

Practice Guidelines For Case Closure

Case Planning

Case closure is the final step in the continuum of services provided to children and families. Case closure, along with all other case decisions should be planned by the caseworker, supervisor, family members, children and members of the Child and Family Team when applicable. Planning for the interventions that will lead to case closure begins with the assessment process and must be re-assessed throughout the casework process during ongoing evaluation of progress. Reasons for case closure include:

- In-Home Case Closure.
- Reunification.
- Adoption.
- Legal Guardianship.
- Permanent Placement with a Relative.
- Emancipation or Youth exiting from care at 18.

When all case decisions and activities, including closure, are guided by a clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished and the achievement of these outcomes, the family understands what is necessary for case closure. Otherwise, cases may be closed prematurely, or may remain open for extended periods of time without painful, outcome-driven decision-making. Ideally, case closure occurs when the desired outcomes of a case plan are achieved. The outcomes associated with successful case planning and case closure include the following:

- Children are safe;
- Permanent living situation for children are achieved; and
- Child and family well-being is improved.

Decisions about case closure should be based on outcomes. Achievement of client-change outcomes is a strong indication that the case should be closed. Information is gathered from a variety of assessment tools.

There are appropriate and inappropriate reasons to close a case (as well as keep one open). Closure can occur after a short involvement with the family (e.g., as soon as an intake is complete or within several months of services) or after longer involvement. Cases should never be closed based solely on a set length of time of service to the family. Adjudicated court cases must be closed in accordance with regulation or as instructed by the Court (NAC 432B.315).

Should the Case be Closed?

The decision to close a case could be based on the achievement of positive outcomes and a number of criteria, which include some of the following:

- There is reasonable expectation that the child will be safe and any remaining risk of harm can be managed solely by the family, with additional resources when necessary;
- The children have been placed into other permanent placements in which there is no or low risk of maltreatment;
- The case does not meet the threshold of a Dependency of Neglect petition, the family is not willing to accept services, thus there is no legal basis for continued services;
- The child or youth no longer presents a risk of harm to self or others;
- The youth is emancipated;
- The family no longer needs services to care for the special needs of the child;
- There is a court order to close or dismiss the case based on the following:
 - The family moved from the country
 - Run-away status of a youth

Is the Case Remaining Open Inappropriately?

Sometimes cases are kept open inappropriately and require review of case plan progress in order to make an appropriate determination whether the case meets criteria for closure or not. For example:

- Vague concerns or fears that the child may again be maltreated;
- Inability to verify that the child welfare agency has met its obligation to provide or arrange for services to the family prior to closure and there is no longer a risk to the child/family;
- The family is cooperative and there have been successes in working with them, therefore, continuing involvement is reinforcing;
- The caseworker stalls in making important decisions such as pursuing termination of parental rights; or
- Services are provided because the family wants them despite the fact that the reason for child protection service involvement has been resolved.

Is the Case Being Closed Prematurely?

In some cases, cases are closed prematurely, for example:

- Minimization of risk to the child, due to inadequate family assessment, assessment concerns not reflected in the case plan, inadequate provision of services;
- Lack of activity leading to a presumption that the child/family is fine;
- The family disappears or refuses to participate in the case planning process and protective issues remain;
- Agency pressure to reduce caseload size and work responsibility, and thus older, less active cases need to "move on";
- Caseworker does not want to work with family;
- Caseworker minimizes the situation and is unwilling or unable to do the planning that is necessary to help the family.

When the caseworker and Child and Family Team can demonstrate that thorough planning was performed, and that conscientious and planful offering or delivery of service occurred prior to case closure, everyone will benefit:

- The family's capacity for success will increase;
- The agency's liability will be reduced; and
- The caseworker will experience satisfaction.

Out-of-Home Care Providers Feelings?

Out-of-home care providers who live with the child often develop strong feelings of attachment and bonding. Feelings about the child moving are often strong. Many foster/resource parents and other out-of-home care providers have anguished about the next step for a child, especially if they disagree with the caseworker or the judge about the fitness of a parent. As the move and closure with the child approaches, it is important to be aware of the mixed feelings and avoid negatively affecting the good-bye process. However, when appropriate, an on-going relationship should be encouraged with the care provider and the child and/or parents, in order to support emotional permanence.

Involving the Family

As part of family-centered practice, families are involved throughout the planning process and case closure is no exception. Partnering with the family regarding how and when to complete services allows for supportive, shared closure process. During the closure process, several tasks must be complete:

1. *Resolve conflicted feelings about the end of service and the casework process.* Clients, caseworkers, foster/resource families and other service providers may feel conflicted about the closure. Common feelings include:
 - a. Relief the involvement is over;
 - b. Satisfaction about progress;
 - c. Sadness and loss due to attachments and relationships formed; and
 - d. Anger that progress has not been made, that the current plan for the child is not acceptable and that the relationship has not been productive.
2. *Examine the casework service experience.* Reviewing the involvement with the child welfare agency and other service providers helps to identify key concerns and milestones of the experience. Many

clients will be able to sustain progress if they are helped to review and identify key factors in their success.

3. *Stabilize the current situation.* For case closure to be successful, it is important that the current situations be stabilized.
4. *Problem solve for the near future.* Future problems are inevitable. The goal of the child welfare agency's involvement is not to prevent all problems but to help clients gain skills and motivation to anticipate problems, avoid them when possible and deal with them effectively as they arise.

Working with clients on closure issues and feelings will likely decrease the chances of recidivism as well as increase the client's confidence in handling future difficulties.

Recidivism

Recidivism is a major concern in all child welfare cases. The primary case goal is usually to prevent the recurrence of the problem that brought the family to the child welfare agency's attention, i.e., repeat maltreatment, involvement with child protective services, return to out-of-home placement, etc. Concerns about recidivism are thus central to the decision to close a case. Services are designed to support the family in making changes to prevent recidivism. If services are not utilized, are ineffective, or not offered with sufficient intensity or duration, recidivism is more likely. Thus premature care closure can contribute significantly to recidivism.

Case Closure- In-Home Cases

When a family is receiving in-home services and the goals of the case plan have been accomplished and a determination has been made that the child is safe and there is minimal or no risk of harm to the child, based on results of the FRAP, the case may be closed. When an in-home case closes it is important that the family is linked to necessary community resources and support systems that may be needed to maintain or improve the families functioning. It is important to provide feedback to family members on their achievements by referring back to the strengths and needs of the family and the realization of the treatment goals.

Case Closure- Reunification

In cases where reunification is the permanency goal, and the goals of the case plan have been accomplished, the case should be closed. This determination must be made in conjunction with the safety plan, results of the FRAP and an evaluation of the family's strengths and needs related to their protective capacity. In some cases the use of trial home visits may be appropriate in which the agency will retain legal custody and the parent physical custody for up to 6 months at a time, per court order, in order to ensure successful reunification. An informal emergency contact plan, i.e., telephones numbers, doctor information, etc., must be established with the caregiver to address any unforeseen emergencies and ensure the safety and well-being of the child.

Case Closure-Adoption

When the permanency plan of adoption is achieved and the court issues the adoption decree, the adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities to the child, as if the child were born to them. The adoptive parents, without agency involvement, will make ongoing decisions regarding the child's care. And as a result, court custody will be terminated and the case closed to the child welfare services unit. As with all families, when case closure is planned, the adoptive family should be provided with information and/or linked to necessary community resources and support services required to meet the needs of the child and family. Adoptive families caring for special-needs children may require services at different times and different stages of the child's development. The agency should therefore be prepared to provide information and referral services as needed. Providing post adoption support services will help ensure the needs of the family are met well after finalization of the adoption. The goal is to achieve a successful adoption by providing the services needed to support the family and to prevent the child's return to foster care.

Case Closure When Parental Rights are Terminated or Relinquished

Case closure involves a specific set of considerations when parental rights have been terminated (i.e., the court ends the parents' rights) or relinquished (i.e., the parent voluntarily gives up rights). Children may move to a new family (or their foster home/kinship placement becomes permanent), parents must come to terms with having their children live elsewhere, and adoptive parents must become acquainted with their new children while helping them grieve the loss of their birth parents.

Relinquishment may occur at birth or later in the child's life. Some parents who relinquish have worked with the child welfare agency to try to improve parenting, but recognize they are unable to do this. Others, usually fathers, are uninvolved and are willing to relinquish rights in order for the child to be freed for adoption. Termination usually occurs when the parent(s) have not been able to meet case plan goals or sustain the change necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of the child. Noninvolved parents who do not respond to notification of hearings may also have their rights terminated.

Because of the variety of circumstances that lead to the ending of parental rights, birth parents have varied reactions. Sometimes even those with little or no contact with the child, experience grief and loss. An inability to parent does not mean a lack of love or even a sense of responsibility. Many parents whose rights end are angry, confused, or ashamed. Others are relieved. Many experience ambivalent emotions. How they cope with the loss will affect their ability to handle other aspects of their life. Also, many parents whose rights are terminated or relinquished will later have other children and their current response may affect their parenting with later children.

The importance of treating families with respect, sensitivity, and concern is as critical now as at any other point in the casework and service delivery process. Helping parents understand the reasons for ending parental rights and moving on with their lives is important not only for them but for their children.

For nearly all children, the loss of a parent, no matter how dysfunctional the situation, is traumatic. The parent who is able to express love and separate from the child in a way, which gives the child permission to move on, gives the child an immeasurably worthwhile gift.

A good-bye visit will help both birth parents and children with the grieving process and help create closure. The caseworker can help the birth parents prepare for such a visit by recognizing their pain, helping them understand what will happen during the visit, and rehearsing. It is also useful, if parents are able, to encourage them to prepare a section or otherwise contribute to a life book for the child.

Concurrently, the child needs to be prepared for the ending of (or change in) the relationship with the birth parents (some relinquishments or even terminations allow for continued contact between the birth parent and the child). Often this preparation is the job of the foster/resource parent with some assistance from a caseworker and/or child therapist.

A good-bye visit is intended to help the child understand that the parent is unable to take care of the child, that the child is loved, and that the birth parent wants the child to move on in his or her life, attaching to new parents. Note, sometimes cases are going through the appeal process so the good-bye visit may not be absolutely final. This situation will affect the visit. During the visit, there must be a person such as the caseworker or therapist in the room to support the child and the parent and to guide the visit. In addition, children should be told that the birth parents love them and they have their permission to move on and love their new family.

Case Closure- Emancipation

Case closure because a youth is emancipated brings out another set of critical issues. While the child welfare agency puts great emphasis on teaching independent living skills to older youth in out-of-home care, most teens will not possess the skills and emotional maturity needed to live independently. While some have extended family, others do not have relatives to turn to when life becomes overwhelming.

The most common problems emancipated youth encounter are lack of financial and emotional support. Emancipation can be quite frightening for youth who have been involved with the child welfare agency for many years. It may be particularly difficult in rural counties where services are limited.

In making a decision to close a case and emancipate a youth, assess the youth's competence in the following areas:

- Housing (e.g., how to find and maintain an apartment, how to read a contract, housekeeping);
- Money management:

- Health and safety (e.g., car safety [such as wearing a seat belt], personal safety [where to park, where and when to walk], planned medical care [medical check-ups]);
- Sexuality (e.g., prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, abstinence, birth control);
- Problem-solving and decision-making skills;
- Communication and interpersonal skills; and
- Job-seeking and job-maintenance skills.

During the case closure process, develop a transition plan that includes an educational and/or vocational plan with the youth. Also, discuss the challenges they might encounter once they are on their own.

Be sure that a youth has at least one adult in the community with whom the youth has a positive and healthy relationship and to whom they can go to for assistance. Sometimes this person is a mentor, teacher, family friend etc. Be sure to let them know where they can go in the community for the help that a family would ordinarily give.

Even after years of conflict, youth often go home after emancipation. Ties have not been irrevocably severed and often when the youth is on his or her own, the parent-youth control issues subside. Thus, it is important that during the case closure process, the youth (and family if possible) continue to explore feelings about each other and identify conditions under which contact could be reinstated.

A discharge staffing should be held with the youth prior to the youth exiting from foster care. The following documents/information must be provided, free of charge, to the youth prior to exit:

- An original birth certificate;
- An original social security card;
- Copies of health and education records;
- Information regarding Independent Living services available to the youth;
- A youth resource directory/contact information regarding services available in community; and
- Any other documents/information the youth require for successful discharge.

Supervisors Role in Case Closure

The supervisor (to include a manager) is a consultant, trainer and mentor to caseworkers and requires that caseworkers use family-centered and strengths based approach to family assessment and service delivery. This requires the supervisor to continually monitor the quality of services offered to children and families. During the case closure phase of the continuum of child welfare services, supervisors must ensure that all case plan goals have been accomplished and that the closure will result in the safety, permanency and well-being of the child.

The supervisor must sign all safety and risk assessments and ensure that all activity regarding case closure is documented in UNITY and on the supervisor case review when applicable.

Conclusion

Case closure must be a carefully planned process, just like other phases of casework. It is made easier when everyone's feelings are attended to and separation issues are addressed. Since case closure may happen quickly, children and families are particularly vulnerable to inadequate preparation, which may result in frustrated feelings and anxiety. On the other hand, with good preparation, the case closure process helps the family to the next stage, whether that is to other community services or to living independent of child welfare agency involvement, can be a positive experience for everyone.

References

Division of Child and Family Services *Adoption Service Manual*

Colorado Department of Human Services (May 1998) *Colorado Child Welfare Handbook*

Oregon Department of Human Services (August 2004) *Client Services Manual, Caseworker contact with Children, Parents and Caregivers.*