

Child and Family Services Reviews Reviewer Brief— Strengthening How Reviewers Determine Effectiveness of Agencies’ Assessment of Underlying Needs and Provision of Services (OSRI Item 12)

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) Onsite Review Instrument and Instructions (OSRI) is the official instrument used in rating cases for CFSR determinations of substantial conformity. This brief is intended to strengthen how CFSR Reviewers determine, during case reviews, whether or not the agency (1) made concerted efforts to assess the needs of children, parents, and foster parents to identify the services necessary to achieve case goals and adequately address the issues relevant to the agency’s involvement with the family, and (2) provided the appropriate services. It builds upon instructions provided in **Reviewer Brief—Understanding the Federal Expectations for Rating Cases**, and draws on information in the field of child welfare/social work regarding needs-based assessments and service plans.

Assessment of Needs

Comprehensive assessment is the foundation for developing service plans that effectively address the needs of children and parents. In a paper on improving outcomes,¹ Paul Vincent emphasizes the importance of focusing on underlying needs, as opposed to symptoms:

Too often, however, this disproportionate focus on symptoms overlooks the child and family history and experience that underlies and produces these challenging behaviors. As a consequence, the underlying causes of neglect and abuse may not be adequately addressed and many families are again subjects of additional reports of abuse and neglect. Where children are concerned, inattention to needs can lead to instability, increasingly more restrictive placement settings and the complete absence of permanency.

With regard to assessment, Item 12 of the OSRI first requires Reviewers to determine if the agency completed a formal or informal initial and/or ongoing comprehensive assessment that accurately assessed needs (of the child(ren), parent(s), and foster/pre-adoptive parent(s), if applicable).

While many states may require the use of instruments or tools to guide assessment, Reviewers should not focus on the **completion of an instrument** but rather on the **quality of the assessment**. In addition, children and/or parents involved in a case may have had other screenings or assessments completed to address specific issues, such as domestic violence, trauma, parenting capacity, or mental health evaluation. Reviewers should not consider any one of these in isolation as an assessment of needs, but should examine how information from any or all of these evaluations and screenings are integrated into a broader, more comprehensive

¹ Paul Vincent, The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, “Improving Outcomes by Improving Practice: A Practice Focused Newsletter,” July 2011, Volume 1, Issue 1.
http://www.childwelfaregroup.org/documents/Vol1_Issue1.pdf

assessment by the agency that addresses the underlying needs of a family related to safety, permanency, and well-being for children.

In determining if the agency conducted a comprehensive assessment that accurately assesses needs, Reviewers should consider:

- Was an assessment completed initially and periodically on an ongoing basis (as needed) to update assessment information relevant to ongoing case planning?
- What did the assessment identify as underlying needs of the child(ren), parent(s), and foster/pre-adoptive(s) parents, if applicable?
- Given the circumstances of the child and/or family situation, and the history of the case, are there underlying needs that were not identified?
- What was the quality of the assessment and did it identify all underlying needs? Did the assessment go beyond asking questions and examine the needs based on the family/child circumstances?

Note: In completing the OSRI, it is important to understand that Item 12 is not addressing assessment of needs related to safety and/or children’s education, physical health, and mental/behavioral health—including substance abuse. These are addressed in safety and other well being items.

Questions to consider for the child(ren):

- Did the assessment consider needs such as social competencies, attachment and caregiver relationships, social relationships and connections, social skills, and self-esteem? Examples: A young child has been severely neglected and has never learned how to interact with other children. A teenager has been sexually abused by several caretakers and wants to form a connection with an adult with whom she feels safe and can trust.
- Did the assessment consider the child’s past abuse/neglect history, separation/grief/loss concerns, and trauma?
- If the child is living or placed with an alternative caregiver outside of his or her home but is not considered to be in foster care, has the agency’s assessment considered the child’s need for permanency and stability?
- If the youth is in foster care and is an adolescent, Reviewers should determine whether the youth’s needs for independent living (IL) skills are being assessed on an ongoing basis as part of the independent living plan. In making this determination, consider the following: Did the agency assess for independent living skills? Is there an independent living plan in the file? (This is required for all youth age 16 and older). Example: An older teen is living in residential care and has learned basic IL life skills but expresses a desire to go to community college, so does the assessment also include what he needs to achieve this goal?

Questions to consider for the parent(s):

- What does the parent need to provide care and supervision and to ensure the well-being of his or her child? Example: The parent has been diagnosed with depression, which affects his ability to get out of bed and get the children off to school on a regular basis.
- What would the parent need to support his or her relationship with the child, or build a relationship if one was not established before the child's entry into foster care?
- What underlying needs, if they continue to be unmet, will affect the individual's capacity to parent and nurture his or her child?
- What is the parent's current capacity to engage in services and what supports may be needed to support engagement?
- If children are in care and going to be reunified, what will the parents need to provide care for all of their children after reunification?

Questions to consider for the foster and/or pre-adoptive parent(s):

- What does the foster and/or pre-adoptive parent need to parent and care for the child? Example: The foster parents usually take older children and they agreed to take a younger child who has a high level of activity and temper tantrums. Does the assessment identify this as a potential challenge for them?
- How do the needs of the child affect the foster and/or pre-adoptive parent's ability to provide care and supervision and to ensure the well-being of the child?

Assessment case example:

Joseph is 9 years old and lives with his 4-year-old sister, Amanda, in the home of their maternal great-grandmother and elderly aunt. The relatives agreed to take the children last year when their mother went to prison for theft; she is scheduled to be released in a few months. The agency has been involved with the family off and on since Joseph was an infant; currently this is an in-home case.

The father of the children was recently released from prison for drug use and has expressed interest in reconnecting with the children and possibly sharing custody of them once he gets a job and secures housing. The father completed a psychological examination as well as a parenting capacity assessment. Both indicated he experienced abuse as a child and turned to drugs and alcohol as an escape, and also noted his need to understand how to show affection and warmth toward his children. He told Reviewers in an interview that he wanted to stop abusing substances and "have good relationships" with his children, his ex-wife, and their relatives. He discussed his brief participation in a batterer's group while in prison and admitted that he had hit his ex-wife in the past in front of the children.

The children live with relatives in a rural community, and their transportation is not reliable. Joseph attends school by bus but is isolated and has few friends or after-school activities. He told Reviewers in an interview that he missed his mother but was also angry with her for going to prison. He said he wanted to do activities with his dad, such as play baseball. Joseph told Reviewers that he wanted his parents to get along and his dad not to hit his mom anymore. He

said that while he wasn't afraid of his father, he did worry about his mom when his dad would get angry at her. Amanda is home all day with her relatives and they told Reviewers they were "worn out" with constantly supervising her and keeping her busy with activities. They said that Joseph was "easy" to care for when he was not having angry outbursts, but they said they may ask the agency to place Amanda in a foster home to give them a break.

During a visit to the home to conduct interviews, Reviewers noted that Joseph was very attentive to his sister. Amanda told Reviewers that she, too, missed her mother and wished she would come home. Reviewers also noted that Amanda was engaged in constant motion and activity, and that she asked her aunt several times to read to her and teach her to do homework, like Joseph. The mother told Reviewers in a phone interview that she wants to make a better life for herself and her children by getting a job, finishing her college degree, and rebuilding her children's trust. She stated that she would like to have a better relationship with her ex-husband if he could seek treatment for his anger and violence toward her. She stated that he had never physically hurt the children but that he needs to understand how the violence toward her scared them and made them feel unsafe.

What are examples of the needs of each family member?

Joseph:

- To feel secure in his positive connection and relationship with his mother.
- To receive assistance with addressing his anger toward his mother.
- To build peer relationships and have social activities outside of the home.
- To build a positive relationship with his father and to be safe during visits.
- To remain with his sister and in a stable arrangement with his relative caregivers.

Amanda:

- To feel secure in her positive connection and relationship with her mother.
- To build a positive relationship with her father and to be safe during visits.
- To remain with her brother and in a stable arrangement with her relative caregivers.
- To have the opportunity to learn with peers and an outlet for social needs through engagement in early childhood activities.

Father:

- To build relationships with his children and improve his parenting capacities.
- To address concrete needs (housing, employment) so that his children can be more integrated in his daily life.
- To address his past abuse and neglect as a child and understand its impact on himself and his interpersonal relationships.
- To address his substance abuse challenges.
- To address his past domestic violence toward his ex-wife and understand its impact on her and the children.
- To repair relationships with his ex-wife and her family that help them co-parent positively.

Mother:

- To feel connected through communication and relationships with her children.
- To address financial and other issues that led to her imprisonment.
- To develop plans for integration back into the community in order to reunify with her children.
- To feel safe in building a relationship with her ex-husband that allows for co-parenting.

Relative caregivers:

- To have time for self-care and a break from constant child care.
- To have the children engaged in activities outside of the home.
- To build a relationship with the father of the children that helps them co-parent positively.
- To develop strategies for redirecting Amanda's energies and her constant need for their attention.

Provision of Services

Item 12 of the OSRI also requires Reviewers to determine how the agency ensures provision of services to meet the identified needs of children, parents, and foster/pre-adoptive parents. For services to be effective, they should be:

- Tailored to meet the specific needs of families;
- Culturally appropriate, with providers who can speak the language of the family;
- Accessible to the family (considering wait lists, transportation, and hours available);
- Provided in a setting that is the most effective and responsive to needs; and
- Monitored to ensure that they are meeting family needs.

Providing services to families goes beyond just making referrals. It includes engaging family members in services and monitoring these services to ensure that treatment goals are being achieved and progress is made; and, if necessary, adjusting the provided services relative to goals and progress.

Questions to consider:

- In what ways, either through contracted services or direct work from the caseworker, have the identified needs of the child(ren), parent(s), and foster/adoptive parent(s) been met?
- Are there identified or perceived barriers to providing a service?
- In what ways has the agency monitored the services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the case participants? How has the agency discussed this with them?
- What is the perspective of the parents, children, and foster/adoptive parents regarding the effectiveness of services?
- What identified needs are not being met, and why?
- How has the agency facilitated the family members' engagement in services?

- Are the services tailored to the unique needs of the family?

Service provision case example:

Jorge is a 17-year-old youth who has been in foster care for 3 years. He has moved several times, bouncing between relative care, non-relative foster homes, and congregate care. He has lived in the same group home for the past year. Jorge has one adult sibling who is in prison and with whom he desires no contact. Both of his parents are deceased. The agency's comprehensive assessment, including an assessment of IL skills, identified several of Jorge's needs, including:

- Pursuing his desire to be a successful artist and musician;
- Addressing his anger and grief about the loss of his parents and his inability to live with his aunt;
- Improved social relationship skills with peers;
- A connection to an adult male; and
- Strengthening skills for independence

When Reviewers met with Jorge, he enthusiastically showed them some of his art work and said he was also writing his own songs and taking guitar lessons. His caseworker and his music teacher at school helped secure funds for the lessons, and also found a donor in the community who purchased the guitar for him. Reviewers also learned that the Independent Living Outreach Worker was assisting Jorge with registering for a tutoring class to improve his college aptitude test scores and was taking him to visit colleges in the fall. Jorge was also involved in activities at the YMCA in his neighborhood, including an after-school basketball league. Both he and his caseworker, as well as group home staff, noted that his social skills with peers had greatly improved since he got involved with basketball and other YMCA activities. Jorge visits with his aunt regularly and often stays overnight on weekends.

He expressed frustration and sadness because he could not go back to live with her and believed that she was afraid he would "upset her life." When Reviewers interviewed his aunt, however, she was clear that it was not viable for Jorge to live with her permanently. Jorge also expressed wanting to be with a "big family" and have a nurturing connection with an adult male figure. He missed his parents and was still sad and angry about the accident that killed them. His caseworkers told Reviewers that he was resistant to attending therapy, but Jorge stated that they sent him to a female therapist and, in addition to wanting a male clinician, the office was far away and it required him to take two buses to get there. The case record showed that Jorge completed all of his IL skills classes at the group home, but when asked by Reviewers how confident he felt, he said the group home didn't require them to shop or cook so he had never really practiced any skills. His aunt does his laundry on the weekends, and he has not applied for summer jobs yet.

How has the agency met Jorge's needs, and what are the gaps?

- Reviewers found that the agency did a good job of engaging Jorge in his goal of pursuing his art and music, including helping to secure a guitar and lessons. The IL Outreach Worker was assisting him with improving his college aptitude test scores and visiting colleges so he could pursue his dream of studying art and music.

- Jorge's worker and the group home got him involved with activities at the YMCA and he was able to make friends and improve his social skills with peers.
- While Jorge completed IL skills classes, he was not challenged to practice those skills by being required to shop and prepare meals at the group home. In addition, he was able to avoid laundry responsibilities by having his aunt do his laundry on weekends.
- Jorge's grief and loss issues after his parents' death, separation from his aunt, and his desire to belong to a family have not been addressed. The caseworker's perception is that Jorge is resistant to therapy, but Jorge explained that he would participate in therapy if he had a male clinician that had an office closer to his home.
- The agency has not worked on Jorge's need for an adult male role model and has not explored the possibility of engaging Jorge in a mentor program.

Summary

Comprehensive and accurate assessment of underlying needs of families and caregivers, and engaging them in tailored services to address those needs, is essential to achieving positive and lasting outcomes for children and parents. It is important for Reviewers to consider the key questions provided in this brief when examining the practice strengths and areas of concern addressed through Item 12 of the OSRI, and to expect agencies to critically assess the needs of families based on their unique histories and circumstances.