



STRATEGY BRIEF

# HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

## How have counties in New York approached **implementation of casework teaming**

With five years of experience in the field, Susan was a confident caseworker, skilled at engaging families despite the challenges that come with the nature of child welfare work. Yet she was struggling to connect with Bill, a father she was serving in pursuit of his goal of reunification. She began to worry that the lack of connection was impacting the ability to achieve permanency for his son.

In most child protection agencies, the only option for a caseworker like Susan who is faced with a challenging case is to consult with her supervisor or request a case transfer. But in the state of New York, some county units have implemented casework teaming, a model where caseworkers agree to partner and share responsibility for cases with colleagues in their unit in order to better support and work more effectively with families.

One of Susan's team members heard her concerns about building a connection with Bill and offered to accompany her on a visit to the father's apartment to discuss the reunification plan. Bill responded more positively to Susan's teammate, who was able to remain on the case as a secondary caseworker to support the family — and Susan — through the reunification process.



# How have counties in New York approached implementation of casework teaming?

In this brief, New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) caseworker staff, as well as supervisors who utilize casework teaming in their units, share their insights and experiences implementing and sustaining the model.<sup>1</sup> For information about outcomes and lessons learned from casework teaming in the state, see the companion brief: [What has been New York's experience with casework teaming?](#)

## Understanding the teaming culture shift

Casework teaming offers a shift in how child welfare workers are supported — and are able to support some of the families on their caseloads. It is important for units to understand what teaming is and isn't before making the decision to implement.

In child welfare, caseworkers often are confronted with challenging situations or an uncomfortable fit between themselves and a family they are assigned to serve. As a result, caseworkers may find themselves anxious, overwhelmed, and isolated with the demands of the job. From the perspective of families, they may feel misunderstood or that their assigned caseworker is too busy to help them. These anxieties, tensions, and misunderstandings can have a domino effect, hindering family engagement and case progress, and impacting staff retention. This can result in case transfer, a change that creates yet more instability for the child and family, and can lead to further delays in the achievement of positive case outcomes. In fact, research has found that as the number of caseworkers within a single case increases, the percentage of children achieving permanency significantly decreases.<sup>2</sup>

By using casework teaming, caseworkers have the support they need to be creative with their approach to families and maximize each team member's strengths. They can “team up” to visit the family together, or they can alternate visits. For example, if there is conflict between one member of the family and the primary caseworker, a team member can take over contact with that family member while the primary caseworker continues to maintain contact with the children. Caseworkers in teaming units benefit from the support provided to them from their colleagues, feel less burdened by pressures of difficult cases, and learn casework skills from each other. Teaming extends

casework expertise beyond an individual to an entire group. Applying that level of collective knowledge and experience to a case benefits the children and families being served.

One of the greatest benefits of casework teaming, according to supervisors, is that team members take care of and cover for each other's cases effectively because they are familiar with the families on each other's caseloads. This type of arrangement benefits both families and caseworkers. Families know that even if their primary caseworker is unavailable, another team member who knows them will be available to them, if needed. Caseworkers know that they can take vacations and make appointments without fear of the families they serve being left unattended in their absence.

## Getting started

During initial formation, casework teaming units in New York spend time getting to know each other and deciding exactly how their unit will operate. For example, all team members complete the OCFS Social Styles Profile self-assessment to learn more about their teammates' work styles as well as their own.<sup>3</sup> Together, teams also create a mission statement to articulate their vision for the work, and an operating agreement that serves as a guide for how the unit will work together to be successful. Supervisors of teaming units attribute these elements to creating a sense of shared ownership over cases.

Given the time commitment necessary to implement teaming within a unit, the support of agency leadership — by encouraging units to explore teaming and giving teams the opportunity to learn how to work in a new way — is also essential. According to OCFS, leadership in one location showed support by taking caseworkers off the assignment cycle for a period of time while they built their capacity to team on cases.

Placing team members' workspaces in close proximity has contributed to increased interaction and shared responsibility within the teaming unit. Team members are better able to coach each other through difficult situations, and hold informal conversations to brainstorm cases and gather feedback and support.

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### Group dynamics matter

Teaming may be especially helpful for new staff. In New York, new caseworkers indicated that it has been helpful to be placed in a unit that practices casework teaming given the learning generated through group supervision and shared home visits. In fact, some staff believe they would not have remained in child welfare without the help they received from teaming on cases.

The supportive environment cultivated in casework teaming would not exist without the support of a skilled supervisor. When the team isn't working well together, a strong supervisor can address the issues at hand and institute needed changes. For example, when one caseworker skilled at engaging families was struggling with completing permanency planning forms (despite training and supervision aimed at improving those skills), the supervisor was able to facilitate coverage of those activities by her teammates. The caseworker, in turn, provided support on the cases of her teammates when they were having trouble engaging a family. Rather than simply giving “easier” cases to staff who might be struggling, casework teaming allows supervisors the flexibility to knit together the individual strengths of caseworkers and strengthen the entire team.

Supervisors emphasized the importance of staff selection for teaming cases, noting that teaming works best for caseworkers who are collaborative by nature. Teaming has been less successful with those staff who are extremely independent, opposed to involvement in others' cases, or simply prefer to handle cases on their own. Casework teaming requires a shift from thinking of “my cases” to sharing details of cases with the unit and being open to receiving help and decision-making input from colleagues. The model requires close interaction and collaboration from all team members, including a strong supervisor who can handle group dynamics. OCFS has found that this shift is not easy, and that staff and supervisors require ongoing coaching and training to institutionalize this culture change.

### Adapting the model to fit the unit

There are two foundational elements of casework teaming: 1) group supervision, which requires protecting time for the task and not letting other meetings or incidents get in the way; and 2) shared responsibility, which requires that teams and families take joint responsibility for the case outcomes. Working within these elements, a casework teaming model can be tailored to meet the needs of an individual work unit.

In New York, casework teaming began as a structured program with very specific guidelines, which OCFS articulated through its manual and trainings. Group supervision was expected to occur a set number of times and, for every group supervision meeting, there was a set agenda and assigned roles that were rotated from session to session (such as notetaker, timekeeper, and facilitator). Casework teaming, however, has shifted from being a prescriptive model to a more flexible and tailored approach built around the vision and needs of the unit. For example, in one county, two family support units participate in casework teaming, and the teams made different decisions about how they would operate. In one unit, the standard OCFS structure worked well, and the team continues to hold group supervision twice a week with a set agenda and dedicated roles that rotate among the team members. In the other unit, however, that rigid structure was less successful, and the unit elected to reduce group supervision to once a week while still keeping individual supervision sessions.

Shared responsibility for cases also varies from unit to unit. Traditionally, this meant that each case was assigned both a primary caseworker and a secondary caseworker. While that model worked for some county units, other units didn't find it to be successful, so they tried pairing staff in different ways and in different combinations. One unit settled on each case being assigned a primary caseworker and then modified how cases would be selected for teaming, deciding not to choose specific criteria for which cases would be teamed, but instead on whichever cases “floated to the top during group supervision.” The team then

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votes on which cases to start teaming and which cases to stop teaming. Under this model, the unit supervisor has observed that the unit seems to team more during critical periods of a case, choosing to allow the collective knowledge of the team to guide the case through the rough patches.

The teaming model has also been adapted to address system gaps, such as the period of transition from child welfare to adult services. In one county, a transitional unit was created to focus attention on the needs of transition-aged youth and represents an adaptation of traditional casework teaming. In this approach, the caseworkers do not work together daily, as the teaming model crosses agency lines to include members from both child welfare and adult services. Staff from each

agency team together to share information and address the needs of youth who are close to aging out of the child welfare system but needs ongoing support from adult services. The core team members meet every other week to discuss the youth they are working with together, brainstorm eligible services for the youth, exchange updates, and share in decision-making. To demonstrate commitment to this cross-agency teaming model, an administrator from each agency attends every meeting. Despite some challenges, both agencies have seen benefits. Adult services staff have found it beneficial to understand the history of the youth who will be involved with the agency in the near future. Child welfare staff have found it helpful to forge relationships with adult service providers so they can better connect the youth with post-transition services and supports.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, information included in this brief is based on the following interviews: staff at the Center for Development of Human Services Institute for Community Health Promotion —SUNY Buffalo State College, and staff at the New York State Office of Children and Family Services on February 28, 2018; staff at Schenectady County Children's Services on April 25, 2018; and staff at Orange County Children and Family Services on May 1, 2018.
- 2 Flower, C., McDonald, J. & Sumski, M. (2005). *Review of turnover in Milwaukee county private agency child welfare ongoing case management staff*. Retrieved from: [http://www.uh.edu/socialwork/\\_docs/cwep/national-iv-e/turnoverstudy.pdf](http://www.uh.edu/socialwork/_docs/cwep/national-iv-e/turnoverstudy.pdf)
- 3 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015). *Teaming in child welfare: A Guidebook*. Retrieved from: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cfsr/assets/docs/Teaming-in-CW-Guidebook.pdf>

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