

Supervising Cases Involving Substance Abuse

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One of the more perplexing and difficult problems to address in child welfare is the exploding epidemic of substance abuse. Our caseworkers are often frustrated with the inability to make headway with parents who we would think should be hitting rock bottom with the removal of their children, but are not demonstrating the desire or ability to make changes. It often seems illogical that a parent would risk the permanent loss of their children in order to get high. However, our statistics and experiences show that even when faced with this reality, addicted parents struggle and often lose their battles with addiction, giving up their families to relatives or adoption.

In Athens County, our statistics for reunification with custodial parents is about a third. Another third is legal custody to a relative and another third result in the permanent termination of parental rights. Over a seven year period there has been a continued decline in reunifications and a significant increase of legal custodies to relatives.

About 95% of our families struggle with a substance abuse issue and often substance abuse is not the only concern. Along with drug addiction our parents face additional challenges such as domestic violence, mental illness, legal problems, homelessness and memories of their own childhood trauma. Individually, these issues are a challenge to overcome, but when combined with a drug addiction, it can become a complex and overwhelming obstacle. Substance abuse rarely stands alone for our families. Working with parents with addiction issues, we encounter numerous obstacles, such as lack of motivation, missed visits with their children, worker avoidance, and lack of healthy family support, which is often complicated by past trauma issues. Living in a rural area, choices in treatment options are limited along with transportation options. In our area of the state, there are a number of small, rural communities that are saturated with illegal drugs or pills. Many of our clients are from those areas and often continue to live in a drug environment without many options for drug free support.

Child welfare workers are responsible for helping families make changes. However, we are all aware of how seldom that occurs with parents who have severe drug addictions complicated by other social problems. As supervisors how do we help our workers cope with feelings of frustration, apathy and sometimes anger for young parents who appear to prefer getting high to raising their children? Complicating this issue are the mandated time lines we must work within when considering reunification. As we all know, these timelines are often too short, especially if there is a relapse - a common and somewhat expected occurrence in drug treatment.

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How We Can Help Our Workers

Training

Training is often the first route we take when workers are at a loss about how to work with drug addicts. This can be effective for gaining an understanding and recognizing the problem. However, we need additional training on how to help parents get connected with effective drug treatment programs. [*Understanding Substance Use Disorders, Treatment and Family Recovery: A Guide for Child Welfare Professionals*](#) is an online tutorial developed by The National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare. The course includes a workbook for caseworkers, as well as a supplemental learning tool for supervisors to become familiar with the training materials and plan for training completion, follow up, and coaching. The workbook provides an example of how the course can be implemented and enhanced to meet the training needs of workers on your unit.

Help Them Dig Through the Layers

Another step is to help our workers dig down through layers of trauma and other problems that pull our parents into cycles of destructive behaviors. Encouraging workers to look at other issues, such as mental illness, homelessness, etc. and then address each of those issues one by one can help workers break the problem into more incremental steps that can result in small successes for both the parent and worker.

Collaborative Practice Desk Guide for Child Welfare Practitioners

Consider using [New York's Practice Desk Guide](#) as a model to develop a desk reference tool pertinent to your county by listing local prevention and intervention program's in your region.

Help Workers Identify Strengths of Each Family

Whether or not a parent can successfully raise their child relies on so many different variables that it is impossible to predict who will succeed and who will fail. There are no clear and easy solutions, and though a parent may have new success in one area of their lives, they may not be able to be successful in the most important areas that involve child safety, stability and nurturance. Helping workers see each family as individuals and identify the strengths and progress for each family is probably one of the most important things we can do as supervisors to help reduce apathy and burnout. Maybe in the end, the decision will be made to place permanently with a relative or terminate parental rights. However, instead of being disappointed that reunification did not occur, we should remind ourselves and our staff that we are creating a better environment for a child who may now have more opportunity for success in life.