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## **AN EXAMINATION OF TRAINING FOR FAMILY SUPPORT CENTER STAFF**

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# **Allegheny County Department of Human Services**

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is dedicated to meeting the human services needs of county residents, particularly the county's most vulnerable populations, through an extensive range of prevention, early intervention, crises management and after-care services.

This report was prepared by the Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE), an office within DHS. DARE supports and publishes research related to the activities of DHS offices including: Aging; Behavioral Health; Children, Youth and Families; Community Services and Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities.

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## Abbreviations

CYF	Office of Children, Youth and Families
DHS	Department of Human Services
DARE	Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation
FDS	Family Development Specialist
FSC	Family Support Center
OCD	University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development
PAT	Parents as Teachers

## Acknowledgements

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## **OVERVIEW**

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) contracts with Family Support Centers (FSC) throughout Allegheny County to provide numerous services to children and their families. FSCs are community-based and governed by participants with support from FSC staff and maintain a primary focus on prenatal care and early childhood development. FSC staff must meet hourly training requirements each year, and some staff need ongoing training to maintain certifications they hold. The University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development (OCD) is the primary organization providing training courses and technical assistance to FSC staff.

In December 2009, DHS began soliciting feedback from FSC staff and Site Directors about the quality of training and technical assistance provided to them through OCD. The purpose of this project was to collect feedback that could be used to improve training such that it would better support FSC staff in their work as they serve families throughout Allegheny County.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate method for gathering feedback, and a total of seven focus groups were held: five for staff and two for Site Directors. Groups were convened regionally and sampling methods were designed to ensure a mix of participants based on center location, job experience and training participation. Sixty-four percent of invited staff attended the groups. Participants were asked to speak about the training and technical assistance they have received, what its strengths were, and how it could be improved to better suit their needs in the future.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **Training Logistics**

The logistics of the trainings offered through OCD seemed to be an area of frustration for staff. Focus group participants report: not receiving descriptions of the training courses in advance, trainers arriving unprepared, trainings taking significantly longer than necessary, and trainings held at similar times each month (interrupting their work with the same families).

### **Training Quality**

Overall, participants spoke very highly of the quality of the training provided by OCD. However, this is limited to when the information is new. The training is targeted to those with a basic level of knowledge, so experienced staff reported a need for more networking and advanced trainings. Aside from content, participants commented on how the style of engaging presenters created the most useful trainings.

### **Relevancy of Training**

Participants consistently expressed the concern that trainings are heavily focused on systems and processes. Staff would like more training on topics that can help them directly in their work with families, and they were able to identify key areas of need. Each group asked for more training on resources and for training on the issues families deal with on a daily basis (i.e. mental health, addictions, autism, etc.).

### **Technical Assistance**

Not all sites took advantage of the technical assistance provided by OCD, but all staff from those that did were very pleased with the assistance received. Staff and site directors reported that OCD staff were responsive and provided quality assistance.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Preparation**

- Provide accurate training agendas in advance
- Illustrate a greater appreciation for staff time by making trainings more concise
- Offer credentialing and certificates for more training
- Carefully consider the timing of trainings

### **Logistics**

- Encourage trainers/instructors to present course material in an engaging and interactive manner
- Tailor training to different levels of expertise
- Provide more networking opportunities for staff

### **Content**

- Provide useful handouts and resources at all trainings
- Develop a resource guide and provide resource trainings
- Expand training offerings

### **FAMILY SUPPORT CENTERS**

FSCs are community-based centers providing services and programs developed to increase the strength and stability of families and to increase parents' confidence in their parenting abilities. Services are administered to families through regular one-on-one home visits and center-based parent groups. The centers also serve as gathering places for families to interact with one another. Each center serves families with children aged birth to five years and provides a core of services, supplemented by referral and optional on-site services designed to meet the specific needs of the communities in which they are located.

DHS maintains a deep commitment to FSCs as a prevention strategy to nurture, protect and strengthen families. Of the 33 family support centers in Allegheny County, 27 receive funding from DHS. This funding is directed through lead agencies, which also provide oversight and serve as the DHS contract agency for the centers. FSCs are primarily governed by participants, with parents providing input.

FSCs receive support from the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development (OCD). One of OCD's regional initiatives is Partnerships for Family Support, which offers professional training and technical assistance to staff members of the numerous FSCs throughout Allegheny County. FSC staff have hourly training requirements that must be met each year (minimum of 20 hours), and the majority of the training they receive is provided by OCD.

### **UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

OCD is a public-private, regional resource and management facility that contributes to the welfare of children, youth and families in Pittsburgh and throughout Pennsylvania. A program within the School of Education, OCD is committed to improving the lives of children and their families using best practices, policy-based knowledge and applied research. In order to successfully implement its local, regional and national projects, OCD routinely partners with government agencies, foundations and other service providers with similar missions.

In effort to better support the efforts of FSCs, DHS collaborated with OCD to host focus groups comprised of both FSC staff and Site Directors to get their feedback on the training and technical assistance they receive. This report is a summary of their feedback, including recommendations for ways that training can be improved to help further develop staff's ability to work with families. These results were presented and discussed with OCD training staff.



### **PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

In December 2009, DHS convened seven focus groups (five comprised of FSC staff and two comprised of Site Directors) at various FSCs throughout the county to gather feedback on the training and technical assistance received by all staff.

Eight participants were invited to each focus group. Site Director focus groups were held separately from staff focus groups so that all participants would feel comfortable speaking freely. The process for selecting participants began by obtaining a list of all FSC staff and splitting them into three regions. Of the five groups for staff, two were held in the Mon Valley region, two in East Pittsburgh and one North of Pittsburgh. FSC staff working in the South, Central and Western regions were invited to the sites closest to their centers. One Site Director group was held in the Mon Valley and the other was held at OCD's Lexington office. Staff was then randomly selected, with the following constraints:

- Every attempt was made to include at least one person from each center
- Each group was designed to have a mixture of individuals with different levels of experience with OCD training, based on attendance lists provided by OCD
- The ratio of Family Development Specialists (FDS) in the sample was designed to reflect their ratio in the general population of FSC staff

Site Directors were also selected randomly, controlling for their level of OCD training.

All Site Directors were contacted in advance by DHS to make them aware that the focus groups would be taking place and they were also asked to support their staff's attendance. After participant selections were made and locations and times for the focus group were secured, selected individuals received invitations by e-mail with the logistics and a description of the purpose of the focus groups. If they did not respond, follow-up phone calls were made in an attempt to reach each person. Only three individuals were never reached directly, though messages were left for all chosen staff and Site Directors. A total of 55 individuals were invited to the groups. 43 confirmed their attendance, and 35 attended. Of all invited participants, we achieved a 64 percent attendance rate.

### **PURPOSE**

At the beginning of each focus group, the moderator provided all participants with copies of an agreement requiring their signatures, which stated the purpose of the focus group and outlined focus group procedures including a confidentiality agreement. The stated purpose of the groups was for staff to provide feedback and discuss the role of professional development activities (training and technical assistance) in their work. Participants were made aware that information gathered from these groups would be used to improve and enhance the training and technical assistance offered to the FSCs in order to make these tools as useful as possible.

To protect participants' confidentiality, no names or centers are associated with the comments included in this report. We also asked all participants not to share any of the information discussed in the group with external parties.

### **LOGISTICS**

Groups were scheduled to last no longer than 90 minutes, and three groups ended in about an hour. Participants did not receive any compensation, but light refreshments were provided.

Two DARE staff members facilitated the focus groups. Discussions were initiated and guided by a list of pre-determined questions asked by the focus group moderator, and the focus group recorder took detailed notes to capture data. After each session, the recorder would share her notes with the moderator who would then enhance the notes with her observations (non-verbal cues).

While questions were developed to elicit honest and open responses from focus group participants, moderators revisited questions after each session and revised them when it became clear that: a) select questions were always going to get the same response, or b) the order in which questions were asked disrupted the natural flow of conversation.

## Findings

Focus groups were advantageous in gathering opinions about OCD training and technical assistance because participants' responses were not limited to certain choices and they were able to express themselves in their own words. Moreover, moderators were free to ask follow-up questions and allow participants to either clarify or expand upon an opinion. Questions were carefully worded to capture general perceptions about OCD training and technical assistance and moderators deliberately did not ask about specific training courses. Responses to introductory questions ("What types of training have you received from the OCD?" and "What technical assistance have you received from OCD?") encouraged participants to think broadly about their experiences and solicited input from all participants, helping to capture a range of perspectives.

There are some limitations to this focus group analysis. Since only a sample of FSC staff participated, selection bias is the main concern. We cannot be sure that the staff who did not attend the focus groups has similar opinions to those who did, especially since FDSs attended at a higher rate than other staff. Additionally, data entry personnel were not included in the sampling because we believed training was designed primarily for staff who worked directly with families. By eliminating this group, we may have missed important feedback.

In this section, we have organized the results of our qualitative analysis by the topics that emerged most frequently in all of the focus groups. We have further broken down focus group results into staff responses and Site Director responses. While feedback from both groups does overlap occasionally, certain issues emerged that were specific to one group or the other.

### **STAFF FEEDBACK**

#### **Training Attendance**

Almost all staff said they attended training because it was required by either a Site Director or by a funder. Some staff are provided more flexibility by Site Directors to choose to attend training based on what they believe will be of value to them. FDSs in particular are given less discretion because of the training hours required for their jobs.

Non-FDS staff report that their attendance at trainings is dictated primarily by the subject matter being presented. Some find several trainings interesting and relevant to them while others do not feel that any of the trainings apply to them.

For staff that has more discretion, the main reason for choosing not to attend training or opting to leave training early is the opportunity cost of training. Staff cites the other demands they face (home visits, paperwork, etc.) as reasons that they may choose to skip a training, particularly when they are not sure what the topic of the training will be or if the training has not been scheduled well in advance. Staff indicated that it was hard for them to justify taking time and energy away from the families they serve to attend a training course, especially if it is not clear that the training will be beneficial.

### **The Impact and Practical Application of Training**

All groups expressed that training is most useful and applicable when the information provided is new. Staff readily expressed that most of the training they have received has been applicable to their work and has helped them perform their jobs better, especially as new staff joining their FSC. Even if staff worked in child development prior to this experience, they acknowledged the importance of knowing how to work within the FSC model.

A few specific examples of training that staff found very useful to their work included:

- **FDC and Pre-Service training** These training courses were mentioned often as examples of training that is most practically applicable to the day-to-day responsibilities of FSC staff. In fact, staff that had not previously worked in the child development field and/or family support found these trainings critical to their ability to serve families.
- **Learning about the impact of nonverbal communication during FDC training** Staff said this training made them more conscious of their reactions—both verbal and non-verbal—when interacting with families. Most said being aware helped them change their behavior to ensure they did not appear threatening or judgmental when working with families.
- **Receiving information about resources** Participants spoke highly of useful books (specifically in PAT training) or handouts they have received that they still reference, and they expressed the desire to receive similar resources for other topics. When some members spoke about resource training they had received on welfare and food banks, others were very interested and wished they had been able to attend.

## Findings

A notable exception to positive staff opinions about the usefulness of training was when Site Directors required them to attend the same training multiple times. Although some Site Directors said they find value in staff taking refresher courses, most staff stated that while training may have been helpful the first time around, attending multiple times did not result in a corresponding increase in knowledge or skills. Staff recognizes that there is always more to learn, but they feel that all courses are taught at the most basic level, and there is not training appropriate for staff who has been working in their positions for several years. Advanced courses, or training courses designed for more experienced staff, would suit their needs more effectively. In order for training to remain relevant and applicable, staff also stress the need for training to evolve – to address the new and different challenges faced by families today versus those families that staff were serving one, five or even ten years ago. A few staff expressed that training can sometimes be too “textbook” (addressed in Opportunities to Improve Training).

Finally, some staff mentioned what they perceive to be an institutional shift in emphasizing processes over people. Staff understand the need for reporting and collecting information, but believe that training (and oversight) is too heavily focused on these processes rather than information and tools that would help them more effectively serve their families (addressed in Suggestions for Future Training). In other words, training too often becomes about how to more efficiently do paperwork than work with families. Many expressed a desire for more relevant training that focused on societal problems (i.e. homelessness and substance abuse) and shifting family dynamics (i.e. more resources for fathers).

### **Staff Expectations for Training**

For most staff, learning something unique or different that they can immediately apply to the work they do with families is paramount. Both staff and Site Directors expected knowledgeable instructors with experience specific to the subject matter they are teaching, and this expectation seems to be met consistently.

Staff noted that instructors’ use of real-life scenarios to emphasize training themes was helpful, but cautioned against making the courses too much about the instructor’s experience. Staff also expects instructors to leave time for debate and appreciate the special insight staff can contribute from working in the communities.

Staff and Site Directors expect the content of a training to match the title and description of it (which they would like to receive in advance). They also expect that instructors will come prepared (bring the appropriate amount of handouts, etc.) and appreciate those who do, interpreting this to mean that the instructors value their time. When these expectations are not met, staff finds this frustrating and unprofessional.

## Findings

Another common frustration is the feeling that trainings drag on much longer than necessary. Staff expect trainers to be respectful of their time and provide the information they need in a concise, but thorough, manner.

### **Preferred Training Format**

The vast majority of FSC staff clearly prefers training that is engaging and interactive and do not respond well to the lecture-style of instruction. By nature of their jobs, staff is used to being on-the-go and interacting with different people all day, so their personalities do not mesh well with training where they are expected to just sit and listen. Staff from multiple focus groups commented on how difficult it is for them to sit in a classroom for hours, and said that when the speaker lectures, they are frequently unfocused, falling asleep, or want to leave very quickly. One staff member did assert that while she is fine with interactive activities, she would like for her decision not to participate on occasion to be respected.

Another topic discussed was the availability of online training. Some individuals had taken advantage of the one online PAT follow-up training and really enjoyed the flexibility it provided. They liked being able to dedicate small portions of time to the training at their convenience, which allowed them to complete the training without canceling visits or changing their schedules. Others expressed little interest in online training. They come to trainings for the knowledge that experts have to share, and they also believe that a lot of the value in training is the opportunity to interact with their counterparts from other centers. Some also prefer being taught by an individual rather than reading from a computer screen.

### **Characteristics of a Quality Training**

Staff was mostly complimentary of the quality of OCD training. Staff reported that all presenters are knowledgeable, many are engaging and they know the family support model very well. Staff identified the following characteristics with quality training:

- Engaging and dynamic presenters
- Discussion-based training (rather than trainings dominated by lecture)
- New and applicable information provided
- Opportunities to network and learn from their peers at other FSCs
- Opportunities to present and work through real world problems
- Trainings available at different levels
- Some staff appreciate entry-level training with information presented in “layman’s terms”
- Some staff (more experienced) are bored with entry-level training and would like more advanced training designed for those with years of experience
- Training provided at convenient times and locations

### **Opportunities to Improve Training**

When discussing the positive qualities of OCD training, staff qualified their statements by emphasizing that it is primarily useful for new staff. For the appropriate audience, the training itself is excellent, but a large portion of FSC staff have been in their positions for multiple years and feel that the logistics, topics and level of instruction are not on target with what they need to be most effective.

Staff had many suggestions for ways to improve trainings to help them to better serve their families. Most of the comments we heard were similar from group-to-group and can be put into the following categories:

- **Offer community-specific training** Some focus group participants expressed appreciation for instructors who understood the fact that there may be cultural nuances or other reasons why it could be challenging to put some of their training into practice when working with families.

At the individual family level, some staff has encountered challenges with families from other cultures and families with limited proficiency in the English language. Staff would like more opportunities to learn about cultural competency so they know what to expect and are able to act appropriately when entering a family's home.

Some staff did recall a few circumstances at their centers when they needed resources to serve a family with limited English proficiency, but most did not act as if the language barrier created any problems. Staff that did encounter this need said that families frequently brought translators, or that they were able to refer the families appropriately so they could receive necessary services.

- **Tailor training to staff with different levels of expertise** As noted above, some staff appreciate entry-level information because new staff come from all different backgrounds and may not have experience in child development, child abuse and neglect, etc. However, a significant portion of staff have several years of experience working within the FSC, and they need more advanced training that goes beyond the basics and explores the challenges they face when working with families.

## Findings

- **Provide credentialing for the training received** This request was first made by staff and then echoed by Site Directors. Staff would like to receive certificates to document their accomplishments, especially for training that is time-intensive. Site Directors support certificates and credentialing because they feel their staff should be recognized for, and have the ability to document, new skills acquired and training completed.
- **Provide more training on how to meet families' immediate needs and teach staff how to balance this work with other FSC responsibilities** Most training ignores the realities that FSC staff face when they work with families, which is that there are usually immediate needs that must be met before their work with assessments and child development can begin (i.e., food, heating, legal counsel, help with substance abuse, etc.). Staff would like these issues to be acknowledged in training and get more resources that they can share with families and advice on how to manage their time in order to achieve everything they are expected to do as an FDS.
- **Clearly announce topics and agendas for training in advance (specifically FDS networking)** Attending training often comes at the expense of staff members doing a home visit or taking time to complete necessary paperwork. For trainings that are not mandatory at each site (FDS networking), staff express that they would like to know in advance what topics will be covered so they can be sure to attend the trainings that will be most useful to them. Currently, some staff attend and do not find training useful, or, staff do not attend because they do not know the topic but then later find out that they would have liked to attend.
- **Allow more opportunities for networking with staff from other centers** In every focus group, we found that staff craves the opportunity to network more and learn from staff at the other centers. Staff consistently feel that people from other centers have knowledge or resources or ways of dealing with problems that they may be unaware of (some were even seeking and sharing resources at the focus groups). They want more opportunities to learn from each other and be able to share resources.



## Findings

- **Allow staff to bring real problems to training to discuss in a structured format** This suggestion surfaced frequently, but it also came in the midst of staff complaining that they do not like when everyone brings up their own stories at training. The difference seemed to be that conversation may sometimes drag or be sidetracked during the Q&A session of trainings by people who talk at length about their own situations. The issue seems to be focus and relevancy.

Staff from multiple groups raised the suggestion that they be given the training topic and agenda in advance and then asked to bring problems they have encountered that relate to that issue to the next training. The instructor could then moderate a focused discussion about these problems so that staff can learn from the trainer, and from each other, ways they may be able to tackle them. This suggestion seemed especially important to more experienced staff that have learned the basics, but still find challenges surfacing every day in their work.

- **Provide resources training, and provide more resources at all trainings** On par with requests for networking, staff enthusiastically expressed their desire for more information on resources, including a resource guide tailored to FSCs. They also want this training to be updated, recognizing that community resources come and go. Some specific requests include information on resources for housing, fathers, previously incarcerated parents and children with special needs.
- **Provide training on different topics: issues families are dealing with, children ages 6+, etc.** In order to adequately address the needs of parents and young children, staff needs to be able to address the needs of the whole family. While their work focuses on children aged 0-5, staff would like more comprehensive training that allows them to better serve the family by being able to assist parents with older youth in the household (ages 6+).

## Findings

- **Improve timing and logistics of training** Most staff felt that training lasts longer than necessary (i.e., what is accomplished in four hours could easily be accomplished in one to two hours). FSC staff also tends to have flexible schedules that allow them to be home by a certain time, so trainings that run later (until 4 pm) cause problems with family obligations like child care. Some staff felt that trainings are too frequently held at the same times of the week and day, forcing them to cancel on the same families repeatedly. Finally, staff was upset that they must now pay for parking at OCD in order to attend mandatory training.
- **Keep information current and bring in experts (i.e. have Children, Youth and Families trainers/caseworkers talk about abuse and neglect)** Staff discussed their desire for training to evolve and stay current with new statistics and new information that reflect changes in their working environment. They seek information about best practices in helping families as demographics of the population they serve shifts over time (given recessions, policy changes, etc.). Specifically, staff has noted increases in the number of families with behavioral health issues, children with special needs, homeless young adults and fathers with children. They also speak of trying to meet families' needs with fewer resources than were available in the past (while the economy was strong).

Staff believes training could be enhanced by bringing in more outside experts as co-trainers. They consistently report that OCD trainers are very knowledgeable, but they also have a desire to hear from CYF trainers and caseworkers when learning about abuse and neglect, autism, domestic violence, etc. They also appreciate hearing from families about what resources they previously accessed that worked for them.

### **Suggestions for Future Trainings**

Staff gave thoughtful consideration to this question, and suggestions from staff within different focus groups and different regions were often similar. In general, staff would like to have access to more training that helps them directly in their work with families. Right now, most training is focused on reporting/paperwork/systems rather than on how to improve their day-to-day work.

Some of the requests that were voiced consistently included:

- Resource training – information on resources available for families for numerous issues (i.e., housing, food, furniture, behavioral health, developmental delays, etc.)
- Autism
- Children with special needs
- Training on issues that families deal with (drug & alcohol addiction, domestic violence, teen parenting, etc.)
- Mental health – how to spot signs of trouble, how to work with people with mental health needs
- Training for dealing with children ages 6+ – in order to help parents and young child, need to be able to help the whole family
- How to manage their work in the face of crises (practical discussion of time management, when reality is messy and crises occur)

Other training requests included:

- How to work with fathers – find them resources in a system designed to help mothers
- What to expect if a family is CYF court active – educate staff so they can prepare the family
- Interpersonal skills, nonverbal communication
- How to work with incarcerated parents re-entering the community – what resources are available for them
- Cultural competency – make available what was in FDC to others in a one-day training

### **Training Opportunities for Others**

Focus group participants thought that all staff would benefit from some type of training, including those who are not FDSs. Basic training would allow data entry personnel and van drivers, for example, to better understand FSCs and the families they serve, enabling them to do their jobs more effectively.

## Findings

Multiple groups also raised the issue of making more training available to parents. They spoke of opportunities that had been available in the past and wanting to see even more available in the future, especially in the area of leadership.

Staff expressed the desire to have Site Directors and influential people from the lead agencies attend trainings that allow them to better understand the demands faced by FSC staff. They feel this would help supervisors place reasonable expectations on their staff. Currently, staff feels they are unable to take the proper amount of time they need to prepare for home visits and complete required paperwork. Site Directors agreed that lead agencies could benefit from training.

### **Technical Assistance**

Staff had varying levels of experience with technical assistance, but feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Staff stated that OCD was always responsive, providing quality technical assistance in a timely manner.

Most staff did not personally receive technical assistance but did know of their data entry person or Site Director receiving technical assistance. Others were not familiar with technical assistance from OCD, and some accessed technical assistance directly.

Staff that had used technical assistance before or were at a center that used it frequently felt well-informed about what was available. Few stated that they did not feel well-informed, but most of the individuals who had never received it looked unsure on how to answer the question. Those who were unsure often ended up concluding that they do not use technical assistance at their center because they have other resources (i.e. extra staff on site, support from their lead agency) that make it unnecessary.

### **SITE DIRECTOR FEEDBACK**

Results from Site Directors' focus groups are presented in this section by topic, and the Site Directors' opinions about OCD training for their staff are separated from their opinions on Site Director-specific training where applicable.

Limitations to the results gathered from Site Director focus groups are greater than those of staff for a number of reasons. Due to unforeseen circumstances, several Site Directors did not attend the first Site Director focus group, resulting in only three people participating. (Attendance at the second group totaled six.) This significantly altered the dynamics of the group and focus group moderators felt their feedback was less open and honest than feedback received from other focus groups. Another potential reason for limitations reporting Site Directors' results is that the topic of discussion was naturally more sensitive for Site Directors. Site Directors' have a significant amount of control over whether staff attended certain trainings, so some discussion topics required them to take ownership for their decisions.

### **Training Attendance**

#### **Staff Training Assignments**

Site Directors said they receive an OCD training calendar in January, which includes basic information about the training being offered throughout the year. Some Site Directors shared this information directly with staff (either at a staff meeting or in e-mail correspondence), and others assessed staff resources first and then made a determination as to which staff they would require to attend which trainings. Multiple Site Directors mentioned sending only one member of their staff to training and then asking them to share what they learned with colleagues (a "train-the-trainer" approach).

Most of the Site Directors in our focus groups report being asked by staff on occasion if they could attend training outside the scope of what OCD offers. Many Site Directors would be willing to allow this, but budgetary constraints have limited that practice in the last few years. When asked what kind of training their staffs sought elsewhere, Site Directors responded with examples of resource trainings (i.e. homelessness, weatherization).

### **Site Director Attendance**

Site Directors want training that is tailored more closely to their varying levels of experience. All agreed that Pre-Service training was incredibly helpful for new Site Directors. In addition to Pre-Service training, it was suggested that new Site Directors would be well-served with a mentor the first 12 to 18 months of their employment at FSC because of the steep learning curve. Veteran Site Directors said they would like more challenging training after being in the position for a year or more.

### **The Impact of Training on Managing a Family Support Center**

Trainings that Site Directors consider worthwhile are multi-faceted and include tips on managerial skills (time management and personnel) and the exploration of more complex and specific topics (substantive discussions about real-life family situations). Most Site Directors, like staff, mentioned instructors' teaching styles as a determinate of whether training was truly beneficial for them. Instructors that engaged them in discussions and adapted teaching to different audiences seemed most useful to Site Directors. Directors reported that their current instructor successfully builds on material from previous trainings and reaches her audience well.

Site Directors seemed to find training especially helpful in facilitating the effective management of their centers when training focused on policies that are, or should, be in place. Policies discussed by participants included those that the Site Directors should have in place for staff, but also procedures for handling personnel and legal issues. This included information on how to develop and implement a policy if one did not already exist.

### **The Value of OCD Training for Experienced Staff**

There are mixed feelings among Site Directors regarding the value of OCD training for more experienced staff. Many Site Directors acknowledge getting push back from their senior staff about some of the training they make mandatory because staff feel it is too repetitive.

A few Site Directors felt strongly that repeat trainings could still be beneficial for staff to attend. These Site Directors felt that skills can always be refreshed and that staff may have new experiences in-between training sessions that allow them to relate and learn from the information differently the second or third time around.

However, several Site Directors strongly believed that their staff's concerns were legitimate and that experienced staff does need to be challenged differently. Most agreed that staff could benefit from more peer-to-peer interaction and information that goes beyond entry-level material. It was reported by Site Directors that staff most often inquire about training that has information on resources, and they get a lot out of FDC training.

### **Opportunities to Improve Training**

Site Directors' recommendations for improving training opportunities for both staff and for themselves were similar and mirrored staff suggestions.

- Clearly announce topics and agendas for training in advance (specifically FDS networking). This would enable Site Directors to help staff plan center activities, family visits and other scheduled appointments appropriately.
- Be prepared for trainings (handouts ready, kits ready, etc.) in order to eliminate downtime.
- Make trainings more structured and concise. All Site Directors emphatically agree that what is currently being accomplished in training in four hours could be accomplished in one or two hours. Multi-week, consecutive trainings also should be scheduled more thoughtfully as some Site Directors did not think it was useful for training classes within the same course to be separated by multiple weeks (if a training spanned a holiday, for example).
- Provide credentialing for the training received. Site Directors support certificates and credentialing because they feel their staff should be recognized for and have the ability to document their experience, expertise and many hours in training.
- Site Directors thought it would benefit FCS staff to be invited to trainings that are also attended by their counterparts in child welfare. In addition to building and maintaining rapport with the caseworkers who work with the same families they do, Site Directors felt it would also be helpful for staff to familiarize themselves with child welfare processes.

### **Suggestions for Future Trainings**

Site Directors identified the following trainings as options they would like to see offered to their staff and made available to them.

- Training for Staff
  - **Customer Service Training** This would be beneficial for all staff, not just frontline support workers. Everyone interacting with FSC families could benefit from tips and reminders on being courteous to anyone that comes into the office or calls on the phone.

## Findings

- **How to Take Care of You** Most Site Directors spoke about their staff's commitment to the families they serve and to completing the appropriate reporting processes that FSC has put into place. However, many expressed concern for their staff's stress levels and their health and well-being due to the demands placed on them by the nature of their jobs. Site Directors thought a course on relaxation techniques, or something similar to avoid burnout, is essential for people who are constantly focused on caring for others.
- **Time Management** Most Site Directors were confident in their staff's ability to manage their own schedules but thought a course on how to realistically manage their time with families could be beneficial. Families often need help with many things beyond child and family development (i.e. making calls for people with limited English skills) or when crises occur.
- **Resource Training**
- Training for Site Directors
  - **Site Director-Specific Pre-Service Training** While all Site Directors valued Pre-Service training, some requested an orientation that is developed specifically for Site Directors.
  - **More Support** Site Directors agreed that new directors should have a mentor for their first year in the position. Even for those who had worked within FSCs before assuming their position commented that the role was significantly different and they could not have performed their job well without support. Some had support from their lead agencies, but felt that incoming directors needed more assistance, especially in recent years given the increasing demands for knowledge of paperwork and computer systems.
  - **Courses to Build Supervisory Skills** Site Directors cited personnel issues and conflict resolution as two areas where they could use more guidance from both skilled instructors and peers.
  - **More Challenging Relevant Courses** Most directors that have been working for FSC for a number of years want to be more challenged in training and said they would appreciate training that is based on the latest research available on a given topic (i.e. autism, current events).
  - **Training on New Reporting Requirements**
  - **Best practices** Site Directors would like to learn more about best practices at the local and national level.



While staff and Site Directors had many positive comments regarding the training and technical assistance they receive through OCD, several areas for potential improvement emerged from the focus group discussions.

### **PREPARATION**

#### **Provide accurate training agendas in advance**

A specific and thorough training agenda (including topics and descriptions) should be shared with FSC staff and Site Directors as far in advance of a training course as possible. While it was acknowledged that OCD sends training schedules for the year in January, topics are often too general for staff to make an informed decision about attending.

#### **Illustrate a greater appreciation for staff time**

- Both staff and Site Directors felt that trainings often take too long and that what is accomplished in four hours could be accomplished in one to two hours. This is a concern since staff is losing valuable time with families to attend the training
- Trainers/instructors should ensure that course materials (handouts, presentations, etc.) are ready prior to class
- Revisit course design to ensure that trainings are the appropriate length and participants are not held longer than necessary

#### **Offer credentialing for more training**

Staff receives many hours of training over the course of their careers, and both staff and Site Directors feel that having certificates and credentials to show for their work is an important part of professional development.

#### **Carefully consider the timing of trainings**

Examine current training schedules and solicit feedback from FSCs regarding optimal training times. Some staff reported that training is always at the same time of the week, consistently interfering with an event or family. Others reported that trainings are always in the afternoon, while mornings may be preferred. Finding the optimal schedule design will require more research, but it is important to offer training when staff is able to both attend and be attentive.

### LOGISTICS

#### **Encourage trainers/instructors to present course material in an engaging and interactive manner**

Staff report that they are used to being active in their jobs, and they have great difficulty remaining engaged during lectures or monotone speakers. Focus group participants reported they learned best with engaging and interactive instructors. Encourage all instructors to develop methods for engaging training participants.

#### **Tailor training to different levels of expertise**

New staff benefit greatly from the training currently offered. Experienced staff may want to learn more about a certain subject (Child Abuse was cited often), but they do not value taking the same course repeatedly. Offer training and case conferencing designed for staff with greater levels of experience.

#### **Provide more networking opportunities for staff**

Consider the best means for allowing staff to network, communicate and learn from each other. Although the primary reason for staff to attend training is to gain new knowledge or learn a new skill, they consistently voiced their desire to network with their peers.

- Provide opportunities for FSC staff to interact with and learn from child welfare workers
- Allow for focused case conferencing during trainings where instructors facilitate discussion among peers about difficult problems staff are experiencing with families
- Create an e-mail distribution list for all FSC staff to facilitate peer advising

### CONTENT

#### **Provide useful handouts and resources at all trainings**

Staff provided mixed reviews of the resources currently provided, but all expressed a strong interest in being provided with useful and relevant notes and takeaways that they can continue to reference once the training has ended. Make the provision of useful handouts and resources a consistent element of trainings.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### **Develop a resource guide and provide resource trainings**

Training seems to be primarily focused on systems and child development issues. While staff find this information helpful, they said the families they serve often have more immediate needs (unable to pay utilities, struggle with mental illness or cannot find a job) that have to be addressed first. They consistently voiced a desire to have more knowledge of the resources they and their families can access.

### **Expand training offerings**

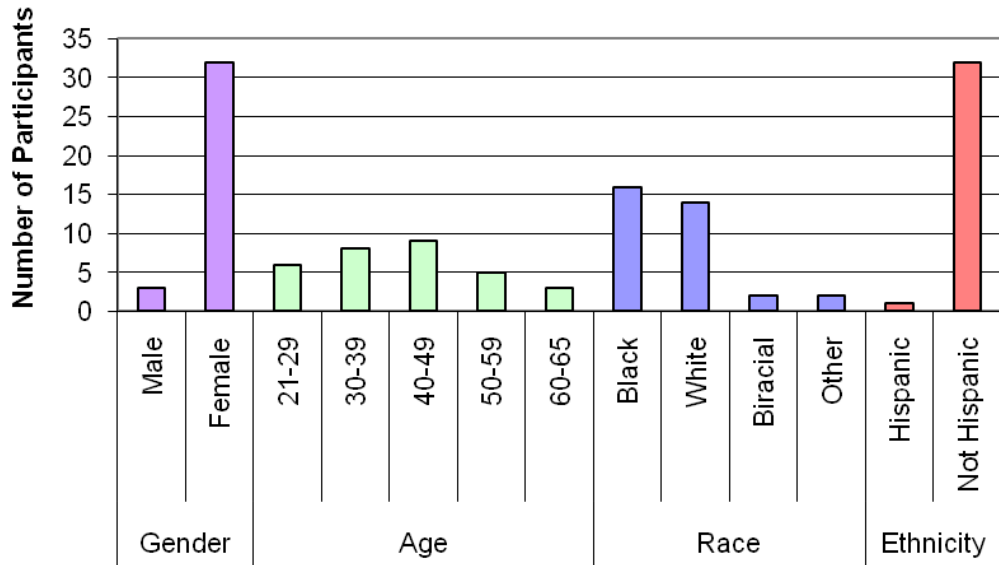
Participants reported completing surveys at the conclusion of current training asking them for suggestions on future topics, but state that they have not seen these topics offered. Take this feedback into consideration to plan future trainings. Specific recommendations we received for training are discussed in the report. A few of these included:

- Substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Mental health
- Crisis management training
- Autism
- Special needs children
- Diversity/cultural sensitivity
- Professional decorum and interpersonal skills
- More comprehensive orientation for new Site Directors and a mentor for the first 12-18 months of employment

# Appendix A

## PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

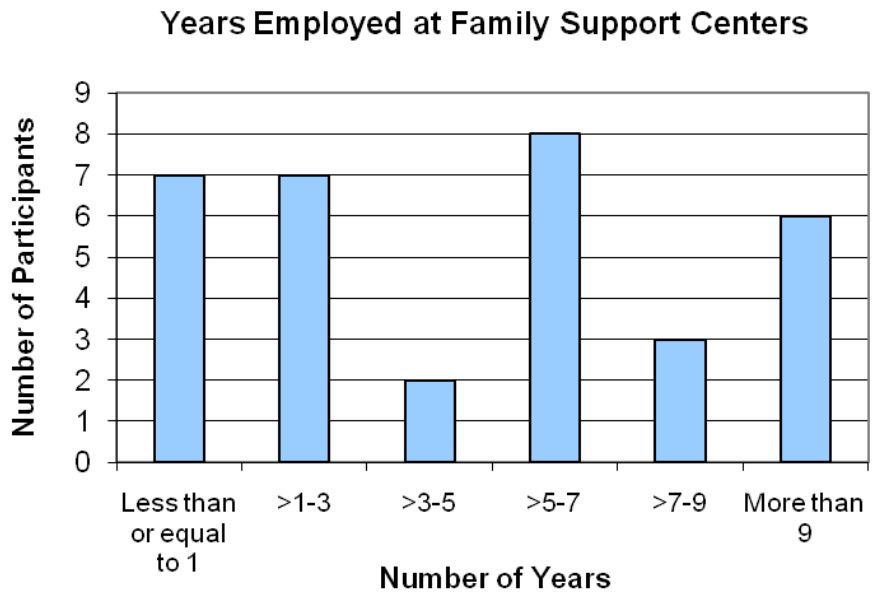
Participant Demographics



Participant Job Titles



# Appendix A



### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

#### Staff Questions: Final Version

Please tell us your name and, in one or two sentences, briefly describe what you do at your Family Support Center.

What types of training have you received from the Office of Child Development?

How do you feel about the quality of the training provided?

Think about some of the trainings you have attended that were the most useful and the least useful. What qualities set them apart?

When you attend training, what do you expect to get out of it? Does the training usually meet these expectations?

If training has been offered that you did not attend, why didn't you go?

Think about the balance of lecture, discussion and group exercises used in trainings. Do you think this balance is appropriate, or would you like to see it change in some way?

In what format is training offered? Is it always classroom-based? Are there any available online or in other formats?

How has the training you've received impacted your work? Has it improved your ability to work with the families you serve?

How could the training that is offered be improved to better suit your needs and the needs of the families you serve?

Are there specific kinds of training you would like to attend that are not currently offered?

Who in the center do you think could most benefit from training (job positions, not specific people)?

#### Transition [to technical assistance]

What kind of technical assistance have you received from the Office of Child Development?

Do you feel well informed about the technical assistance available through OCD?

What are the circumstances under which you received technical assistance?

Did you request the assistance or did OCD reach out to you?

How has the TA you've received impacted your work?

How do you feel about the quality of the technical assistance provided?

#### Closing

We have about [#] minutes remaining. Is there anything else that you think is important to discuss that we have not covered so far?

## Appendix B

### Site Director Questions: Final Version

Please tell us your name and something that you think makes your center unique.

[Staff Training]

What is the process at your center for communicating to staff the trainings that are available and which they must attend?

What training have you required your staff to attend?

Do you find the training provided through OCD valuable for your more experienced staff?

What are some of the reasons you might require staff to attend multiple trainings on the same topic?

[If needed] You may require staff to attend the same training multiple times over the course of a couple years even if they may perceive it to be repetitive. As their supervisor, what do you think the value is to this training?

How many of your staff has sought out training opportunities beyond what is required? Have you encouraged them to do so?

Has staff approached you with interest in receiving training in areas that are not currently offered?

Is there any training *you* would like to see your staff receive that they are not currently receiving?

Who in the center do you think could most benefit from training (job positions, not specific people)?

Transition [to Site Director Training]

What types of training have you received from the Office of Child Development? How many of the trainings you've attended were specific to Site Directors?

How do you feel about the quality of the training provided?

Think about some of the trainings you have attended that were the most useful and the least useful. What qualities set them apart?

How has the training you've received impacted your ability to manage the center?

How could the training that is offered be improved to better suit your needs?

Are there specific kinds of training you would like to attend that are not currently offered?

## Appendix B

### Transition [to technical assistance]

What kind of technical assistance has you or anyone at your center received from the Office of Child Development?

What are the circumstances under which you received technical assistance? Did you request the assistance or did OCD reach out to you?

How do you feel about the quality of the technical assistance provided?

How has your staff been made aware of the kinds of technical assistance available to them? Do they access it directly, or do requests go through you?

How has the TA you've received impacted your work?

### Closing

We have about [#] minutes remaining. Is there anything else that you think is important to discuss that we have not covered so far?