Child welfare matters.

Improving organizations, making a difference

Fall/Winter, 2010

Taking Action
Keys to Using Data and Information

This issue focuses on the most challenging aspect of quality improvement (QI) systems—using data and information to improve practice and outcomes. Some components of effective QI systems have been implemented by child welfare agencies—adopting clear outcomes and standards and developing systems to collect data and information. Today most agencies have a large amount of data and information— from information systems, case review processes, surveys and other sources. Agencies have had less success using data and information to identify and implement action steps to improve performance—but this is the critical component of an effective QI system. This issue highlights different aspects of strong child welfare QI systems— where agencies conduct ongoing analyses and take action that results in improved practice and outcomes. We hope the information and resources in this issue will help others develop more effective approaches to using data and information. Please contact us if we can be of assistance or with feedback about our work!

Peter Watson
Director, NRCOI

Your goal is to help children, youth and families.

Our goal is to help you.

A quality improvement (QI) system supports an agency's goals through ongoing data and information collection and analysis and using those results to make improvements. This article explores key factors to using QI results and taking action to improve practice and outcomes:

• leadership support,

• dedicated QI staff,

• training and support,

• clear QI structures and goals,

• accessible and usable reports,

• expectations for action, and

• support for improvements.

To identify these factors, we drew on the NRCOI's work in quality improvement, discussions with our national QI Peer Network, interviews with QI leaders in several states, and a review of agency materials and reports. The article highlights these key factors and illustrates them with examples, insights, and stories of action drawn from several states with strong child welfare QI systems, including Arizona, Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Tennessee, and Utah. We are grateful to the QI leaders in these states who provided insights and information for this article.

Taking Action: Keys to Using Data and Information

Leadership Support

A common element of effective QI systems is leadership support of the QI process. Leaders send a powerful message about the importance of using data and information when they regularly review and use information system reports, case review results and other information, and when they discuss performance with their management team, local managers, staff and stakeholders. In effective systems, leaders communicate and model a clear expectation that managers and staff use data and information regularly to guide their work. They provide funding and support for QI staff dedicated to facilitating the use of information throughout the agency, and the QI manager is part of the agency's leadership team.

"Our director, Erwin McEwen, really believes in using and sharing data—he has held data summits around the state as well as a statewide leadership academy recently which brought together public and private agency management along with university researchers where the importance of using data was a primary focus. He also travels the state and meets with staff in their local offices where he uses data to help staff understand why the agency is pursuing various initiatives such as Differential Response and our trauma-informed case practice model. He presents the data and connects it to the agency vision, and also listens and responds to staff's questions and concerns."

<div align="right">

– Joan Nelson-Phillips, Deputy Director, Division of Quality Assurance, Illinois

</div>

In agencies where top level leadership is not as committed to using data and information, QI managers should create opportunities to educate leaders about available information and help them understand how using the QI process can improve outcomes and promote their priorities for the agency.

Reforming Child Welfare, by Olivia Golden

The Urban Institute Press, Washington, DC, 2009
http://www.urban.org/uipress/

In her book, Olivia Golden draws on her own experience as a child welfare director, and on other child welfare directors' experience, to explore key factors in bringing about change in large, troubled child welfare agencies. She identifies the importance of leaders using data and information and encouraging others to do so:

"The key lesson (for leaders) is to exhibit curiosity and a drive to use information yourself, and to build around you a curious, data-driven organization."

"Every reformer saw better information systems, both quantitative and qualitative, and better use of information as key ways to upgrade or revamp child welfare services."

"Gathering and analyzing information, setting measurable targets, tracking progress, giving individuals and units feedback on their performance and reviewing individual cases in detail were all at the heart of reform."

"Because these agencies are so complex, systematic data collection is necessary to get a grip on what the problems are and begin to solve them"

QI Staff

Another key is having dedicated QI staff who understand the data and information, are able to make it understandable to others and serve as accessible resources to facilitate the QI process. Many states use QI staff to help explain and interpret data and provide additional analyses or information in response to questions. To promote action in response to QI findings, however, QI staff in effective systems must draw on additional skills. They facilitate meetings, help managers and staff identify action steps, and ensure follow-up and a continual process of reviewing progress and reevaluating action steps. QI staff must work on the local or regional level, and communicate with each other regularly to share lessons learned. Some agencies have begun to create teams of two distinct types of staff who work closely together—quality assurance (QA) staff focused on producing data reports and ensuring data quality—and QI staff focused on using data to improve performance.

Train and Support QI Staff

Because QI staff need to develop varied skills, it is critical that agencies provide training and support for them. In effective QI systems, staff receive formal training and ongoing guidance, both from state QI staff and through facilitated interactions with one another. Many agencies convene regional QI staff regularly by phone, video-conference or in person, and use these gatherings to provide training in using data sets and information, to discuss performance, and to allow the staff to share ideas on approaches to using information and facilitating change. QI managers have found it is important to be persistent in training efforts, practicing and modeling the use of data and information in many different forums over time.

Kentucky provided a formal training for Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) specialists (see "CQI Training in Kentucky") that helped them develop their skills in a number of areas. Since the training, Kentucky asks these staff regularly to analyze their regional data and identify practice changes that could lead to improvements. Specialists develop graphs of trends in performance, identify and discuss the practices of their region's stronger and weaker teams, and examine data on specific factors that could affect performance in certain areas.

Taking Action: Keys to Using Data and Information

"Our CQI specialists train each other — they call one another about where to get the data they need, and model how to work with data sets. Our data staff and my statewide CQI staff train them on using data but they learn from each other more than anything."

– Ruth Huebner, Director
Information and Quality Improvement, Kentucky

Create a QI Structure

Defining a clear QI structure and system is another key to promoting the use of data and information. The QI system should have clear goals linked to the agency's goals and a defined organizational structure linked to the larger child welfare system. Developing written manuals that describe the purpose of the QI system, components and operation of the QI system, the role of QI staff and teams, available data and information sources and what happens at QI meetings signals the intention to sustain the QI system over time. (See: Tennessee's CQI Manual)

Many agencies aim to build a culture of continuous quality improvement, using the whole agency to look at performance and work on improvements. Some QI systems train all staff on the QI process, and some design the structure so anyone can be involved in QI meetings or activities. Often, agencies create a tiered structure of QI teams on local, regional and state levels. If issues cannot be resolved at lower levels, they are sent up to the next higher level team.

Joan Nelson Phillips, Deputy Director, Division of Quality Assurance, Illinois recommends that agencies have an explicit plan for CQI, with goals that are linked to the agency vision. Agencies also should build a solid CQI organizational structure over time (your CQI "house") and be prepared to modify it when necessary. Illinois uses a "house" analogy to illustrate its multi-tiered CQI structure that includes statewide, regional and local teams.

Tennessee's CQI Manual

(See Tennessee's Office of Performance and Quality Improvement website: www.state. tn.us/youth/dcsguide/pqi.htm)

Tennessee updates its CQI Manual regularly. The manual describes the CQI process, the role of central and regional QI staff, and the role of CQI team members, the team leader/facilitator and the team scribe. It describes CQI teams—how often they meet, who can be members, and how they work—and defines the role of State CQI teams. It discusses the information sources CQI teams can use and specifies seven steps to a successful CQI meeting:

1. Review/update minutes, goals, action steps from previous meeting.
2. Identify an issue through data or other reliable information.
3. Brainstorm/understand current level of performance.
4. Set time-bound and measurable goals.
5. Develop action steps/plan.
6. Track and adjust action steps at next meeting.
7. Close feedback loop by sharing information learned.

Illinois DCFS CQI Structure

Your roof — Statewide Quality Council

Walls/Structure — RQC C/N, RQC Northern, RQC Central, RQC C/C, RQC Southern, RQC C/S; SQC

Foundation — Local Quality Teams
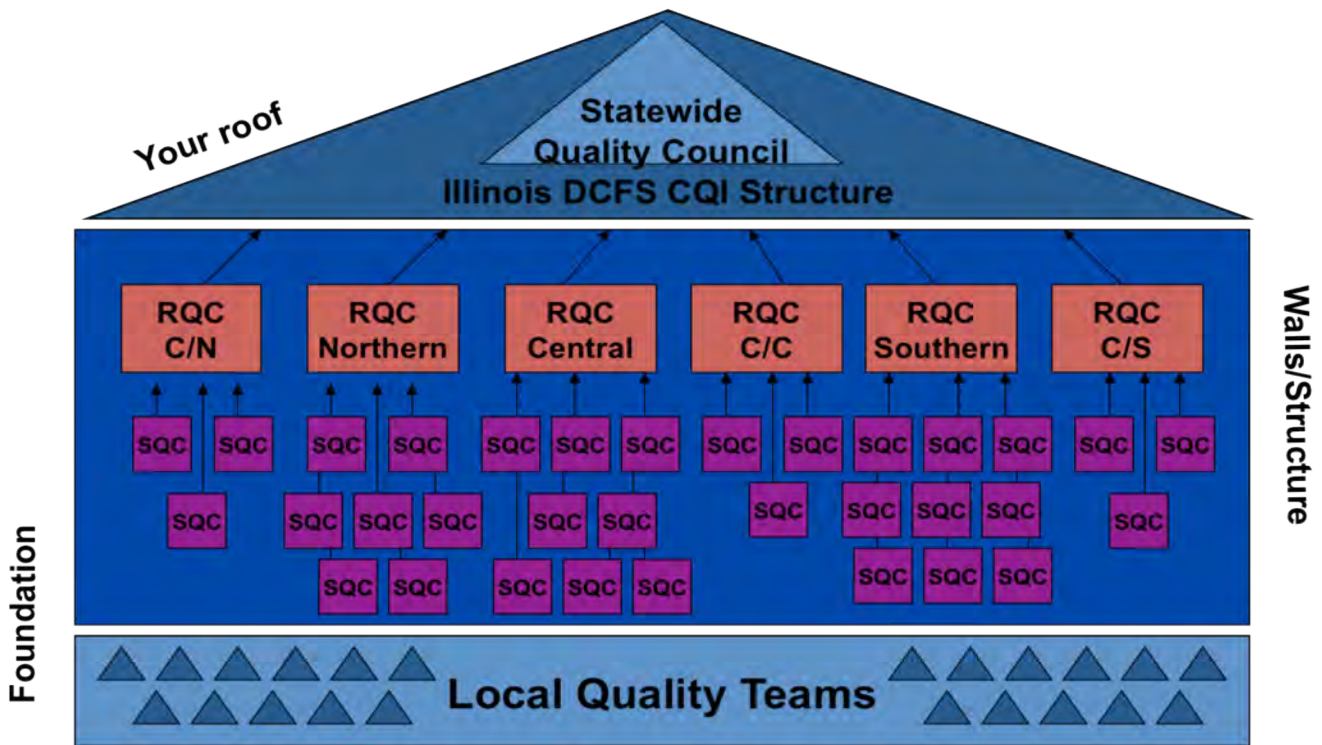
Effective QI systems rely on regular team meetings during which participants review data and information and are charged explicitly with:

- using data and information to identify strengths, areas needing improvement, and action steps to improve practice and outcomes;
- ensuring implementation of those action steps; and
- continually monitoring progress—noting how actions have impacted performance and revising actions as necessary.

Team meetings are most effective when they:

- Use QI staff to facilitate the review of data and development of action plans during the meetings.
- Engage a wide array of participants: agency leadership, central office and regional managers, supervisors, case-workers, support staff and stakeholders. Some agencies find it particularly valuable to involve contracted agency staff. Others benefit from the involvement of foster parents, youth and families, community members and stakeholders from other systems such as the courts.

- Support a feedback system that reports on QI team recommendations or issues sent forward for resolution. Feedback strategies include QI staff reporting back to teams, reviewing minutes of higher level teams at each meeting, sharing minutes in QI newsletters or emails, and even developing automated systems to track and report on actions at different levels.

- Recognize at the outset that local teams often want to start by addressing practical issues that affect working conditions (such as "potholes in the parking lot"). Quick wins on these issues helps build staff support for the QI process. Then, over time, teams can be encouraged to focus more on practice and outcomes.

Taking Action: Keys to Using Data and Information

State managers of Missouri's QI system produce a quarterly newsletter, *In Focus*, in which the state child welfare director highlights outcomes or practice areas and asks local QI teams to review their performance in these areas. The newsletter includes charts on performance (often with trends over time, broken down in different ways), the agency's overall goal, discussions about factors that impact performance, recognition of regions that are performing well and success stories that highlight effective approaches for improvement.

Reports

Effective QI systems produce regular, accessible reports from varied sources (e.g., information systems, case review results, survey results) that are interesting, engaging, and prompt conversation. Agencies should consider four report characteristics that promote the use of data and information:

- **Clear Priorities:** Many child welfare agencies now generate so much information, managers and staff frequently have difficulty sorting through all that is available. Agency leaders and QI systems should prioritize areas to review based on overall agency goals and outcomes. These priorities need to be communicated regularly to staff so they care about related reports and see their importance.

- **Easy to Understand and Creative:** Report formats should be easy to follow so users can find information they need. Reports should be clear and tell a story about performance through formats such as tables or graphs. QI systems should use creative ways to spur interest, such as adding stories to report narratives, using charts to report on case reviews, or including visually appealing graphs.

- **Timely:** Data from information systems is most useful to managers if the reports are real time, providing information on what happened over the past week or month. Case review reports also must be timely—interest is strongest right after the review and will wane over time.

- **Reliability:** To develop reliable and trusted reports, agencies may have to release and begin to use new reports on priority areas, ask staff about their accuracy, and take steps to improve the quality of the data (or explain why it is already accurate) in response to feedback. An important step is encouraging staff to enter accurate and timely data into systems, and explaining how the data are linked to key reports, with the goal of producing reports that reflect what is happening on the ground. Once staff perceive reports to be reliable, they are more likely to use them regularly.

Often, just putting out reports leads to improvements in practice and outcomes. Producing, distributing and discussing reports shows that the area highlighted is a priority for the agency, makes staff and stakeholders more aware of the issue, and can prompt changes.

In the first round CFSR in Utah, the systemic factor on case review was an area needing improvement, as the items on written case plans and termination of parental rights (TPR) did not pass. The agency recognized that practice was not consistent and developed reports to notify caseworkers of cases where child and family plans are due or need to be updated, and other reports to notify them when TPR information is expected to be added to the case record. The agency has seen significant improvement in performance on their case review system.
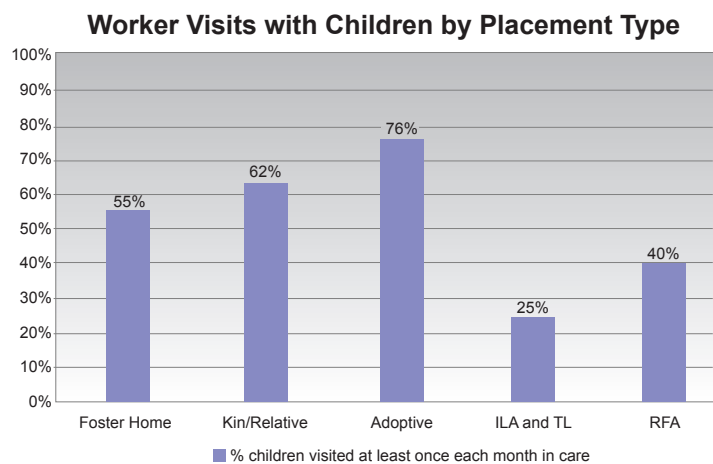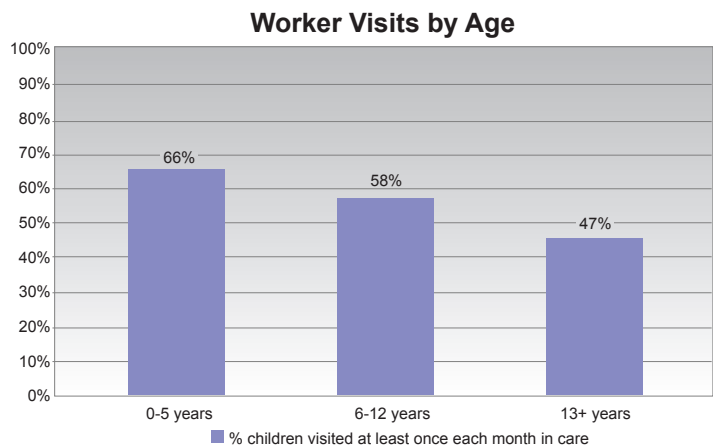
Expectations for Action

Identify actions

Strong QI systems encourage people throughout the child welfare system to be curious and ask questions about reports, and to work with QI staff to further analyze the information. By breaking down data, comparing different kinds of information, and looking for strengths, those engaged can identify more specific problems in performance and potential solutions. This helps staff at state and local levels develop specific, targeted action steps.

- **Break Down:** Breaking data and information down so it is available at the state, regional, office and/or unit and worker levels encourages use of reports, provides transparency, heightens interest and even promotes a sense of healthy competition. Such data clarifies where performance is strong, where improvement is needed, and where action should be taken to strengthen practice and build on strategies that work. It also promotes local involvement and control by making clear how agency priorities relate to each individual's work. Breaking down data in other ways (for example, by age group, placement type, or facility type) can also help reveal patterns of practice and/or places to target improvement efforts.

Breaking down data

Missouri provides reports on worker visits to children that can be broken down to the worker level. The state also used an *In Focus* newsletter to highlight worker visits by age—showing that children 13 and older were much less likely to be visited that those 0–5—and by facility type—showing that those in independent living, transitional living and residential facilities were much less likely to be visited than those in adoptive or kin placements.

Worker Visits by Age

- 0-5 years: 66%
- 6-12 years: 58%
- 13+ years: 47%

■ % children visited at least once each month in care

Worker Visits with Children by Placement Type

- Foster Home: 55%
- Kin/Relative: 62%
- Adoptive: 76%
- ILA and TL: 25%
- RFA: 40%

■ % children visited at least once each month in care

Taking Action: Keys to Using Data and Information

- **Comparing:** It often is illuminating to compare different types of data and information. For example:

  - When outcome data reveal an area needing improvement, look for or gather qualitative information to identify specific and related performance issues. Agencies can analyze recent case review results, conduct targeted case reviews, or have QI staff, managers and/or supervisors ask questions and compile information on specific issues.

  - When case review reports reveal an issue, use outcome data to explore whether this is a system-wide issue (See "The Value of Curiosity in Tennessee").

  - Explore ways to compare data within and across public and private contracted agencies performing similar tasks (including, for example, trend analyses, or comparisons with similar local offices or jurisdictions).

The Value of Curiosity in Tennessee

In one of Tennessee's regular quality services reviews (QSRs), a particular case raised concerns about a residential provider's use of restraints. The QSR staff, together with the local CQI team, decided to look more closely at the provider agency serving the child. They reviewed available generic incident reports, and then requested more detailed reports to further explore the issue. Based on the generic data, the team initially suspected the provider in the case used more restraints than other providers. The local CQI team referred their concerns to a central office CQI team, who analyzed the detailed data and discovered the provider in question actually used an average number of restraints relative to its total bed nights in comparison with other providers in the state. During this analysis, though, another facility stood out as having an abnormally high number of seclusions relative to other providers. The Tennessee agency had not been aware of issues with that provider, but it pulled together a large team to review the provider's services and practices. Ultimately, this process led Tennessee to develop more specific incident reports that break down data by region, facility and actual incident. The agency formed a new CQI team to regularly review these more detailed reports, and shares them with local CQI staff.

- Compare data across systems, such as mental health, child care, education and the courts, to explore the provision of services to children and families in child welfare.

- **Identify Strengths:** Once analysis has revealed more specifically where performance issues exist, QI systems also need to identify and learn from places that perform well. Strong systems ask what such regions, units or workers are doing that contributed to the success, and consider how these strategies can be used elsewhere.

"The key to using reports is having well-trained CQI specialists who are out in every region and supported by service region administrators who understand the change process—that the only way to get change is to have these conversations—drill down to the team and worker level, to find out who's doing well, what their strategies are, how they do that, and to disseminate that more widely."

– Ruth Huebner, Director, Information and Quality Improvement, Kentucky

Take action

In strong QI systems, agencies analyze reports and implement specific actions that lead to improvements in practice and outcomes. Two examples illustrate this commitment to the heart of the QI process:

Addressing Reentry in Utah: During its first round CFSR, Utah's foster care reentry outcome needed improvement. The agency analyzed its data and discovered that almost 50% of children reentering foster care were coming from disrupted kin placements. QI staff in one region further explored the reasons for these disruptions by having supervisors answer a series of questions about each reentry. One issue identified was the lack of supports and resources available to kin who took custody and guardianship compared to those available to licensed foster parents. The agency began a strategy to license kin caregivers as child-specific foster care homes. Since then, there has been a rise in the number of licensed kin placements and the percentage of children reentering from relative placements has decreased significantly, helping Utah meet its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) goal for reentry.

Safety Assessments in Arizona: Arizona implemented a new safety assessment process, but their regular practice improvement case reviews revealed inconsistency in the information workers were gathering. QI staff brought this issue to a state team of policy and training staff and they developed new short interview guides for the field. They now see much more comprehensive assessments, and specific items in the review process, like aftercare planning, are more often rated as a strength.

Taking Action: Keys to Using Data and Information

Support Improvement Efforts

QI systems also must work to ensure support for initiatives to improve practice and outcomes. While describing the full range of planning and support necessary is beyond the scope of this article, a few areas stand out in effective QI systems.

- **Support Supervisors:** Supervisors are critical to ensuring success, particularly when improvement efforts involve changing case practice. As a result, QI systems have begun to educate and support supervisors on the QI process itself. For example, agencies develop supervisory case review systems and provide training on the use of data and information to help supervisors focus staff on priority outcomes. QI systems also provide opportunities—such as supervisory forums, video conferences, webinars and meetings—for supervisors to learn from one another and receive training and information on best practices in promoting change.

  Minnesota has elevated the focus on supervisors to the program improvement planning (PIP) level as well. Counties must develop their own county improvement plans in response to Minnesota's county CFSR reviews. Recently, Minnesota's QI system modified its PIP format such that county PIPs now include sections on the role of supervisors in implementing each of the major goals in the plans. The goal is to sharpen the focus on involving and supporting supervisors as counties implement improvement strategies.

- **Share Success:** To support and encourage system-wide improvement efforts, agencies can reward strong performance, highlight promising practices and report on progress as initiatives move forward. Some agencies provide prizes, incentives or awards to workers or units that meet performance goals, and others promote staff and managers who perform well and lead change successfully. Others highlight and share practices used by strong performing workers, teams or regions through newsletters, publications, websites and QI staff discussions and presentations.

Minnesota developed an excellent tool to communicate lessons learned through its ongoing county CFSR process (the MnCFSR). The MnCFSR team creates and distributes PIP Tips, short publications focused on key review items. Each PIP Tip summarizes the importance of the practice in focus, identifies evidence-based practices from the literature and highlights local case practices and systemic strengths that lead to improved performance in Minnesota counties. The MnCFSR team also highlights strong performers and techniques for improving practice in these same areas through statewide, quarterly supervisory videoconference discussions and through spotlighting quality practices on a supervisors' website.

Agencies also may share success during the course of practice improvement efforts. For example, providing charts and stories that illustrate success demonstrates that improvement efforts are making a difference. They also help build excitement and commitment to the QI process (See "Kudos")

Under leaders committed to using data and information, agencies can take steps to strengthen their QI staff, structure and reports so that they all focus on identifying strategies and taking action to improve practices and outcomes. Agencies can move this process along by supporting supervisors and sharing success, continually moving the agency forward towards its goals.

Taking Action
Keys to Using Data and Information

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT: Leaders use data and information themselves, set expectations for others to do the same and provide funding and support for the QI system.

QI STAFF: Dedicated QI staff interpret and analyze data and information, facilitate QI meetings, help identify and develop action plans and review progress.

TRAIN AND SUPPORT QI STAFF: Provide formal training and professional development opportunities for QI staff to develop their skills and facilitate their interactions with one another.

CREATE A QI STRUCTURE: Define a clear QI structure and goals. Charge QI teams with using data and information, involve QI staff and a wide array of participants, develop feedback systems and focus on improving practice and outcomes.
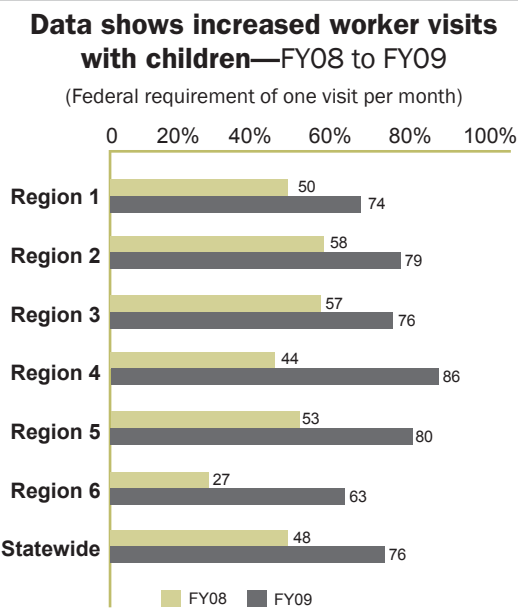
REPORTS: Develop and produce reports that are easy to understand, creative, timely and reliable, and prioritize areas to review.

EXPECTATIONS FOR ACTION: Identify actions by analyzing data and information—break it down, make comparisons, and identify strengths—and take action to make improvements.

SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS: Support supervisors, and highlight and reward success as change initiatives move forward.

Kudos

Below is an example of a chart distributed in one state system sharing success.

Data shows increased worker visits with children—FY08 to FY09
(Federal requirement of one visit per month)

Region	FY08	FY09
Region 1	50	74
Region 2	58	79
Region 3	57	76
Region 4	44	86
Region 5	53	80
Region 6	27	63
Statewide	48	76

This chart refelects the hard work by staff statewide to improve practice and to document the visits they have with children.

Resources from the Network

From the NRCOI
www.nrcoi.org/qi.htm

Learn how the NRCOI can help your agency strengthen your quality improvement (QI) system through our training and technical assistance services, the QI Peer Network and through access to resources.

The NRCOI helps agencies develop, implement, and maintain QI systems. Areas of assistance include:

- Agency QI Plans
- Developing qualitative case review systems (such as State CFSR systems)
- Supervisory review processes focused on outcomes
- Program Improvement Plan (PIP) development and measurement strategies
- Using data and information in decision-making at all levels of the agency
- Implementing practice improvements
- Training QI staff to provide ongoing technical assistance and support to all levels of their agencies

From the NRC-CWDT
www.nrccwdt.org

The NRC-CWDT provides assistance in productive use of data at all levels of the organization—including workers, supervisors, managers, and agency executive staff. Assistance includes reviewing current reports or assisting in developing new report formats so that data is easily understood, exploring how to integrate data from different sources, and arranging peer consultation between states.

Tell us what you think.

We welcome your comments! Please use the CONTACT button on our website to give us your feedback:

www.nrcoi.org

A member of the University of Maine System

Muskie School of Public Service

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

A service of the Children's Bureau, a member of the T/TA Network

e-mail: helpkids@usm.maine.edu
www.nrcoi.org
TTY: 207-780-5804
Fax: 207-780-5817
Toll Free: 1-800-HELP KID (435-7543)

Peter Watson, Director

Portland, ME 04104-9300
PO Box 9300, 34 Bedford Street
University of Southern Maine
Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service
National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement
Published by the

Improving organizations, making a difference

Child welfare matters.