

Employing Registered Nurses in Child Protective Services' Investigations

Many children come to the attention of child protective services (CPS) with a medical condition that puts them at risk for morbidity and mortality. CPS investigators may not have the medical knowledge necessary to properly assess the child's medical needs or the family's capabilities in meeting those needs. Furthermore, the Family First Prevention Services Act requires states to create a plan and fully document the steps taken to track and prevent child maltreatment deaths. Addressing the needs of children who experience medical neglect or are medically fragile, many of whom have life-threatening conditions, is one important aspect of any state's child fatality prevention plan. This replication kit is designed to be a high-level overview of Oklahoma's CPS nursing program for states considering adopting a front-end prevention strategy for children with medical needs who come to the attention of child welfare. It is not a program manual.

In 2015, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) began to implement a program to employ and train Registered Nurses (RN) to collaborate with CPS workers, particularly where children are identified at intake as having medical needs or concerns. The goal of the program is to provide medical and clinical expertise to frontline CPS workers to ensure the best outcomes for child safety and well-being through cross-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration.

At the time this program began, according to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), 1,493 child maltreatment reports in Oklahoma were made involving medical neglect; this number represents 2.2% of the total number of referrals taken by the state hotline in that federal fiscal year (FFY 2015). One in five (20%) of these 1,493 reports involved children who had been referred to CPS previously. Furthermore, according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) for FFY 2015, 14.6% of Oklahoma children in out-of-home care had a medical condition.

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services Child Protection Services Nursing Program (hereafter referred to as the CPS Nursing Program) was born out of the recognition that CPS could benefit from having medical expertise at the front end of the service continuum to better serve this population. The program is funded and operated by DHS, and it serves the state as a whole. The goal of the program is to provide medical and clinical expertise to ensure that:

1. Workers are given guidance and support on medical components of children on their cases as well as health safety goals for the child.
2. Families have needed resource supports in place to care for medically fragile children.
3. Children with unstable/inadequate medical care are identified and established with appropriate providers.
4. Proper interventions using nursing diagnosis and evidence-based practice standards to keep children medically safe across the continuum of child welfare.
5. Courts have a holistic picture of the case that includes medical issues and safety concerns

(*For more information on this program or to obtain the entire replication kit please contact: alicia@sg-ht.org)