



ISSUE BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

What has been **New York's** experience with casework teaming?

Casework teaming is a child welfare staffing model and organizational approach in which **multiple caseworkers share casework functions on certain cases**.¹ Group supervision is used to make case decisions, and assess and address child and family needs. Casework teaming is designed to reduce caseworker isolation and workload, strengthen staff retention, and improve casework decision-making and service delivery to children and families.² Child welfare units that successfully have used the casework teaming model report they are able to better meet the needs of the children and families they serve.³ Since a member of the team is always available to respond to or address the needs of a family if the primary caseworker is unavailable, families are more consistently supported.⁴

For more than a decade, the [New York State Office of Children and Family Services](#) (OFCS) has implemented casework teaming in multiple counties. Highlights of the state's experiences, outcomes, and lessons learned are provided below. For additional information about casework teaming in the state, see the companion brief: [How have counties in New York approached implementation of casework teaming?](#)



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Development and implementation

Building on an earlier casework teaming model employed in Massachusetts, OCFS adapted casework teaming to fit its state-supervised, county-administered child protection agency. OCFS first piloted casework teaming in 2007 with six counties, and has since expanded to 30 teams in nine local Departments of Social Services, which include teams from all child welfare program areas (child protective, preventive, foster care, and adoption), as well as two interdisciplinary collaborations between Adult Protective Services and Children's Services. Local jurisdictions must apply to become a casework team, and OCFS manages the training, coaching, and cross-site learning provided to the local jurisdictions.⁵

Essential components

Two core components at the heart of OCFS casework teaming are **group supervision and a sense of shared responsibility**. During group supervision, which is facilitated by the unit supervisor, all members of the unit collaborate to make strengths-based decisions about a case. This allows all members of the team to contribute their expertise. It also allows the supervisor to shift from being the only person responsible for final decisions to facilitating a team process where the supervisor provides supportive coaching and quality assurance. Additionally, group supervision allows new team members to benefit from the expertise of more experienced staff.

Frequent and open communication between team members and shared responsibility for cases ensure families benefit from the expertise of an entire team as opposed to just one caseworker.⁶ Being able to carve out and protect the time to conduct group supervision is essential to successful casework teaming. Additional components of casework teaming essential for successful group supervision and creating a sense of shared responsibility include:

1. Allowing teams to determine the criteria for casework teaming (such as high risk of removal or domestic violence), with flexibility to team a case if it would be beneficial due to workload management.⁷

2. Assigning a primary and secondary caseworker to teamed cases.
3. Presenting weekly updates about each teamed case during group supervision,⁸ with flexibility to adjust the frequency if it is not realistic given caseload requirements.
4. Ensuring each team member contributes to the case during group supervision.
5. Relying on case decisions made by team consensus with supervisory approval.
6. Establishing an operating agreement that addresses roles, responsibilities, expectations, and conflict resolution in relation to teaming.⁹

Impact

In 2007, an independent, longitudinal evaluation began over a three-year period to better understand the impacts of casework teaming. While the evaluation did not assess whether teaming resulted in improved safety or permanency outcomes for children and families, it did find that staff participating in teaming reported **greater cohesion, a greater sense of self-efficacy, and greater ability to help children and families due to shared decision-making and workload responsibilities**, when compared to staff in a similar unit from the same county not using casework teaming. In addition, the teaming units conducted group supervision with a greater focus on the quality of work and developing creative solutions, and less emphasis on task completion.¹⁰

Other benefits from implementing casework teaming, noted in a 2011 follow-up study, included:¹¹

- Increased availability of a caseworker familiar with the case whenever the family needs immediate assistance.
- Reduced caseworker stress and workload.
- Enhanced caseworker decision-making skills.
- Shared responsibility for case outcomes.

Anecdotally, supervisors who utilize casework teaming report that their units experience less turnover than

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STAKEHOLDER RESPONSE TO CASEWORK TEAMING

- Families felt like they were better supported because they knew if they couldn't reach their primary caseworker, they could reach a team member that knew their story and could help.
- Foster parents were skeptical of the practice at first, but felt supported knowing they could call anyone on the team.
- Judges felt that casework teaming best served children, and that they were able to gather the most information due to the number of people involved.

other units that do not use teaming, and that teaming mitigates the impact of turnover on cases. In addition, teaming has been used as an effective way of onboarding new caseworkers, as the entire team serves as informal mentors to a new staff member.

Implementation considerations

OCFS administrators consider skilled supervisors with strong critical thinking skills essential to the success of casework teaming. In addition, OCFS attributes the following implementation-related activities to the success of its teaming efforts:

1. Adapting the components of the teaming model to align with the type of practice (such as investigations, adoption, or foster care).
2. Defining roles and expectations early in the implementation process and each time there is a staffing change on the team.
3. Educating the rest of the local agency before rolling out casework teaming, highlighting what casework teaming is, its benefits, and how it may or may not impact their daily work.
4. Creating support for the teaming process from all stakeholders, such as the judiciary, resource families, and other programs and community agencies with which the agency interacts, by providing information about casework teaming and its benefits.
5. Placing the workspaces of staff and supervisors near one another to support routine opportunities to build strong team relationships.
6. Adjusting the workloads of teaming staff to ensure they can actively participate in casework teaming training and meet other teaming requirements.
7. Providing ongoing coaching and training to teaming staff to support and sustain successful implementation.
8. Involving a staff development coordinator or other non-case-carrying staff to provide oversight and support fidelity of the model, regardless of frontline staffing changes that may occur.
9. Ensuring continuous quality improvement by regularly reviewing the practice and evaluating its impact and outcomes.



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Sustainability challenges

OCFS identified three main issues impacting sustainability of caseworker teaming:

- **Turnover:** While units that use teaming report a high degree of satisfaction and express a desire to stay in a teaming unit, turnover remains one of the most significant barriers to the success of casework teaming. Teams spend considerable time laying the foundation for how they will work together by drawing up teaming agreements and exploring their working styles. When one or more team members leave or are reassigned, this work must begin anew to rebuild the team's foundational commitments.
- **Cost of training:** The amount of time and effort required to build the team during early implementation and the ongoing effort to maintain the team results in significant casework teaming training costs. While OCFS will maintain support for those counties that currently use or are piloting casework teaming, the state is not planning to expand the initiative.
- **Time:** Child welfare staff experience competing demands on their time. As a result, dedicating time to weekly group supervision and ongoing communication to support effective team decision-making can be challenging.

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

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, information in this brief is based on interviews with staff at the Center for Development of Human Services Institute for Community Health Promotion—SUNY Buffalo State College, and the New York State Office for Children and Family Services, on February 28, 2018, and staff at Schenectady County Children's Services on April 25, 2018.
- 2 National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (January 2013). *Casework teaming to reduce workload, enhance effectiveness & boost morale*. Retrieved from: <http://files.ctcdcn.com/fa43a05f001/4fc1b0ed-dc5d-4682-a669-afd33b4c3d15.pdf>
- 3 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015). *Teaming in child welfare: A Guidebook*. Retrieved from: <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cfsr/assets/docs/Teaming-in-CW-Guidebook.pdf>
- 4 National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (January 2013)
- 5 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015)
- 6 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015)
- 7 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015)
- 8 National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (January 2013)
- 9 National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (January 2013)
- 10 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015)
- 11 New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2015)

P 800.228.3559

P 206.282.7300

F 206.282.3555

[casey.org](#) | KMResources@casey.org

