new approach to case conferencing was implemented, ACS data shows a significant increase in the number of 72-hour and 30-day FTCs and six-month SPRs held; an impressive accomplishment in a short period of time.¹³ ACS tracks family engagement by monitoring parent attendance at 72-hour and 30-day Family Team Conferences and six month SPRs as well as at parent/child visits. ACS data shows that 72-hour FTCs are achieving 73% parent attendance, while parent attendance at the 30-day FTCs is 60% and parent attendance at SPRs is 51%.¹⁴ While a notable accomplishment in the three years since the FTCs and SPRs were initiated, the ACS Reform Plan established even higher performance targets and envisioned greater parent participation, setting a goal of 85% parent attendance for 72-hour FTCs and 90%

¹¹ ACS case managers attend approximately 1,650 SPRs monthly – yet there is currently no way to calculate the entire universe of SPRs that are held monthly because the CONNECTIONS computer system has yet to be updated to collect this information.

¹² Parent consent to observe the FTCs and SPRs was obtained prior to Panel observation visits.

¹³ The number of 72-hour Family Team Conferences has increased from 4,744 72-Hour conferences held in 2000 to 5,232 held in 2002, with 74% parent participation in 2000 compared to 73% in 2002. The number of 30-day FTCs has also increased from 364 in 2000 to 3,216 in 2002, with 62% parent participation in 2000 compared to 60% in 2002. In the case of SPRs, data that are collected are not comparable. SPR data from CFY2002 shows that data was collected for 18,431 SPRs that were attended by OCACM/ACM case managers and direct care Third Party Reviewers. For SPRs, it is reported that 50% of children with a plan for reunification had a parent in attendance at the SPR.

¹⁴ Data provided by ACS Division of Child Protection and Division of Foster Care and Preventive Services.

parent attendance for 30-day FTCs, and setting an ultimate goal of 95% parent attendance at each FTC and SPR.¹⁵

NYCCWAP OBSERVATIONS ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

In a review of relevant material, data, protocols, stakeholder interviews and observations of FTCs and SPRs the Panel found that the 72-hour and 30-day FTCs and SPRs have not yet become the family engagement and family decision-making vehicles that ACS envisioned. Parents reported finding the FTCs and SPRs helpful, but the Panel observed that these case conferences had not yet become useful enough opportunities for determining and addressing the presence of current rather than initial safety concerns, planning around child and family service needs, establishing visiting plans or taking other actions needed to achieve quicker permanency.

72-HOUR AND 30-DAY FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATION I. HOLDING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES APPEARED ROUTINE AND WORKERS VIEWED THE CONFERENCES POSITIVELY.

OBSERVATION II. THE CONFERENCES OBSERVED WERE RUN AS THOUGH PLANNING DECISIONS ABOUT A CHILD'S RETURN HOME, OTHER PERMANENCY OPTIONS AND VISITING WERE MADE ELSEWHERE.

- WORKERS WERE UNCOMFORTABLE RAISING PERMANENCY QUESTIONS DURING THE CONFERENCES OBSERVED.
- WORKERS DID NOT USE PLAIN LANGUAGE TO ARTICULATE PERMANENCY GOALS IN THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES OBSERVED AND PERMANENCY DISCUSSIONS THAT OCCURRED WERE DISCONNECTED FROM FAMILY COURT PROCEEDINGS.
- VISIT PLANNING WAS NOT A CENTRAL FOCUS OF THE DISCUSSION AT FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES OBSERVED.

OBSERVATION III. THERE WAS WIDE VARIATION IN SKILL LEVEL AMONG STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR FACILITATING THE 72-HOUR AND 30-DAY CONFERENCES.

OBSERVATION IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALIZED CHILD/FAMILY SERVICE PLANS AND A SPECIFIC IMPLEMENTATION PLAN WAS LIMITED IN CONFERENCES OBSERVED.

SERVICE PLAN REVIEW OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATION I. SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS OBSERVED WERE USED FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW RATHER THAN AS THE OPPORTUNITY ENVISIONED BY ACS FOR PLANNING AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING BETWEEN ACS, CONTRACT AGENCY CASEWORKERS, AND PARENTS.

- SPR CONFERENCES OBSERVED FOCUSED ON A REVIEW OF PARENT AND CHILD COMPLIANCE WITH PREVIOUSLY ESTABLISHED SERVICE PLANS AND PARENTS WERE NOT ENCOURAGED TO IDENTIFY THEIR OWN NEEDS OR THE NEEDS OF THEIR CHILD.
- THE PLANNING OF PARENT-CHILD VISITS DID NOT REFLECT THE NEW ACS VISITING GUIDELINES IN SPRS OBSERVED.

¹⁵ *The Renewed Plan of Action*. Page 79-81.

OBSERVATION II. THERE WAS WIDE VARIATION IN THE SKILL LEVEL OF STAFF FACILITATING THE SPRS AND A LACK OF CLARITY ABOUT THE STAFF PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR FACILITATING THE SPRS.

OBSERVATION III. SERVICE PLANNING WAS DISCONNECTED FROM FAMILY COURT PROCEEDINGS AND THERE WAS LITTLE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SERVICE PLAN IMPLEMENTATION IN SPRS OBSERVED.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS REGARDING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

OBSERVATION I. ACS HAS DEVELOPED A POSITIVE WAY TO INVOLVE PARENTS AND SOLICIT THEIR ADVICE AND COUNSEL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACS POLICIES AND PROGRAMS THROUGH ITS OFFICE OF ADVOCACY.

OBSERVATION II. CASE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES OCCUR IN THREE ACS DIVISIONS AND IN THE CONTRACT AGENCIES CHALLENGING THE ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES, CONTINUITY AND COORDINATION OF CARE AND THE TIMELY FLOW OF INFORMATION.

OBSERVATION III. PROMISING MODELS FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES ARE IN USE BY SOME CONTRACT AGENCIES.

72-HOUR AND 30-DAY FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATION I. HOLDING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES APPEARED ROUTINE AND WORKERS VIEWED THE CONFERENCES POSITIVELY.

FTCs have been held in increasing number and with increasing regularity since they were first piloted in 1999. Panel focus groups and interviews with Child Protective Caseworkers, Supervisors, and Child Evaluation Specialists (CES) reflected broad support for and positive feelings about the 72-hour Safety and 30-day Permanency FTCs. Workers expressed the belief that bringing family members and parents together early on helped to ease the tension between the caseworker and the parent, making work with families easier and more productive.

OBSERVATION II. THE CONFERENCES OBSERVED WERE RUN AS THOUGH PLANNING DECISIONS RELATED TO A CHILD'S RETURN HOME, OTHER PERMANENCY OPTIONS OR VISITING WERE MADE ELSEWHERE.

- WORKERS WERE UNCOMFORTABLE RAISING PERMANENCY QUESTIONS DURING THE CONFERENCES OBSERVED.

Workers who facilitated or participated in the 72-hour Safety and 30-day Permanency FTCs observed did not use the conferences as an opportunity to reassess the reason for the child's removal, consider whether the conditions that warranted placement had been ameliorated or reconsider whether the child could be returned home. Time spent in 72-hour and 30-day FTCs observed was not used to address permanency questions or to reconsider the need for foster care placement, although the FTC protocol offers guidance on how to structure a permanency discussion between workers and parents. Rather than addressing permanency questions in these early meetings, workers used the conferences as an opportunity to bring family members and workers together to review the abuse or neglect allegation, review child and family service needs and outline a service plan.

- WORKERS DID NOT USE PLAIN LANGUAGE TO ARTICULATE PERMANENCY GOALS IN THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES OBSERVED AND THE PERMANENCY DISCUSSIONS THAT OCCURRED WERE DISCONNECTED FROM FAMILY COURT PROCEEDINGS.

Workers seemed to avoid explicitly stating permanency recommendations to parents or they referred to the permanency goal by number at the conferences observed.¹⁶ When parents and family members asked when their children would return home from foster care, workers gave the impression that they had little or no role in recommending that a child return home or stay in foster care longer and implied that the decision was made by the Family Court. Parents left the FTCs with little understanding of how long their child would be in foster care or what they had to do to secure their child's return home. Workers noted their own reluctance to articulate an early permanency recommendation to parents out of concern that ACS attorneys or the Family Court Judge could come to a different conclusion than the one reached by caseworkers and parents at the conference.

In interviews and through observation, workers expressed the view that the information they gathered and the plans they developed in the early conferences did not inform or influence the Family Court process. Parents, parent advocates, and child and parent counsel expressed concern about the lack of a process for sharing information gathered during the conferences with the Family Court Judge or attorneys. Although ACS protocol¹⁷ states that the service plan is to be shared with parents, Law Guardians, and parents' attorneys, often it is not.¹⁸ ACS protocol requires that information flow from the CES worker to the ACS Division of Legal Services to the Law Guardian to the parents' attorney and only if all of these parties agree can the report be forwarded and shared with the Family Court.

- VISIT PLANNING WAS NOT A CENTRAL FOCUS OF THE DISCUSSION AT FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES OBSERVED.

Parents and ACS and contract agency workers reported that parent-child visiting is the single most powerful incentive to promote parent attendance at FTCs. CES and CPS staff, family members and attorneys agreed that the ACS visiting guidelines were very good and wanted parent-child-sibling visitation planning to be consistent with the new ACS visiting guidelines. The ACS protocol for FTCs provides guidance to workers in framing a question about how visiting can be used to support permanency. Yet, visit planning was not a central part of the discussion at the conferences observed.

¹⁶ The permanency goal assigned to each child in care identifies by numerical identification whether or not the child will be returned to his/her parents (01), returned to an able caretaker (02), freed for adoption (04), or returned to a relative (12). When a child can not return to a parent, find a permanent placement with a relative or guardian or be adopted, he/she will have the goal of independent living (03) or for youth placed in residential treatment facilities that have greater needs, they goal of placement in custodial care (05) may be established.

¹⁷ According to the Family Team Conference protocol, the CES is responsible for sending the conference service plan agreement or ACS recommended service plan to parents/caretakers, child (ren) (when age appropriate), ACS staff, foster care worker, DLS attorney, and to include the plan in the case file. The DLS attorney is responsible for sharing the service plan agreement with the parent's attorneys and the law guardian. If there is no objection from the attorneys, the signed service plan agreement is shared with the Family Court.

¹⁸ According to ACS protocol, the CES worker is responsible for sharing the service plan with parents/caretakers and the DLS attorney who then shares the plan with the parent's counsel and the law guardian. The service plan is shared with the Family Court only if all attorneys agree to do so. Notably, after the Family Team Conferences a "conference report" is also completed by CES and received by CPS caseworkers and supervisors, ACS managers and deputy directors, and by the foster care agency worker (as per ACS protocol). Conference reports include case overview information (family composition, pertinent family history, safety and risk factors, reasonable efforts to prevent placement, why alternatives to placement were rejected, current status of the case including the level of placement and explanation for sibling separation) and case conference information (barriers to service, visiting plan, education plan, service plan rationale, among other topics) and are updated after the 72 hour Child Safety and 30 Day Permanency Family Team Conference. According to ACS policy, the Family Team Conferences are considered confidential and conference reports are not shared with parents/caretakers, the DLS attorney, law guardian or parent's attorneys or the Family Court.

OBSERVATION III. THERE WAS WIDE VARIATION IN SKILL LEVEL AMONG STAFF RESPONSIBLE FOR FACILITATING THE 72-HOUR AND 30-DAY CONFERENCES.

ACS has invested in the hiring of MSWs and in extensive staff development for its CES workers. Many CES workers have developed strong facilitation skills and they were able to keep the conversation focused, to communicate directly, to handle complex emotions, and explain to parents, with ease and confidence, the requirements and implications of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), while others lacked these skills. Even when workers had good facilitation skills, taking up highly charged emotional issues with parents in these early conferences was challenging. While conflict avoidance was most evident at the 72-hour conferences when emotions related to a child's recent removal were very raw, this practice was also evident at the 30-day conferences observed.

OBSERVATION IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALIZED CHILD/FAMILY SERVICE PLANS AND A SPECIFIC IMPLEMENTATION PLAN WAS LIMITED IN CONFERENCES OBSERVED.

Panel observations of the FTCs identified challenges in ensuring individualized service planning, continuity of care, consistency in the flow of information and transfer of care coordination and case management responsibility between ACS workers from different divisions (CPS to OCACM workers) and between ACS and contract agency workers. ACS policy delineates the person responsible for specific tasks in the service plan, requires that all participants leave the conference with a copy of the service plan and prompts the CES worker to ask participants if they have questions about the plan. Although ACS policy and protocol define roles and service planning responsibilities for ACS and contract agency workers attending the FTCs, these roles and responsibilities were not explained in simple terms to parents attending the conferences observed. Consequently, some parents left the conferences not knowing to whom they should speak to answer questions, get additional information about services or other issues, or whether or not someone from ACS or the contract agency was responsible for making sure that the service plan agreed to during the conference would be carried out.

According to the FTC protocol, the ACS Division of Child Protective Services (CPS) CES worker is to convene the 72-hour and 30-day FTCs. The CPS caseworker is to function as the case manager for the first 90 days the child is in foster care. CPS workers and supervisors, parents, ACS and contract agency workers, ACS staff and other service providers are allowed to attend the FTCs. After the first 90 days in care the CPS worker is to transfer the case management responsibility to an ACS Office of Contract Case Management (OCACM) case manager. The OCACM worker responsible for contract agency case management does not attend the 72-hour or 30-day FTCs because he/she has not yet been assigned to the case. Contract agency representatives (either an intake worker or the caseworkers assigned to a case) are invited to attend both the 72-hour and the 30-day conferences.

While the Panel observed contract agency Intake Workers attending the FTCs, they did not take an active role or interact with parents. In follow-up interviews and focus groups with contract agency workers, staff explained the intent of the ACS policy as giving control of the FTCs and the planning that takes place in them to CPS workers.¹⁹ This incorrect interpretation creates passivity

¹⁹While a three-day training curriculum has been developed on Family Team Conferences for ACS and contract caseworkers, contract agency staff have not benefited from this training component to date. Between 1/02-9/02, 210 ACS caseworkers received training on Family Team Conferences.

among contract agency workers in the conferences. In thinking about the FTCs, CPS and contract agency workers expressed concerns that the contract agency caseworker directly responsible for the case does not usually attend the 72-hour or 30-day FTCs. This means that the contract agency caseworker was not actively involved in the early service planning, and service planning for the child and family often started over when the contract agency caseworker receives the case. The absence of OCACM case managers also appeared to affect the continuity of care and slow the implementation of the FTC service plan recommendations. Limited resources were cited by ACS and contract agencies as limiting the availability and attendance of OCACM and contract agency workers at FTCs.

SERVICE PLAN REVIEW OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATION I. SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS²⁰ OBSERVED WERE USED FOR ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW RATHER THAN AS THE OPPORTUNITY ENVISIONED BY ACS FOR PLANNING AND SHARED DECISION-MAKING BETWEEN ACS, CONTRACT AGENCY CASEWORKERS, AND PARENTS.

- SPR CONFERENCES OBSERVED FOCUSED ON A REVIEW OF PARENT AND CHILD COMPLIANCE WITH PREVIOUSLY ESTABLISHED SERVICE PLANS AND PARENTS WERE NOT ENCOURAGED TO IDENTIFY THEIR OWN NEEDS OR THE NEEDS OF THEIR CHILD.

The SPRs observed were used to review parent compliance with service plans and parent/child visit schedules instead of providing an opportunity to amend the service plan based on changed circumstances or new information, increase the frequency or change the location of parent/child visits, or revise or rethink permanency goals. In the SPRs observed, service plans appeared to have been developed before the conference giving the impression that parent attendance and participation was unnecessary and that parents had no role in service planning for themselves or their children.

On the issue of permanency, the SPRs observed were used to plan the next six months in care rather than in consideration of the circumstances that might warrant immediate return home including: *What is the current safety situation of the child? Why is the child in foster care today? What are the barriers to achieving permanency? How will the service plan help the family reach their permanency goal and within what time frame will permanency be achieved? Is the current permanency goal realistic? If not, should the permanency goal or service plan be changed?*

The comfort level of parents appeared to affect their willingness to participate actively in the SPRs. In SPRs observed, workers used numerical goals to describe the child's permanency plan, used acronyms or jargon that was not clear to parents and referred to parents in the third person.²¹ Parents who knew their workers or who brought a friend or another family member to the SPR appeared more comfortable and willing to participate in the proceedings.

²⁰ An SPR is held 90 days after placement and every six months while a child is in foster care. Parents, caretakers, children over 10, individuals providing family support, direct foster care workers and supervisors, other involved ACS staff, the contract foster care worker and supervisors, Third Party Reviewers and OCACM case managers and supervisors may attend (Appendix A). While the protocol holds the case worker or supervisors responsible for determining who among the many workers in attendance will facilitate the SPR, the protocol requires that Third Party Reviewer and case managers ensure that specific permanency issues are addressed at the SPR.

²¹ As noted in the earlier discussion of Family Team Conferences, the permanency goals of children in care are often referred to by numerical identification 01, 02, 03, 04, 05, or 12 during the SPRs. Instead of clarify the permanency goal, this practice has the opposite effect and confuses parents and family members.

Parents and children attending SPRs observed were asked to sign off on the service plan before the SPR concluded. Little time was spent walking parents or youth through the implementation activities outlined in the service plan or identifying the worker responsible for follow up. Parents and youth were unsure of who was responsible for helping them seek and secure services, how the service plan related to the child's permanency goal or how much longer the child would stay in foster care. The practice observed was not consistent with SPR protocol requirements that the Third Party Reviewer along with the ACS case manager, ensure that "a likely date by which the child may safely return home, be placed for adoption, legal guardianship, or legal custody" be discussed before the SPR concludes.²²

- THE PLANNING OF PARENT-CHILD VISITS DID NOT REFLECT THE NEW ACS VISITING GUIDELINES IN SPRs OBSERVED.

In SPRs observed, Parent-child visits were not scheduled with the frequency or variety of locations called for in the ACS visiting guidelines. The promise of the new ACS visiting guidelines as a way to incentivize parent attendance at SPRs and expedite permanency was limited by reliance on office-based visit locations and supervised visiting.

OBSERVATION II THERE WAS WIDE VARIATION IN THE SKILL LEVEL OF STAFF FACILITATING THE SPRs AND A LACK OF CLARITY ABOUT THE STAFF PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR FACILITATING THE SPRs.

The SPR protocol requires that a Third Party Reviewer attend every SPR and, along with the ACS Case Manager, "actively question participants about their actions and activities during the past six months, ensure that participants stay focused on the child's need for a permanent, safe and stable home and insist that decisions around permanency for the child not be postponed indefinitely."²³ The SPR protocol does not assign the role of facilitator to a specific staff person and instead allows the contract agency to select a facilitator from among the many workers required to attend: contract agency supervisor or contract agency caseworker, or Third Party Reviewer or OCACM case manager. In the SPRs observed, facilitation was handled in many different ways by contract agencies and facilitation skill levels varied markedly from agency to agency.

Follow-up discussion about the SPR protocol identified gaps in understanding and practice around SPR facilitation. ACS suggested that it should be the contract agency supervisors or contract agency caseworkers who facilitate the SPR.²⁴ Yet this responsibility is not specified in the SPR protocol or commonly understood by parents or contract agency or ACS workers. Nor is it consistent with ACS policy for SPRs held for children in direct foster care, in which the Third Party Reviewer facilitates the SPR. Furthermore, proficiency in family engagement and facilitation at SPR conferences requires focused training not currently offered to contract agency workers by the ACS Satterwhite Training Academy.²⁵ Contract agency caseworkers and supervisors have

²² The SPR protocol requires the Third Party Reviewer and ACS case manager to ensure that the following topics are covered: the safety of the child (identify what prevents a child from leaving foster care), the extent to which the agency, parents, and child are in compliance with the case plan developed at the prior SPR, the extent to which the parents have made progress of the past six months toward correcting the conditions which led to the child's placement, and the likely date by which the child may safely return home, or be placed for adoption, legal guardianship, or legal custody, and identify the Family Court activity that has taken place since the last SPR.

²³ Family Team Conferences. Service Plan Protocol (First Edition) September 2000 (9/8/00 Draft)

²⁴ Notably in the case of SPRs for children in direct foster care, it is ACS policy that the Third Party Reviewer facilitates the SPRs.

²⁵ ACS's Satterwhite Academy has developed a Common Core curriculum comprised of components on classroom and on-the-job training for caseworkers, specialty classes on protective, preventive, and foster care, a supervisory core, and core essentials for experienced case workers and managers. Some of the training components are still being piloted. The caseworkers core is intended to provide 20 days of classroom training and 5 weeks of on the job training (OJT); the OJT portion of the training is in its

benefited from training on SPRs,²⁶ but specialized training on group and conference facilitation is available only to ACS Child Evaluation Specialists.²⁷ Facilitation training is also unavailable for other ACS staff who participate in SPRs including the Third Party Reviewer and OCACM and ACM case managers whose role at the SPR is to ensure that the conference stays focused on permanency.

OBSERVATION III. SERVICE PLANNING WAS DISCONNECTED FROM FAMILY COURT PROCEEDINGS AND THERE WAS LITTLE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR SERVICE PLAN IMPLEMENTATION IN SPRS OBSERVED.

Parents, parent advocates, and child welfare attorneys expressed concern that there is no routine mechanism or process for sharing the information gathered in the SPR conference with the Family Court Judge or with attorneys. While the SPR protocol identifies the following recipients of SPR reports: parents, foster parents, children over the age of 10 years and a relative to whom the child will be discharged, it does not specify the party (ACS or contract agency worker) responsible for sharing or transmitting this information to them. Further, the SPR protocol does not promote or address the conditions under which an SPR report may be shared with the Family Court or attorneys or specify the party responsible for transmitting the report to them.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS REGARDING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

OBSERVATION I. ACS HAS DEVELOPED A POSITIVE WAY TO INVOLVE PARENTS AND SOLICIT THEIR ADVICE AND COUNSEL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACS POLICIES AND PROGRAMS THROUGH ITS OFFICE OF ADVOCACY.

The ACS Office of Advocacy seeks direction, solicits guidance, and secures input into ACS policy, protocols and programs from parents through regular meetings, surveys and other means of reaching out to and engaging parents. The Office of Advocacy Parent Advisory Workgroup has developed the ACS Parent Principles and The Parent Handbook. Its members provide a parent presence on the ACS Advisory Board. While well received by parents and workers, The Parent Handbook has not had the broad reach envisioned by ACS because resource constraints have limited broad distribution and translation into multiple languages. The ACS Office of Advocacy recently convened its first Parent Specialist Consortium²⁸ to better understand the role parent advocates play in the child welfare system.²⁹

pilot phase. Specialty training opportunities, with the exception of preventive service training, are also in pilot form; while the supervisory classes and core essentials for experienced case workers and supervisors have been fully developed.

²⁶ In 2000, 366 caseworkers and supervisors received SPR training of which 204 were from contract agencies and 160 from ACS. A 1 ½ day training curriculum (*Asking the Tough Questions: Hearing the Tough Answers*) was also purchased from the National Association of Foster Care Reviewers and conducted by a trainer from the Child Welfare Institute in May and June of 2002. 85 staff (including 27 ACS third-party reviewers, 33 ACS case managers and 27 voluntary agency Third-Party Reviewers, and 1 academy trainer) completed this training. From June 2002-2003, 378 supervisors received Common Core training (172 of whom were contract agency supervisors) with the agency meeting its milestone to train 1/3 of contract agency supervisors.

²⁷ 148 CES workers received training on Family Team Conferences between 1/02-9/02 and 46 received training on facilitation during that same time period.

²⁸ Specifically, the consortium sought to determine how contract agencies recruit and train individuals for Parent Advocate positions, the role and function of Parent Advocates in contract agencies, source of funding for Parent Advocates and workload and supervision of Parent Advocates. 21-parent specialist, 21 parent specialist coordinators, and 17 guest-observers participated in the consortium.

²⁹ Consortium findings suggest that most candidates for these positions have been identified by contract agencies because they are parents who have been successfully reunified with their children. Individuals in these positions hold a caseload of 5-7 families and they play a range of roles including escort, trainer, and support group leaders, and family-to-family trainers among others. In addition, most parent advocates and parent specialists first come into contact with families at intake or 72-Hour Family Team Conference and they receive training from a variety of different sources (ACS, contract agencies, other city agencies, or consultants, and DYCD offers family development credential training).

OBSERVATION II. CASE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES OCCUR IN THREE ACS DIVISIONS AND IN THE CONTRACT AGENCIES CHALLENGING THE ENGAGEMENT OF FAMILIES, CONTINUITY AND COORDINATION OF CARE AND TIMELY FLOW OF INFORMATION.

The number of cases, volume of activity to manage, and number of contract agency programs to monitor accounts for the historical differentiation of case management functions into separate divisions at ACS. ACS' Division of Child Protection-CPS workers and Division of Foster Care and Preventive Services-OCACM workers and Division of Legal Services-ACM workers provide case management at different times during the child's stay in foster care. For the first 90 days of placement, the CPS worker functions as a case manager and is responsible for working with contract agencies to make sure that the initial service plan is developed and implemented. CPS caseworkers attend the 72-hour and 30 day FTCs. After 90 days, this responsibility is transferred to the OCACM worker who will function as the case manager and work with the contract agency worker to follow through on the child and family service plan. OCACM case managers attend the SPRs. Finally, ACM workers take on case management responsibility for children freed for adoption and they too work with contract agencies.

The case management, case planning and care coordination activities that flow from this structure contributes to discontinuities in practice and inconsistency in the flow of information and in the transfer of care coordination, oversight and case management responsibilities from division to division in ACS and from ACS to contract agencies. Specific challenges arising from the hand-off across Divisions includes: the perception among parents and youth that their ACS worker changes frequently; limited accountability for FTC and SPR follow-up; and, frequent communication difficulties among ACS workers and between ACS workers and contract agency workers.

OBSERVATION III. PROMISING MODELS FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES ARE IN USE BY SOME CONTRACT AGENCIES.

PARENT ADVOCATES – Parent advocates have been hired by contract agencies to increase parent involvement. The Panel observed variation around job descriptions and in the case-related functions performed by parent advocates working in the contract agencies. Some agencies employed parent advocates who had children in foster care while others did not require personal experience with the child welfare system. Some agencies used parent advocates to prompt compliance or mediate discord while other agencies had parent advocates encourage and reinforce parent participation in the decisions around their case. Parent advocates played many different roles: educator, coach, and troubleshooter. When the roles were defined in this way, parent advocates were charged with keeping parents informed of the foster care process and underscoring the importance of parent attendance and participation in FTCs, at visits, in SPRs and at Court appearances. They also provided parents with support in the FTCs and SPRs and helped parents to obtain public benefits and needed services. Many contract agencies relied on savings achieved through faster permanency through the Safe Timely Adoption and Reunification or STAR program to pay the salaries of parent advocates.³⁰ STAR incentive funding, used by contract agencies to support parent advocates, was eliminated in Fiscal 2003.

YOUTH FACILITATORS - One agency developed a creative approach to youth and family engagement around SPRs. They developed a way for older youth to take the lead in establishing the service plan and also created an opportunity for youth to serve as the SPR facilitator. A form itemizing the

³⁰ The Safe Timely Adoption Reunification program established goals for contract agencies to expedite permanency via adoption and reunification. Contract agencies that met these goals were allowed to reinvest savings achieved through timely permanency into other agencies programs.

topics to be addressed during the SPR was developed to prompt the youth facilitator about issues to cover. While the discussion in the SPR was not limited to the topics listed, this method encouraged youth to take the lead in identifying their needs and issues of concern and ways to address them in the service plan developed.

TREATING THE FAMILY– Some agencies focused on the behavioral and mental health needs of children and parents and emphasized an approach that used the SPRs to serve the family as a unit. In general, agency staff had advanced clinical skills. Workers encouraged and promoted partnering between parents and foster parents, bonding between parent and child and fostering sibling relationships. Parents were also assisted in expressing and planning around their own needs, developing their own resources and planning the next steps for their family.

PARENT AND FOSTER PARENT TEAMS – Some agencies modeled partnerships between parents and foster parents. Parents involved in a team approach reported that working with their child’s foster parent is a key to success – helping to minimize the trauma of separation their child experiences, providing them with mentoring assistance and positive role models, and helping to keep them close to their children. Parents and foster parents involved in the team approach also expressed the belief that good teamwork helped support parent efforts to improve their lives and in so doing help ensure that children are returned home as quickly as possible.

NYCCWAP RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The significant increase in the number of FTCs and SPRs held and the growing numbers of parents attending these case conferences reflect sustained effort and a commitment by ACS to create regular and ongoing opportunities for parents to participate in important decisions about their children and their future as a family. The Panel found that while this new approach to case conferencing is reaching more parents and holds great promise, more work needs to be done to strengthen this important foundation of reform. The Panel observed that a gap remains between the aspirations for family engagement as envisioned by ACS and parents’ experience.

RECOMMENDATION I. MAXIMIZE THE USE OF FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS AS DECISION-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS AND INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP INDIVIDUALIZED CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICE PLANS.

- FRAME SPECIFIC PERMANENCY QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED DURING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS.
- AMEND ACS PROTOCOLS TO CLARIFY THE PROCESS FOR SHARING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEW REPORTS WITH ACS ATTORNEYS, LAW GUARDIANS, PARENTS’ COUNSEL AND THE FAMILY COURT JUDGE PRESIDING OVER THE CASE.

RECOMMENDATION II. STREAMLINE AND BETTER COORDINATE ACS CASE MANAGEMENT, CASE PLANNING, AND CARE COORDINATION ACTIVITIES AND CONSIDER WAYS TO IMPROVE CARE COORDINATION THROUGH THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY.

- RE-THINK CASE MANAGEMENT, PLANNING AND CARE COORDINATION FUNCTIONS AT ACS TO PROMOTE CONTINUITY OF CARE.
- CLARIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN FTC AND SPR PROTOCOLS TO ENABLE CHILD EVALUATION SPECIALISTS (CES) AND ACS CASE MANAGERS (ACM, OCACM, CPS) TO PROMOTE CONTINUITY OF CARE AND FORGE STRONGER LINKS BETWEEN FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS.

RECOMMENDATION III. BUILD ON ACS' WORK WITH PARENTS AND PARENT ADVOCATES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF CONFERENCES AND SPRS.

- REINSTITUTE INCENTIVE FUNDING TO PROMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND PERMANENCY.
- INCREASE PARENT ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION AT FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SPRS TO MEET THE ACS GOAL OF 95%
- ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO BRING A FAMILY MEMBER OR SUPPORTER TO THE FTCS AND SPRS.
- STIMULATE AND INCREASE PARENT ATTENDANCE AT FTCS AND SPRS THROUGH VISIT INNOVATIONS LIKE VISITING HOSTS AND CHANGING THE FREQUENCY OR LOCATION OF PARENT-CHILD VISITS.
- REPRINT, TRANSLATE AND DISTRIBUTE THE ACS PARENT HANDBOOK TO EVERY PARENT SERVED BY ACS OR ITS CONTRACT AGENCIES.
- DEVELOP MATERIALS TO INFORM PARENTS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS AND PROVIDE GUIDANCE ABOUT WAYS TO PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN THEM.

RECOMMENDATION IV. CONTINUE TO PROMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE THROUGH TRAINING.

- INCREASE SUPPORT TO TRAIN ACS AND CONTRACT AGENCY WORKERS AND CREATE A MECHANISM FOR SHARING PRACTICE MODELS BETWEEN ACS AND CONTRACT AGENCY PROGRAMS.

RECOMMENDATION V. DEVELOP FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS AND RELEASE REGULAR REPORTS ON PROGRESS MADE.

- UPDATE THE ACS STRATEGIC PLAN AND OTHER REPORTS WITH NEW FAMILY ENGAGEMENT GOALS AND INDICATORS FOR IMPROVING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND CHILD WELFARE REFORMS.
- DEVELOP A MECHANISM TO TRACK AND RATE THE QUALITY OF THE CONFERENCES AND SPRS.

IMPROVING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

RECOMMENDATION I. MAXIMIZE THE USE OF FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS AS DECISION MAKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS AND INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP INDIVIDUALIZED CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICE PLANS.

- FRAME SPECIFIC PERMANENCY QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED DURING THE FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS.

Explicit permanency questions must be addressed at the 72-hour and 30-day conferences and at each SPR. When a child comes into foster care the expectation must be explicit that permanency should be achieved as soon as possible and appropriate. The FTCs and SPRs provide an important opportunity to make permanency decisions. To expedite permanency, specific questions must be considered at each FTC and SPR including: *Can the child go home today? If not, what are the barriers to the child's return home? What must be done to accomplish reunification? Who is responsible for making this happen? Other questions must be addressed as well: Is it necessary to move toward another permanency goal or a TPR? And if so, what are the barriers to achieving the permanency goal that has been identified? What must be done to accomplish this goal? Who is responsible for making this happen?* The FTC protocol provides useful guidance to workers about how to frame a permanency discussion at the 72-hour and 30-day Family Team Conferences.

The sample reunification planning questions posed in the ACS Family Team Conference protocol are helpful in this regard: *Why did the child come into care? How long has the child been in care? Who are the stakeholders in planning for reunification? What is the recommended permanency plan for this child, at this time? What strengths and supports does the family have that could support post-reunification parenting? What does the family identify as their needs and what do they*

want to happen? What changes have occurred since placement that would support reunification at this time? What problems, gaps or vulnerabilities exist that preclude reunification at this time? What conditions are necessary for the child to return safely home? What actions/services are needed to close these gaps or to support family functioning post-reunification? How can visitation be used to support the permanency plan? These questions should become the basis for revising the SPR protocol and for additional staff training to support discussions with parents about permanency at FTCs and SPRs.

- AMEND ACS PROTOCOLS TO CLARIFY THE PROCESS FOR SHARING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCE AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEW REPORTS WITH ACS ATTORNEYS, LAW GUARDIANS, PARENTS' COUNSEL AND THE FAMILY COURT JUDGE PRESIDING OVER THE CASE.

The Panel observed that many parents, law guardians, ACS attorneys and parents' counsel do not receive service plans and further, that information gathered in FTCs and SPRs is not used to inform Family Court proceedings. To improve the quality of decision-making and service planning and inform the Family Court process, the permanency goal, service plans and other information gathered at FTCs and SPRs must be shared.

Since 2002, orientations by The Legal Aid Society for new attorneys and social workers have included a presentation of FTCs and the importance of using the service plans developed in Family Court proceedings. And between June and December 2002, the ACS Family Team Conference Coordinator trained Legal Aid attorneys and social workers and ACS Division of Legal Services attorneys on the FTCs and the importance of introducing the service plans developed to the Family Court. At that time, the DLS attorneys reported receiving the FTC service plans. Similar training on SPRs has not occurred and continued training and reinforcement must occur on the need for attorneys and the Family Court Judge to have the most recent FTC and service planning information.

The Panel recommends developing a protocol for sharing the service plans developed in FTCs and SPRs with attorneys involved in the case and with the Family Court. The service plans should be shared in a timely manner even in instances when a Court appearance date does not coincide with the date of a FTC or SPR. Additionally, ACS protocol for both FTCs and SPRs should clearly identify who should receive a copy of the service plan and who (which worker) is responsible for transmitting this information to the different parties and the Family Court. A mechanism must also be developed to ensure that information presented in the FTC conference report (i.e., the visiting plan, child's educational plan, barriers to securing services identified as needed, as well as family's strengths) is also shared with the Family Court in a manner that does not compromise the parent's or child's legal standing. A mechanism should also be developed to ensure that information regarding Court decisions flows back to case planners and case managers (including CPS workers, OCACM and ACM case managers and contract agency staff). Finally, consideration should be given to establishing early mediation for select cases with the ability to dismiss findings of abuse and neglect, when child safety or neglect concerns in these cases have been addressed.³¹

³¹ It should be noted that ACS is interested in establishing 2 pilot projects in high need districts (districts with high placement rates) with the aim to divert or achieve early resolution to court involvement by building on the results of the 72 hour case conference. These pilots are in the initial planning stages and stakeholder agreement has not yet been secured.

RECOMMENDATION II: STREAMLINE AND BETTER COORDINATE ACS CASE MANAGEMENT, CASE PLANNING, AND CARE COORDINATION ACTIVITIES AND CONSIDER WAYS TO IMPROVE CARE COORDINATION THROUGH THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY.

- RE-THINK ACS CASE MANAGEMENT, PLANNING AND CARE COORDINATION FUNCTIONS AT ACS TO IMPROVE THE FLOW OF INFORMATION AND PROMOTE CONTINUITY OF CARE.

The Panel believes that a lack of continuity and coordination in case planning and case handling triggers the loss of vital time necessary to expedite permanency and provide services to parents and children. The Panel supports ACS in its consideration of ways to improve these important case-handling functions and support care coordination through the use of technology (fax, e-mail, Connections) to improve the continuity of care, timely flow of information, case management, planning and care coordination as well as family engagement and child and family outcomes. Better coordination across divisions at ACS and between ACS and the contract agencies, stronger connections when cases are transferred across divisions and between workers and earlier involvement of OCACM and ACM workers can improve permanency outcomes and assist parents in their understanding of the foster care process. The ACS Division of Child Protection is working with OCACM and ACM to identify the circumstances in which OCACM and ACM workers would be invited to attend the FTCs. ACS has proposed that OCACM workers be invited to FTCs in cases where it appears that the child will remain in foster care for an extended period of time rather than in cases where swift reunification is expected. Under the ACS proposal, ACM workers will be invited to FTCs in cases of abandoned babies and other cases where expedited adoption is the goal. However, budget constraints are likely to limit the attendance of OCACM and ACM workers at FTCs.

- CLARIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN FTC AND SPR PROTOCOLS TO ENABLE CHILD EVALUATION SPECIALISTS (CES) AND ACS CASE MANAGERS (ACM, OCACM, CPS) TO PROMOTE CONTINUITY OF CARE AND FORGE STRONGER LINKS BETWEEN FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS.

Clarification of responsibilities and increased attention to permanency is needed to infuse the case conferences with a greater sense of urgency. ACS and contract agency workers must make clear to parents and youth the purpose and intent of FTCs and SPRs, ensure that specific permanency questions are addressed at each proceeding, ensure that responsibility for service plan and follow-up activities is clear and that tasks are completed in a timely manner. Further, clarification of ACS staff roles and responsibilities for case handling across divisions and re-thinking the case management and care coordination functions provided by CPS, OCACM, ACM workers at different points in the case can improve continuity of care.

The assignment and differentiation of *convener, facilitator and permanency advocate* roles for workers may be worth considering. The FTC protocol describes the role and responsibilities of the CES worker as a facilitator. Building on this approach and extending the staff roles of facilitator, convener and permanency advocate to both FTCs and SPRs could engage more parents, help parents participate actively in permanency decision-making and service planning, prepare parents for conferences and SPRs and manage the conferences in a way that encourages parent participation.

RECOMMENDATION III: BUILD ON ACS' WORK WITH PARENTS AND PARENT ADVOCATES TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF CONFERENCES AND SPRS.

- REINSTITUTE INCENTIVE FUNDING TO PROMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND PERMANENCY.

The Safe Timely Reunification Program (STAR) was an incentive program initiated by the city in 2000 that allowed contract agencies to retain savings achieved through timely reunification and adoption and reinvest these funds in program enhancements. Many contract agencies used STAR funds to develop new ways to engage parents. One approach used was to create new staff positions for parent advocates. STAR incentive funding was eliminated in November 2002 due to fiscal constraints. Contract agencies have begun to layoff parent advocates because of this loss of funds. The Panel recommends that ACS re-visit the decision to eliminate the STAR incentive funding and restore funding as a way to promote expedited permanency, hire parent advocates and otherwise encourage parent involvement.

- INCREASE PARENT ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION AT FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SPRS TO MEET THE ACS GOAL OF 95%.

Parent attendance should increase and active participation should improve as the quality of the FTCs and SPRs improve. Efforts are underway at ACS to improve attendance and increase parent participation. ACS held focus groups in December 2002 with CES and CPS Field Office managers to identify strategies to increase parent attendance and participation in the FTCs. A list of successful strategies was shared with CES managers to be used by all CES workers. Recently, ACS has translated FTC invitation letters and notification of parent non-attendance into Arabic, Chinese, Creole, Spanish and Russian and will soon distribute them to CES workers citywide to assist with outreach to parents.

These efforts are positive and should be extended to support contract agencies responsible for the SPR conferences. Translating notices about SPRs into multiple languages could improve outreach efforts. ACS should work with contract agencies to determine which strategies work best to increase parent attendance at SPRs and share approaches that engage families successfully among agencies. .

- ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO BRING A FAMILY MEMBER OR SUPPORTER TO THE FTCS AND SPRS.

A sense of security and comfort prompted parents to actively participate in identifying their family's strengths, service needs and permanency goals during the conferences and SPRs. Parents should be encouraged to bring someone to the FTCs and SPRs who can play a supportive role for them – a service provider, family member, community member, parent advocate or other person of the parent/caretakers choosing.

- STIMULATE AND INCREASE PARENT ATTENDANCE AT FTCS AND SPRS AND THROUGH VISITING INNOVATIONS INCLUDING THE USE OF VISITING HOSTS AND CHANGING THE FREQUENCY OR LOCATION OF PARENT/CHILD VISITS.

Parent engagement can be improved through regular opportunities for interaction between foster parents and parents, workers and parents, and parents and children. These interactions can be modeled and reinforced at FTCs and SPRs and in visit plans. The visiting guidelines and questions outlined in the FTC protocol provide a broadly accepted framework for best practice. Generally stated, the visiting guidelines support the principle that parents should have a role in determining where, when and how often visiting will take place.

Several contract agencies have incorporated a visiting host model into their FTC and SPR visit planning activities. The visiting host is an individual identified by the family or contract agency that

convenes parent/child and sibling visits and who accompanies the parent throughout the visit. Visiting hosts are identified during the conferences and SPRs. ACS has used visit planning to promote parent attendance and participation at FTCs and SPRs through a visiting plan contest held for CES workers. ACS could provide guidance on the use of visit hosts, innovative visit planning and other approaches to visiting that increase parent attendance and involvement at FTCs and SPRs. Further, visit plan training and coaching now provided to CES workers could be extended to OCACM, ACM and contract agency workers.

- REPRINT, TRANSLATE AND DISTRIBUTE THE PARENT HANDBOOK TO EVERY PARENT SERVED BY ACS OR ITS CONTRACT AGENCIES.

The ACS Office of Advocacy, through its Parent Workgroup and through parent representation on the ACS Advisory Board solicits parent input regularly and uses this feedback to develop agency policy, protocols and informational materials. ACS should continue to seek advice and counsel from parents and parent advocates. ACS has secured funding from New Yorkers for Children to improve parent engagement by translating The Parent Handbook into multiple languages. The Parent Handbook should be made available to every parent served by ACS and the contract agencies.

- DEVELOP MATERIAL TO INFORM PARENTS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTENDING FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES AND SERVICE PLAN REVIEWS AND PROVIDE GUIDANCE ABOUT WAYS TO PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN THEM.

There is no single source of information distributed to parents that underscores the importance of their attendance and participation in the FTCs and SPRs. While ACS has developed and distributed a two-page pamphlet on the 72-hour and 30-day conferences to parents, these pamphlets discuss the purpose of the conferences in general terms but do not emphasize the critical need for active participation by parents or explain the connection between parent attendance and participation at FTCs and SPRs, service and permanency planning and the child's timely return from foster care or other permanency options.

The Panel recommends that ACS work with parents to develop easy to read and understand material that underscores the importance of parent attendance and participation in the FTCs and SPRs. This material should be distributed to every parent served by ACS or its contract agencies.

RECOMMENDATION IV: CONTINUE TO PROMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICE THROUGH TRAINING.

- INCREASE SUPPORT TO TRAIN ACS AND CONTRACT AGENCY WORKERS AND CREATE A MECHANISM FOR SHARING PRACTICE MODELS BETWEEN ACS AND CONTRACT AGENCY PROGRAMS.

Panel observations suggest that ACS and contract agency staff would benefit from additional training, as there is great variation in the skill level of ACS and contract agency workers who facilitate and participate in the FTCs and SPRs. The Panel also noted the need to better integrate case practice around parent engagement as an accompaniment to classroom training on parent engagement. ACS believes that the use of Master's level Social Workers as facilitators and the revised Tasks and Standards for CES workers have added value to the FTCs. The SPRs have not benefited from similar attention or resources.

The Panel observed creative approaches to family engagement in use by contract agencies yet, there is no method for sharing this information across agencies or among the workforce.

Mechanisms must also be developed to identify and share best family engagement practice with ACS and contract agency workers. Training provided to contract agency supervisors and caseworkers must be comparable to the training provided to ACS staff and training funds should be used in ways that increase training opportunities for contract agency and ACS workers. Workers who take on the roles of convener, facilitator and permanency advocate will need training on timely permanency, on concurrent planning required by ASFA, effectively engaging families, and group facilitation. The training curriculum for foster parents, caseworkers, and supervisors and training provided to ACS attorneys, Law Guardians, and parent counsel could better incorporate the first-hand experience of parents, youth, and parent advocates.

Finally, ACS has established a series of committees, subcommittees, and work groups³² to encourage CES workers to play a more active role in program development and allow for specialization in fields of interest (including conference protocol, conference forms, community engagement, visiting, education, early permanency and institutional placement).³³ ACS has also offered CES workers elective training seminars and has planned a lecture series on best practice to begin in May 2003.³⁴ Currently, these initiatives are limited in reach to CES workers alone. Access to elective training seminars and the planned lecture series should be expanded to Third Party Reviewers, CPS and contract agency supervisors, as well as ACS case managers (OCACM, ACM, CPS).

RECOMMENDATION V: DEVELOP FAMILY ENGAGEMENT INDICATORS AND RELEASE REGULAR REPORTS ON PROGRESS MADE.

- UPDATE THE ACS STRATEGIC PLAN AND OTHER REPORTS WITH NEW FAMILY ENGAGEMENT GOALS AND INDICATORS FOR IMPROVING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND CHILD WELFARE REFORMS.

ACS must continue to update and release reports regularly to educate the public about the status of reforms and the timetable for implementation. The Panel recommends: Re-examining the goals and benchmarks in the *Renewed Plan of Action*, clarifying what has been accomplished, what is left to accomplish, and whether or not the goals and benchmarks included in the plan are still applicable. Because ACS envisions family engagement as central to its child welfare reform efforts, additional family engagement indicators beyond measuring parent attendance at FTCs and SPRs, need to be developed to measure progress toward this goal and ACS needs to incorporate this data into its reports to the public. Further, revised family engagement goals should be developed and new benchmarks should be set. ACS should continue to collect data by tracking the FTCs on the CES Tracking Sheet and SPRs on the SPR Information Tracking System and continue to report family engagement indicators in the Mayor's Management Report.

³² According to ACS, in addition to a monthly CES management meeting, CES staff and managers are scheduled to work together through subcommittees and workgroups including the Family Team Conference Protocol Subcommittee, the Family Team Conference Form Sub Committee, the Family Team Conference Parent and Community Engagement Sub Committee, the Visiting Specialist Work Group, Education Specialist Work Group, Early Permanency Planning Specialist Work Group, and the Institutional Placement Specialist Work Group.

³³ Each of the workgroup/committees is in a different stage of development - some began work in Fall 2002 while others and others were initiated in May 2003.

³⁴ Elective training opportunities took place throughout CFY03 and include the following: CES Foundations Curriculum (5 days), Family Team Conference Training (2 days), Gay and Lesbians, Fatality Issues, Improving Visiting Practice (full day seminar), Therapeutic Foster Care, Distance Learning Seminars on sudden infant death syndrome and risk reduction, preventing traumatic brain injury, and the Indian Child Welfare Act and Early Child Development (held recently in October-November 2002). CES workers receive notification of all elective trainings as they are offered. Additionally, a 60-90 minute best practice lecture series has been planned to begin in May 2003.

ACS has begun to conduct a two-part evaluation to assess whether long-term outcomes are different for families and children after a FTC is held. Conference characteristics that lead to improved outcomes will be investigated and the primary outcomes that will be examined are length of stay in care, subsequent abuse or neglect following discharge, reentry into care, and the link between attendance at conferences and use of services. The Panel urges ACS to issue a report on the findings of the FTC evaluation and use it to improve training, reporting and other quality improvement and accountability activities that support parent engagement.

Agency reports including the *Status Report*, *The Renewed Plan of Action*, and *The Top 12 Performance Report* are easily accessible on the ACS website as are monthly, quarterly, and year-end performance indicators. Yet these reports are have not been updated to include family engagement indicators nor have they been released recently to inform stakeholders and the broader public about agency progress, initiatives underway or future directions.

- DEVELOP A MECHANISM TO TRACK AND RATE THE QUALITY OF THE CONFERENCES AND SPRS.

ACS has framed a series of permanency and visit planning questions to guide workers in the FTC discussion and also developed a checklist to measure the quality of the Family Team Conferences. The FTC Qualitative Evaluation Instrument for Family Team Conferences is to be used to determine whether conferences meet requirements related to: location, invitees and attendees, conference timing (3-5 days or 30 days), stakeholder engagement, procedural issues (introducing participants to each other, conference introduction and ground rules, scheduling next conference), and service planning (including visiting and education planning). CES managers have been provided with the checklist and are required to use the list to rate the quality of every FTC.

ACS has revised the FTC quality instrument to track whether specific permanency questions are addressed at the conference. This could prompt and remind workers about the permanency questions to be asked and other topics to be addressed during the FTC. The FTC instrument also provides useful data that can be used to monitor the quality of the conferences. There is no comparable quality instrument for workers at the SPR. ACS could develop and implement a similar checklist to prompt workers around key issues to address and to measure the quality of the SPRs.

The Division of Child Protection is also redesigning its monthly CES caseload sheet to track parent attendance at every FTC held. This information should allow ACS to track the individual parent attendance rate for every CES and analyze participation rate data for CES at the following levels: managerial area, borough, and citywide. This caseload tracking system could create increased accountability and provide feedback to CES workers to improve parent attendance rates at conferences. Currently, parent attendance rates for SPRs are measured for the contract agency as a whole, rather than tied to a specific worker or staff function. Unlike the CES Caseload-Tracking Sheet, there is no mechanism to track contract agency or ACS worker performance or parent attendance at SPRs. A tracking system could be developed to increase contract staff accountability and improve parent attendance at SPRs.

ACS and the Panel agree that efforts are needed to improve the effectiveness of SPRs and to this end the ACS Office of Quality Improvement began a study to review the status of SPRs throughout the city. The project will include observations of SPRs as well as stakeholder surveys and began on June 23, 2003. It is expected that this project will provide a more focused understanding of what occurs in the SPRs and enable ACS to develop an approach to improving the SPRs including specialized training, policy and protocol changes, designation of specially trained facilitators, Third Party Reviewers, or altering the organization of case management functions at ACS.

CONCLUSION

ACS has developed sound policies to support parent engagement - case conferencing and visiting - and in this way has charted a course for lasting improvements in the way families and children experience the city's child welfare system. Yet, continued attention must be paid in order to ensure that these policies direct practice in every encounter with families and that they become the norm in every Family Team Conference and Service Plan Review. Attention must also be paid to other opportunities to increase family engagement at ACS including a review of the strategies employed by preventive service programs to reach out to and engage parents. Efforts to improve front-line practice so workers can engage families more effectively will play a critical role in advancing child welfare reform, improving the quality and timeliness of permanency decision-making, strengthening parent-child-sibling relationships, and improving other outcomes for children.

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APPENDIX A

ACS FAMILY TEAM CONFERENCES – SCHEDULING REQUIREMENTS³⁵

Type of Conference	When – Held	Required Attendees
Elevated Risk 72 hour Child Safety Conference	Held within 3 business days of an assessment that risk to a child has increased.	Parents, caretakers, children over 10, family supports, Division of Child Protection (DCP) case-worker and supervisor, other involved ACS staff, foster care worker (if applicable), and other service providers (ok'd by parents)
Post-Removal 72 hour Child Safety Conference	Held 3 to 5 business days after protective removal.	Parents, caretakers, children over 10, family supports, DCP caseworker and supervisor, other involved ACS staff, foster care worker, and other service providers (ok'd by parents)
30 Day Family Permanency Conference	Held 30 to 35 days after a protective removal.	Parents, caretakers, children over 10, family supports, DCP caseworker and supervisor, other involved ACS staff, foster care worker, foster parents, and other service providers
Family Service Planning Conference	Held at 45 days from assignment and at changes in status of a Family Services Unit case.	Parents, caretakers, children over 10, family supports, DCP caseworker and supervisor, other involved ACS staff, foster care worker, foster parents, and other service providers
Service Planning Review/ Third Party Review	Held 90 days after placement and every six months while children are in foster care.	Parents, caretakers, children over 10, family supports, primary planner and supervisor, secondary case planner, other involved ACS staff, congregate care specialist, foster care worker, foster parents, law guardian, and other service providers
Reunification Discharge Conference	Held at least two weeks before requested or anticipated discharge.	Parents, children over 10, foster parents, service providers, OCACM case manager and supervisor, family supports, contract agency case planner and supervisor, child's law guardian
Independent Living Discharge Conference	Held 30 days prior to trial discharge and 30 days prior to final discharge or a youth turning 21.	Youth, relatives, parents, youth supports, primary planning worker, discharge/aftercare worker, service providers
Pre-Adoption Conference	Held within 30 days of goal change to adoption.	Foster parents, foster children, child welfare specialist and supervisor, foster family supports, extended family, birth parents CES (if applicable)

³⁵ Division of Child Protection Family Team Conferences 72-Hour Child Safety Conference Protocol (3rd Edition) 30-Day Family Permanency Conference Protocol (1st Edition)

APPENDIX B

Best Practice Guidelines for Family Visiting Arrangements for Children in Foster Care³⁶

Aspects of Visiting	Guidelines
Parent-Child Contact Immediately Following Removal	Visiting plans and arrangements should be discussed and put into place and/or revised at both the 72 hour Child Safety Conference and the 30 day Family Permanency Conference. Parent-Child contact should be arranged as soon as possible, with the level of supervision deemed necessary and appropriate given the circumstances of the case.
Sibling Contact	ACS requires that siblings and half siblings be placed together whenever possible unless placement together would be detrimental to the child's best interest. In the event that it is not possible to place siblings together, they must be reunited within 30 days. When siblings are placed separately, foster care agencies are required to exercise diligent efforts to facilitate bi-weekly face to face contact between siblings and half siblings, unless it would be harmful to their health or safety or unless geographic proximity precludes visiting. Regular telephone contact and other forms of correspondence should be arranged between visits. When the best interest of the child are involved, every effort should be made to coordinate parent-child visits so as to include the entire sibling group and the parent.
Responsibility for Visits	It is always the foster care agency's responsibility to arrange and facilitate visits and other forms of contact between the child and parents and among separated siblings. This responsibility applies to both planning and non-planning agencies.
Quality of Visits:	The lowest level of supervision which safe guards the well being of the child should always be chosen in order to allow the parent to resume/assume the maximum amount of parenting responsibility possible.
Scheduling	Visiting arrangements should take in to consideration the schedules and circumstances of all those involved including the parent, the child, and the foster parent.
Frequency and Length	Current OCFS regulations require that children with the goal of "return to parent" visit their parent at least once every two weeks, but it is expected and recommended that more frequent contact be arranged and facilitated. ACS recommends that visits occur on a weekly basis, visit length be at least two hours, and visits occur in sites identified by participating parties as comfortable, supportive, and convenient.

³⁶ Family Visiting Resource Guide. Revised April, 2002

Activities and Location	Whenever possible visits should be integrated into the already scheduled activities for the children and activities, which the parent will be involved with post-reunification. This type of visit arrangement maximizes the naturalness of visits for children and parents.
Preparation	For both the child and the parent preparation before visits is critical throughout the life of a case, particularly after immediate removal. Prior to visits children, parents, and foster parents should be provided with information regarding (1) each parties rights and responsibilities regarding visits; (2) the circumstances of the visit (when, where, for how long, who will be there); (3) what is planned for the end of the visit (for example, children should not expect to go home with the parent unless that is actually the case); (4) when the next visit will be.
Debriefing/Processing	Ideally debriefing should occur directly after the visit. Debriefing after the visit can be equally important. Processing the visit with children often serves to reduce negative behavioral reactions sometimes seen in children, while processing with parents includes helping them understand the needs of the child and providing guidance and information on effective parenting techniques for addressing these needs. Processing with the parent is also important to help them understand and handle the child's reaction to visits.
Progression of Visiting Plan	When reunification is the permanency goal it is understood that visit frequency and length will increase over time, with the level of any supervision deemed necessary decreasing over time as consistent with the safety of the child. In general the visiting plan should evolve weekly to more frequent visits of greater length, overnight and weekend visits, lead to trial and final discharge. If a child's visiting plan has not progressed over a 6-month period, the reasons justifying the lack of change must be clearly documents in the case record.
Child Contact with non-Resource Parents, Relatives, and Other Significant Parties.	Case planners should keep in mind that there may be other significant relatives (or others) in the lives of children with whom contact should be facilitated. These people should be considered as resources for case planners – they can help lessen the trauma of removal and placement for children, help provide support for the parent in complying with the service plan, and may be able to provide respite for or help to the foster parent by assisting with transportation, taking children to appointments, hosting parent-child visits or participating in activities with the children.

APPENDIX C

Field Visit Guide for Panel Members

You will be observing Family Team Conferences (72 hour safety conference; 30 day permanency conference; and service plan review conference) and visitation at ACS Field Offices and contract agencies.

Depending on the scheduling, you will have time before or after the conferences to speak with ACS and contract agency caseworkers and supervisors, and if they are willing with parents and foster parents and youth.

We're starting with the premise that successful family engagement starts very early (within the first 30 days of the initial contact with ACS) and the assumption that failure to engage early creates significant barriers to reunification and timely permanency.

Please introduce yourself as a member of the New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel and explain that we are doing a series of field visits to learn more about how ACS and its agencies engage and work with families to improve services to children and families and improve child welfare services overall.

Please assume that the word family includes biological parent, other family members, foster parent or youth in care.

Note the difference between family attendance and participation.

Please refer to the agency grid to see whether the agency is known for innovative family engagement activities and ask about them.

General Impressions:

Environment

- Cleanliness
- Security
- Waiting Room/Visiting Room/Bathroom
- Ambience

Process/Quality of Interaction With Parents/Caregivers/Youth

- Are staff attitudes welcoming (receptionist – other staff who come in contact with family), open, cooperative?
- Quality of the interaction between ACS and contract agency staff and family/youth. Does family know ACS caseworker and/or contract agency caseworker and do caseworkers know each other?
- Does family understand what is going on, the process underway and why they are there?
- What does ACS or agency staff do to engage family/foster parents/youth early on?
- Are parent advocates present at conferences? Is child or parent's counsel present? Should they be?
- Do parents and all staff present participate in case planning? Do they share decision-making? Is planning individualized for family and child?
- Is there a sense of urgency about the need for and route to reunification or other permanency option?

Training and Supervision

- What kind of training did ACS worker/contract agency worker receive on family engagement? MAPP (Model Approach to Partnership in Parenting), Circles of Support, Family-to shared parenting module-Family, ASFA, common core, other?
- Does case supervision include review of family engagement issues? Attendance? Participation?
- Worker preparation to deal with family differences: language, immigration status, race, religion, disability, culture
- Does process allow for private family time?

Questions to guide field visits

72-hour conferences

- What is the agency doing to engage parents, family members, foster parents, youth early on?
- How are the rights of parents to participate in 72-hour conferences made clear to parents and extended family members?
- How do you do outreach to encourage parent participation in the 72-hour conference – are parents/family members contacted by phone, mail, or via home visit?
- What barriers to parent and family member participation in 72-hour conferences do you see?
- What methods do you use or can be used to overcome these barriers?
- What would improve the effectiveness of the 72-hour conference?
- How can we ensure that the 72-hour conference is used to its potential as tools for frontline staff to work better with families?
- How can we enhance the degree to which information gathered in the 72-hour conference informs the Family Court and is integrated into the Court process so that cases may be resolved more expeditiously?
- How soon do parents or children receive needed services?
- How is parent feedback collected – after the 72-hour conference?

30-day conferences

- What happens with parents and families in the time between the 72-hour and the 30-day conference?
- How can we assess and improve the follow through from and between the 72-hour and the 30-day conference?
- What help (in terms of services) is provided to parents in the first 30 days?
- How are the rights of parents to participate in 30-day conferences made clear to parents and extended family members?
- How do you do outreach to encourage parent participation in the 30-day conference – are parents/family members contacted by phone, mail, or via home visit?
- What is done to ensure that parents participate in the identification of needs (their needs and their children's needs) and of service choices?
- What barriers to parent participation in 30 day conferences do you see and what methods do you use or can be used to overcome these barriers?
- How can we improve the degree to which information from the 30-day conference (what is developed and decided upon at the conference) is used and implemented by the foster care agency?
- How can we enhance the degree to which information gathered in the 30-day conference informs the Family Court and is integrated into the Court process so that cases may be resolved more expeditiously?
- How is parent feedback solicited after the 30-day conference?

SPRs

- How are the rights of parents to participate in SPRs made clear to parents and extended family members?
- How do you do outreach to encourage parent participation in the SPR - are parents/family members contacted by phone, mail, or via home visit?

- What barriers to parent participation in SPR conferences do you see and what methods do you use or can be used to overcome these barriers?
- What is done to ensure that parents participate in the identification of needs (their needs and their children's needs) and of service choices during the SPR?
- What innovative things are agencies doing around the delivery of service planning and the engagement of parents, foster parents, and youth in the SPR process?
- How can we improve the degree to which the plan developed during SPR conferences are used and implemented by foster care agencies?
- What are the barriers to implementation of the plans developed during SPR conferences?
- How can we enhance the degree to which the plans developed and decisions made at the SPR inform the Family Court and are integrated into the Court process so that cases may be resolved more expeditiously?
- What is the relationship between parent-child visiting and service planning?
- How is parent feedback solicited after the SPR conference?

Visiting

- How often should parents visit with a child or children, where should visits take place, and how structured or supervised should visits be?
- How often should siblings visits occur, where should the visits take place, and how structured or supervised should the visits be?
- How often should visits between children and extended family members occur, where should visits take place, and how structured or supervised should they be?
- What barriers to parent participation in visiting do you see and what methods do you use or can be used to overcome these barriers?
- What innovative things are agencies doing around visiting?
- Is visiting ever used to as an opportunity to develop parenting skills, to modify behavior, or engage children and parents therapeutically?
- How is parent feedback on visiting solicited?

Parents/Youth

- Is the child placed in foster boarding home, kinship care, group home/residence or RTC?
- How do parents/youth understand their right to attend and participate in 72 hour, 30 day, SPR and visiting?
- What do parents/youth understand about attendance and participation in 72 hour, 30 day, SPR and visitation?
- Family's/youth's perception of ACS workers' and agency workers' interest in them? In their child?
- Family/youth satisfaction with interaction with ACS worker? Contract agency worker?
- Family/youth satisfaction with ability to participate in 72 hour, 30 day and SPR conferences?
- Family/youth satisfaction with timeliness and quality of services provided to them and to their child after 72 hour, 30 day or SPR conferences?
- Family/youth perception of barriers to attendance and participation in Family Team conferences and visiting?
- Family/youth recommendations of ways to overcome these barriers
- Family/youth perception of and satisfaction with ACS worker and contract agency worker ability to deal with parents:
 - Language
 - Immigration Status
 - Culture
 - Disability
 - Race
 - Religion
- What are reasonable parent/youth attendance rates at:
 - 72 hour
 - 30 day

- SPR
- Visiting
- Does parent/child have counsel or parent/youth advocate at family team conferences? Visiting?

General questions

- How do you work with families who are non-English speakers? Do you have bilingual staff, use translators, or rely on children or family members?
- What are appropriate, reasonable participation rate targets for parents, foster parents, youth at various conferences and visiting?
- How do you use parent advocates to better engage families?
- Does the agency use the model approach to partnership in parenting (MAPP) and circles of support (foster parent lead focus groups)?
- What do we know about the value of parent advocates at the foster care agencies?

APPENDIX D

Questions for the Consortium on Parent Advocacy

Questions for the agencies:

- How would you describe the job/role of the parent advocate at your agency?
- What do parent advocates do for or with parents? What role do they play in family engagement?
- Are parent advocates trained? If so how are they trained, what is the length of training, it's cost, and how is training reimbursed or paid for?
- Do parent advocates have their own caseload? If so, how many parents/families do each parent advocate work with? If not, how are they paired with parents/families and on average how many parents/families do they work with?
- How soon are parent advocates connected with parents/families?
- Are parent advocates supervised? If so, by whom?
- Do parent advocates work as part or team? If so, who is part of the team?
- Are parent advocates encourage to be present at the case conferences – 72 hour, 30 day, UCR, 90 day SPRs, discharge planning?
- Do parent advocates play a role in determining the service plan for members of a family (parents, children, youth)?
- How do agencies identify or hire parent advocates?
- Are parent advocates paid and if so, what is the average rate of pay?
- How many hours a week is individual parent advocates working in your agency?

Questions for the parent advocates:

- How would you describe the your job/role at your agency?
- What do parent advocates do for or with parents? What role do they play in family engagement?
- Have your received training? If so how were you trained and what are thoughts on the training you received?
- How are you paired with parents/families and on average how many parents/families do you work with?
- How soon are you connected with parents/families?
- Are you supervised? If so, by whom?
- Do you work as part or team? If so, who is part of the team?
- Are you encouraged to attend case conferences (72 hour, 30 day, UCR, 90 day SPRs, discharge planning) with parents? How often do you attend these conferences?
- Do you play a role in determining the service plan for members of a family (parents, children, youth)?
- How were you identified or hired by your agency to be a parent advocates?
- Are you paid or compensated for your work as a parent advocate?
- How many hours a week do you work as a parent advocates in your agency?
- What would help make your job/role as a parent advocate easier or more rewarding?