

SEPTEMBER PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT: PLACEMENT PLANNING

Placement planning and decision making are critical responsibilities of all child welfare staff: CPS, foster care, licensing, adoption, juvenile justice workers and front line child welfare supervisors. At the core of those responsibilities is the capacity for child welfare staff to assess whether or not caregivers are able to safely provide care for children, in both the short and long term.

DHS is currently undertaking a review of the MiTEAM practice model and associated policy, training and other supports to determine what enhancements are needed to ensure staff fully understand the responsibilities of their positions (or roles) and have the requisite skills to make and contribute to these critical placement planning decisions for children involved in the child welfare system.

Although Michigan has been steadfast in its commitment to allowing for placement with unlicensed relative caregivers, we also accept responsibility for ensuring those unlicensed settings are safe and appropriate to meet the needs of children. DHS has established policies, protocols, and tools, like the DHS forms 588, 875, 903,903a, 904, 904a, and 3130A to guide workers through questions and assessment activities. Together, they are expected to provide a framework for decision making about suitability of placement. These tools are also the means by which workers and supervisors document the observations and information which leads to those decisions.

It is critical to understand that assessment of and planning for placement is necessary and required on an ongoing basis, not just prior to/at time of placement or when crisis occurs. Moreover, the assessment of placement is also not just the responsibility of one type of worker. While our child welfare system is broken into different program areas (CPS, foster care, adoption, licensing), each of those program areas has critical impact on the life of children in placement settings and as such, requires that workers in each program area fully understand how their work can further protect children throughout the life of the case.

Practice Spotlight Challenge

In the month of September child welfare professionals in DHS offices and private agencies are asked to focus on how placement planning practices can be improved in your offices/agencies. Using policy, protocols, practices and information already available, consider each of the following as they relate to individual caseloads and across units/offices/agencies. It is expected that directors and managers will engage staff in activities and discussions in your offices to encourage review and critical focus on this practice area now and into the future.

- How do I know the placements on my caseload are safe and are in the child's best interest?
- What specific activities do I engage in that help me assess child safety?
- How do I assess the safety of the placement on an on-going basis?
- Are the current caregivers able to meet the child or youth's most basic needs?
- Is the child or youth getting better (or not) in his or her placement?

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- Is this the least restrictive placement that can best meet the child's needs or is another placement needed to better meet the needs of the child or youth?
- Does the current caregiver need support to meet the needs of the child or youth?
- Are there any policies or documents that have not been completed which must be done in order to clearly document that safety is addressed in my placement settings? (Note: particular attention is needed for missing or incomplete DHS 875 forms)
- How do I engage with my worker/supervisor to discuss short and long term placement plans for all children on my caseload?
- What critical thinking processes do I apply to make decisions about 'marginal' placements?
- Are my methods of documentation (forms, case plans, service agreements, etc.) sufficient to support my decisions about placements?
- How do I collaborate with my colleagues (CPS, foster care, licensing, adoption, juvenile justice) on a regular basis to help ensure I am considering all relevant factors in the current and future placement decisions?
- How am I supported when making difficult placement decisions, particularly when there is opposition from family members and the court? Or when even high placement priorities cannot be met, such as sibling splits vs. all siblings placed in a 'marginal' relative placement?

Leadership Assignment

DHS and private agency directors and managers are required to reference previously released *CSA Communication Issuance 13-061, Unlicensed Relative Placements*, the referenced best practice documents and associated county plans to ensure in the month of September all staff have taken a critical look at how they evaluate safety of children in all placements, but specifically those unlicensed relative placements. DHS Business Service Center Directors and Christine Rehagen (for private agencies) are available to dialogue with you regarding the intent behind this leadership assignment.