Ohio Regional Forum Report Findings from the Survey and Small Small-Group Participation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center (MCWIC) is collaborating with The Ohio Office of Families and Children (OFC) to develop and implement a new technical assistance (TA) model. This project is a part of Ohio’s systemic effort to improve its child welfare outcomes, and will materially alter how OFC works with Ohio’s county-administered child welfare offices. It will build Ohio’s capacity to implement evidence-informed and promising child welfare interventions.

To inform the process of developing a new technical assistance model, MCWIC hosted a series of ten regional forums throughout the state during July, 2010. The purpose of these events was to understand how the Ohio Office of Children and Families can better work with and support Ohio’s public and private children services agencies. Attendees were invited to participate in small focus group discussions to provide input and share their agency’s perspective on the current and future role of the OFC in supporting public children services agencies. Preceding the focus group discussions, however, participants were asked to complete a survey that was designed to gather their frank opinions on the role of the OFC. An identical survey was administered online through a link on MCWIC’s home page to be completed by interested persons who were unable to attend a regional forum.

This report summarizes the findings from the regional forum discussions and survey. It provides a snapshot of perceptions of the technical assistance currently provided by the OFC, as well as suggestions for the new technical assistance model that is to be developed by the MCWIC “Partners for Ohio’s Families Project.”

PARTICIPATION IN FORUMS AND SURVEY

A total of 184 individuals participated, either through the online survey or the regional forums. This group represented a broad range of PCSAs and private providers that were geographically distributed across the state. Roughly equal percentages of participants came from metro and mid-sized agencies, with a slightly smaller proportion from rural agencies. Eighty percent of participants were employed by PCSAs. Approximately half of the agencies represented could be characterized as stand-alone child welfare agencies.

RESULTS OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSES

The majority of respondents (38.9%) reported that they had interacted with the OFC “1-4 times” in the past year at the request of the OFC.

INTERACTION WITH OFC

Examining the types of technical assistance received from the OFC by survey respondents, “SACWIS/automated systems” and “Policy clarification/rule compliance” were most prevalent. When respondents were asked to rank what they needed most in their position, these two forms of support were also ranked highest, with “Policy clarification/rule compliance” as the top concern. This suggests a level of fit between the technical assistance needs and the categories of technical assistance currently being provided by OFC.
EXPERIENCE WITH OFC
OFC was rated as relatively helpful and responsive, particularly in the areas of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” and “Monitoring or licensing.” Regarding OFC’s approachability, again, the area of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” received high ratings with “SACWIS/automated systems” and “Monitoring or licensing” rated as a close second and third, respectively. Overall, the agency was seen as relatively approachable.

In contrast, however, respondents generally had a less positive sense of OFC’s awareness of their agency’s strengths and concerns. These ratings were comparatively low, as the OFC was ranked only moderately aware of either the strengths or concerns of respondents’ agencies. Ratings of the nature of the collaborative relationship between the OFC and respondents’ agencies were also relatively low. The majority of respondents saw a relationship that was neither strong nor weak in collaboration. Another one-third of respondents saw a collaborative relationship that was weak in nature. Only 17% of respondents reported a strong collaborative partnership with OFC.

RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE ANALYSES
By far, the topic of “rules” was the most common topic of discussion at the forums. Discussions regarding the rules often revolved around seeking assistance in rule interpretation from OFC as well as the impact of these rules for the practice of county and private agencies. The second most common theme was “children and families,” generally in the context of how rules and the assistance provided by OFC impacted the work of county and private agencies with their child and family clients. The third most common topic of discussion at the forums reflected whether or not the forum participants felt that OFC supported their work.

Content analysis of the feedback provided through the forums and surveys revealed four broad dimensions, each of which can be viewed as a continuum from negative to positive. As the analysis makes clear, these concepts are not mutually exclusive, but are interrelated, and improvements in one area are most likely dependent upon, and will also lead to, improvements in other areas. These four themes are as follows:

- **Relationships/Bureaucracy** reflects a common concern among participants regarding frequent turnover and reorganization of staff at OFC. Such instability meant that county and private agency staff often interacted with anonymous OFC employees. In this sense, OFC represented an impersonal bureaucracy, which was viewed in a negative light. In contrast, stability in staff roles and responsibilities at OFC, in general, was viewed positively by regional forum participants who valued the opportunity to get to know and develop professional relationships with OFC staff.

- **Empowerment.** When contacting OFC for assistance, such as rule interpretation, county and private agency staff often complained that OFC staff were not empowered to provide the necessary assistance. The OFC staff were described as either lacking the authority to provide the requested assistance or being unwilling to provide the requested assistance because they believed that their actions would not be supported by
OFC leadership. This lack of empowerment was viewed as an impediment to the delivery of TA.

- **Responsibility.** A common complaint was that OFC was unwilling to share in the responsibility when things went wrong, but instead, tended to pass on the blame. In contrast, respondents suggested that a true partnership or collaboration between OFC and the county and private agencies would involve a sharing of responsibility and a willingness to work together when improvements are necessary, rather than simply “finger-pointing.”

- **Reactionary/Collaborative.** Staff of county and private agencies frequently complained that OFC was very reactionary when something went wrong, such as a child death. The reaction generally involved the creation of new rules that complicated their work and were seen as roadblocks or impediments to their tasks of working with families and children. In contrast, participants suggested that OFC needed to be more collaborative in developing rules for protecting children. In other words, the rule-creation process needed to be more collaborative by including the viewpoints of individuals who were actually in the field doing the “hands-on” work.

The report concludes with a compilation of statements of the ideal vision for the future, as expressed by participants in the forums and surveys. Specific suggestions for improvement included ideas regarding:

- Methods for improving the rule making process and for providing clearer and more consistent interpretation of rules
- Providing more consistent, proactive, and collaborative monitoring processes
- Providing more timely and meaningful SACWIS support
- More flexible funding options
- A return to provision of on-site technical assistance and support
- A call for OFC to lead more collaborative, statewide efforts to achieve a clear, shared vision and mission for all 88 counties
ABOUT “PARTNERS FOR OHIO’S FAMILIES”

The Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center (MCWIC) is collaborating with The Ohio Office of Families and Children (OFC) to develop and implement a new technical assistance (TA) model. This project is a part of Ohio’s systemic effort to improve its child welfare outcomes, and will materially alter how OFC works with Ohio’s county-administered child welfare offices. It will build Ohio’s capacity to implement evidence-informed and promising child welfare interventions.

PURPOSE OF THE REGIONAL FORUMS

To inform the process of developing a new technical assistance model, MCWIC hosted forums in each of the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program’s Regions to understand how the Ohio Office of Children and Families can better work with and support Ohio’s public and private children services agencies. Attendees were invited to participate in small focus group discussions to provide input and share their agency’s perspective on the current and future role of the OFC in supporting public children services agencies. Preceding the focus group discussions, however, participants were asked to complete a survey that was designed to gather their frank opinions on the role of the OFC. MCWIC and OFC staff developed this survey in the belief that this conduit would be perceived as more confidential that the small-group discussions and, consequently, would result in more honest and candid responses. An identical survey was administered online through a link on MCWIC’s home page to be completed by interested persons who were unable to attend a regional forum. Subjects who had completed the survey online were asked not to complete a duplicate survey during their forum participation.

REGIONAL FORUM SURVEY, QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS AND COUNTIES

The Regional Forum Survey was made available online on June 25, 2010 and closed on August 9, 2010. A total of 184 individuals completed the survey, either online or at a Regional Forum. The mean level of experience in the field of child welfare was 18.62 years and the mean number of years in respondents’ current positions was 7.32. Over 80% of respondents worked for public children services agencies (PCSAs). The remaining respondents worked for a variety of private child welfare providers. As Figure 1 indicates, participation was fairly evenly distributed across metro, mid-size, and rural agencies. Approximately 73% of the respondents reported that their county has a child welfare levy. Finally, as indicated in Figure 2, about half of respondents were from stand-alone agencies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many years of experience do you have in the field?</td>
<td>18.62</td>
<td>9.53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many years have you been in your current position?</td>
<td>7.32</td>
<td>6.14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Describe Your Agency:</th>
<th>Metro</th>
<th>Mid-Size</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n=63)</td>
<td>(n=65)</td>
<td>(n=42)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Agency Size**
### Identify Your Agency as a:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCSA</th>
<th>Private Network</th>
<th>Other Private Entity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80.3% (n=143)</td>
<td>10.1% (n=18)</td>
<td>9.6% (n=17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### My County has a Child Welfare Levy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>73.1% (n=128)</td>
<td>26.9% (n=47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Describe Your Agency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stand-Alone Child Welfare</th>
<th>Combined</th>
<th>Triple-Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48.8% (n=79)</td>
<td>20.4% (n=33)</td>
<td>30.9% (n=50)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Stand-Alone or Combined Agency**

- **Stand-Alone Child Welfare**: 48.8%
- **Combined**: 20.4%
- **Triple Combined**: 30.9%
INTERACTION WITH THE OHIO OFFICE OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN
Survey respondents were asked how often they interacted with OFC at their own request and how often they interacted with the OFC at the initiation of the OFC. Responses for OFC interactions at the respondent’s request are summarized in Figure 3. A slight majority (28.3%) of respondents reported interacting with the Office of Families and Children “more than 10 times” over the last year. OFC initiated interactions are summarized in Figure 4. The majority of respondents (38.9%) reported that they had interacted with the OFC “1-4 times” at the request of the OFC.

In the last year, how often have you interacted with the OFC at your request?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>(n=40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4 Times</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>(n=49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 Times</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>(n=40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than 10 Times</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>(n=51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Interactions with the OFC at Your Request in the Last Year
In the last year, how many times have you interacted with OFC at OFC's initiation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1-4 Times</th>
<th>5-9 Times</th>
<th>More Than 10 Times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>(n=43)</td>
<td>(n=70)</td>
<td>(n=39)</td>
<td>(n=28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of Interactions with OFC. Respondents were asked to consider their amount of interaction with OFC across six categories of functional services and supports. They were to provide a percentage for each, accounting for 100% of their interactions with OFC across the six types of technical assistance. Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, minimum and maximum percent for each of the six categories. Respondents indicated that the largest proportion (38.76%) of interactions with the OFC is for “SACWIS/automated systems” support, whereas the smallest percent of interaction is for “Financial Assistance” (18.67%). The large range (difference between the maximum percentage and minimum percentage) and large standard deviations (the standard deviation is a measure of variability of the data; a small standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be very close to the mean; a high standard deviation indicates that the data is spread out over
a large range of values) for the categories indicate a very large amount of disagreement in respondents’ rankings of services/supports received from the OFC. These results are summarized in Figure 5.

Table 1. Please consider how much of each of the following functional services and supports (as provided by the OFC) you received in the last year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service/Support</th>
<th>Mean %</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum %</th>
<th>Maximum %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SACWIS/automated systems</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy clarification/rule compliance</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring or licensing</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/administrative support</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site support (training, special review, etc.)</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Assistance</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Functional Services/Supports Received from the OFC Last Year, as a %
Ranking Most Necessary Services. Respondents were asked which functional services and supports provided by OFC were most necessary for their position. The six categories of technical assistance were ranked according to need, with “1” being the most necessary and “6” being the least necessary. An examination of the mean rank for each item (see Table 2) allows a comparison of the relative “need” for each service/support for the sample of respondents, with lower means representing more need and higher means representing less need. Respondents rated “Policy clarification/rule compliance” as the most necessary service/support (mean = 2.04) and rated “Organizational/administrative support” as least necessary (mean = 4.24). In other words, the average rank for the former is about 2 and the “average” rank for the latter is between 4 and 5. Each item had a range of 1 through 6, indicating that there was a large amount of variation in respondents’ rankings of what they needed most from the OFC to perform their duties.

Table 2. Please rank order (1-6, where 1 is the service or support you need the most) the following functional services and supports according to what you need most in your position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service/Support</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy clarification/rule compliance</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACWIS/automated systems</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Assistance</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site support (training, special review, etc.)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring or licensing</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/administrative support</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE OHIO OFFICE OF FAMILIES AND CHILDREN Helpfulness. The next section of the survey focused on respondent ratings of their experiences with the OFC, including their opinions of the helpfulness and responsiveness of the OFC. Table 3 contains the ratings for the perceived helpfulness of OFC across a variety of services/supports. The percentage of respondents describing OFC as “Extremely helpful” is fairly consistent across the variety of services/supports, ranging from a high of 12.9% for “On-site support” to a low of 9.3% for “Organizational/administrative support.” Much greater variation across types of services/supports is found for the other categories.

The relative helpfulness of the OFC’s services/supports is most easily determined by comparing the mean ratings across items. Given rankings ranging from “Extremely unhelpful = 1” through “Extremely helpful = 5”, the areas of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” and “Monitoring or licensing” have the highest rating for helpfulness (mean =
3.56). The lowest rating is for “Financial assistance” (mean = 3.08), which might be a reflection of general difficulties with budgets and finances. These mean ratings are also compared in Figure 6.

Table 3. Please rate how helpful OFC has been in meeting your needs for each of the following functional services/supports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service/Support</th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Extremely unhelpful</th>
<th>Unhelpful</th>
<th>Neither unhelpful nor helpful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
<th>Extremely helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy clarification/ rule compliance</td>
<td>3.56 (0.97) N=162</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring or licensing</td>
<td>3.56 (0.94) N=156</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACWIS/ automated systems</td>
<td>3.41 (1.12) N=151</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td>3.08 (1.13) N=144</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site support</td>
<td>3.35 (1.06) N=155</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/ administrative support</td>
<td>3.18 (1.00) N=151</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responsiveness. Table 4 contains the ratings for the perceived responsiveness of OFC across a variety of services/supports. Percentages across categories for each item, as well and the mean and standard deviation for each item, are presented in the table. Examining the percentages, the “Extremely responsive” category shows substantial variation across the variety of services/supports, ranging from a high of 15.2% for “Policy clarification/rule compliance” to a low of 2.0% for “Organizational/administrative support.” Each of the remaining four categories displays substantial variation across the types of functional services/supports.

The relative responsiveness of the OFC’s services/supports is most easily determined by comparing the mean ratings across items. Given rankings ranging from “Extremely unresponsive = 1” to “Extremely responsive = 5”, the area of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” has the highest rating for responsiveness (mean = 3.66) and “Monitoring or licensing” is a close second (mean = 3.65). The lowest rating is for “Financial assistance” (mean = 2.86), which, again, might be a reflection of general difficulties with budgets and finances. These mean ratings are also compared in Figure 7.
Table 4. Please rate how responsive OFC has been to your requests for each of the following functional services/supports.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service/Support</th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Extremely un-responsive</th>
<th>Un-responsive</th>
<th>Neither un-responsive nor responsive</th>
<th>Respon-sive</th>
<th>Extremely responsive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=164</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy clarification/</td>
<td>3.66 (0.94)</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rule compliance</td>
<td>N=164</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring or licensing</td>
<td>3.65 (0.70)</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACWIS/automated systems</td>
<td>3.27 (0.94)</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td>2.86 (0.78)</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site support</td>
<td>3.22 (0.78)</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/</td>
<td>3.00 (0.80)</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administrative support</td>
<td>N=152</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparing Helpfulness and Responsiveness. Comparing the mean ratings for the helpfulness of the functional services/supports to the responsiveness of the functional services/supports reveals some interesting patterns regarding the current delivery of technical assistance. **Policy clarification/rule compliance** and **Monitoring or licensing** both received slightly higher scores on their responsiveness as compared to their helpfulness. In contrast, the other four identified services/supports all received slightly lower scores on responsiveness as compared to helpfulness.

**Approachability.** This section includes respondents’ ratings of the likelihood that they would approach the OFC for assistance for a variety of functional services/supports. Table 5 contains the ratings for the perceived **approachability** of OFC across a variety of services/supports. Percentages across categories for each item, as well and the mean and standard deviation for each item, are presented in the table. Examining percentages, “Very likely” to approach the OFC declines substantially as you move down the table, from a high of 36.2% for “Policy clarification/rule compliance” to a low of 7.7% for “Organizational/administrative support.”

The relative responsiveness of the OFC’s services/supports is most easily determined by comparing the mean ratings across items. Given rankings ranging from “Very unlikely = 1”
to “Very likely = 5”, the area of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” has the highest rating for approachability (mean = 3.93). “SACWIS/automated systems” (mean = 3.74) and “Monitoring or licensing” (mean = 3.71) have high scores as well. In contrast, both “Financial assistance” (mean = 2.91) and “Organizational/administrative support” (mean = 2.87) have mean scores falling below three, or the middle category. These mean ratings are also compared in Figure 8.

Table 5. How likely are you to approach OFC for assistance on the following functional services/supports?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Service/Support</th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation)</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Neither unlikely nor likely</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy clarification/rule compliance</td>
<td>3.93 (1.15) N=163</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring or licensing</td>
<td>3.71 (1.16) N=160</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>36.9%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACWIS/automated systems</td>
<td>3.74 (1.17) N=157</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial assistance</td>
<td>2.91 (1.26) N=151</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site support</td>
<td>3.12 (1.22) N=158</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational/administrative support</td>
<td>2.87 (0.80) N=156</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
OFC Aware of Agency’s Strengths and Concerns. Respondents were also asked the degree to which they felt that the OFC is aware of their agency’s strengths and concerns. In their rating, respondents made little distinction between OFC’s knowledge of their strengths versus their concerns. The means are nearly identical (mean for strengths: 3.07; mean for concerns: 3.06). Also, the percentages across each category are similar. The mean responses indicate that respondents view the OFC as having a fair amount of awareness of their agency’s strengths and concerns. Responses are summarized in Table 6 and Figure 9.

Relationship between Agency and the OFC. The final quantitative survey question asked respondents’ opinions of the relationship between their agency and OFC. The highest percentage of respondents (36.7%) described this relationship as “Neither strong nor weak collaborative partnership.” The least likely response was “No collaborative partnership exists.” Only 16.9% of respondents reported that a strong collaborative partnership exists between their agency and the OFC. Results are displayed in Figure 10.
Table 6. To what degree do you feel OFC is aware of your agency’s strengths and concerns?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation) N</th>
<th>Completely unaware</th>
<th>Unaware</th>
<th>Neither unaware nor aware</th>
<th>Aware</th>
<th>Completely Aware</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.07 (1.29) N=162</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concerns</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.06 (1.23) N=163</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Degree to which OFC is Aware of Respondent Agency's Strengths & Concerns
How would you describe the relationship between your agency and the OFC?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No collaborative partnership exists</th>
<th>Weak collaborative partnership</th>
<th>Neither strong nor weak collaborative partnership</th>
<th>Strong collaborative partnership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11.4% (n=21)</td>
<td>34.3% (n=57)</td>
<td>36.7% (n=61)</td>
<td>16.9% (n=28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSIONS FROM QUANTITATIVE SURVEY**

This report provides important findings regarding the relationship between the Ohio Office of Families and Children, public children services agencies, and private providers in Ohio. It provides an evaluation of technical assistance currently provided by the OFC, as well as suggestions for the new technical assistance model that is to be developed by the MCWIC “Partners for Ohio’s Families Project.” Major findings are summarized below.
INTERACTION WITH OFC
Examining the types of technical assistance received from the OFC by survey respondents, “SACWIS/automated systems” and “Policy clarification/rule compliance” were most prevalent. When respondents were asked to rank what they needed most in their position, these two forms of support were also ranked highest, with “Policy clarification/rule compliance” as the top concern. This suggests a level of fit between the technical assistance needs and the technical assistance being provided by OFC.

EXPERIENCE WITH OFC
Helpfulness. Ratings on helpfulness of the OFC are relatively high, with “Policy clarification/rule compliance” and “Monitoring or licensing” receiving the highest rankings and “Financial assistance” receiving the lowest rankings.

Responsiveness. Findings for responsiveness were similar to those for helpfulness. OFC was seen as most responsive in the areas of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” and “Monitoring or licensing” and least responsive in the area of “Financial assistance.”

Approachability. Respondents were also asked about the approachability of the OFC across functional services/supports. Again, the area of “Policy clarification/rule compliance” received high ratings with “SACWIS/automated systems” and “Monitoring or licensing” rated as a close second and third, respectively. Overall, the agency was seen as relatively approachable.

Awareness of Strengths and Concerns. Respondents were asked to rate the OFC on its awareness of their agency’s strengths and concerns. These ratings were comparatively low, as the OFC was ranked only moderately aware of either the strengths or concerns of respondents’ agencies.

Relationship between Agency and the OFC. Ratings of the nature of the collaborative relationship between the OFC and respondents’ agencies were also relatively low. The majority of respondents saw a relationship that was neither strong nor weak in collaboration. Another one-third of respondents saw a collaborative relationship that was weak in nature. Only 17% of respondents reported a strong collaborative partnership.
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION
Qualitative data regarding the working relationship between OFC, county child welfare agencies, and private agencies was collected in two forms: 1) Responses to the open-ended questions on the survey and 2) notes taken by MCWIC staff during the small-group sessions at the regional forums. Similar to the quantitative data, then, participants at the regional forums and interested parties who were not able to attend the forums were able to provide detailed information on successes and challenges within the current system, as well as suggestions for improvement. This report on the qualitative data collected by MCWIC progresses as follows. First, we present the most commonly reported themes that were collected at the small group sessions of the forums. This information provides a general overview of what was on the minds of participants. Second, we break down the responses by training region in an effort to detect regional differences, listing the top three themes emerging from each region. Next, using the words and ideas of survey respondents and forum participants, we illustrate positive and negative interactions with the Office of Families and Children, organized by theoretical constructs. Finally, we describe the Vision for the Future for a new technical assistance model that emerged from the survey and the regional forums by organizing specific suggestions of participants across six types of technical assistance provided by OFC.

MOST COMMON THEMES/CODES
As the first step of the qualitative analysis, we reviewed the notes taken by MCWIC staff during the small group sessions of the regional forums. Using qualitative data analysis software, we found the most common appearing themes in order to develop an overview of what was on the minds of forum participants. Although these words and phrases do not provide contexts or a thorough understanding of participant viewpoints, their ranking does provide an indication of the most frequent forum topics. As indicated by Table 7, "rules" were the most common theme of the forums and discussions of rules often revolved around seeking assistance in rule interpretation from OFC as well as the impact of these rules for the practice of county and private agencies. The second most common theme was "children & families," generally in the context of how rules and the assistance provided by OFC impacted the work of county and private agencies with their child and family clients. The third most common theme was "feel supported by OFC" and often reflected whether or not the forum participants felt that OFC supported their work.

We also ranked the top three themes for each of the eight regions and some regional variation is apparent. Table 8 indicates that "rules" ranked as a "top 3" theme for every region with the exception of Cambridge. Children & Families ranked as a top 3 theme in 5 of the 8 training regions. Six other themes ranked as a top 3 concern for at least one region: Feeling Supported, SACWIS, Communication, Training, (Lack of) Relationship with OFC, and Financial.
Table 7: Most Common Themes for all Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking (Most common theme is ranked 1)</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Children &amp; Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feel Supported by OFC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SACWIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(Lack of) Relationship with OFC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Financial Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Policy Clarification/Rule Compliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Technical Assistance Specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Alternative Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Monitoring/Licensing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Organizational/Administrative Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Mandates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Help Desk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Most Common Themes by Region (Top 3 by Rank)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Rules</th>
<th>Children &amp; Families</th>
<th>Feel Supported</th>
<th>SACWIS</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>(Lack of) Relationship with OFC</th>
<th>Financial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loveland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayton</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toledo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akron</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

26
DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Participants in the regional forums and the corresponding online survey provided feedback regarding their positive interactions with OFC, negative interactions with OFC, and their ideal vision for a collaborative relationship between OFC and county and private agencies. This feedback serves as an indicator of the aspects of technical assistance provided by OFC that are perceived as most useful and most valuable to the county and private agencies. The MCWIC evaluation team applied content analysis techniques to systematically examine and interpret this feedback in an effort to identify patterns and themes. The feedback on positive and negative interactions with OFC was organized along four broad concepts, each of which can be viewed as a continuum from negative to positive. As the analysis makes clear, these concepts are not mutually exclusive, but are interrelated, and improvements in one area are most likely dependent upon, and will also lead to, improvements in other areas.

For example, the concept of Relationships/Bureaucracy reflects a common concern among participants regarding frequent turnover and reorganization of staff at OFC. Such instability meant that county and private agency staff often interacted with anonymous OFC employees. In this sense, OFC represented an impersonal bureaucracy, which was viewed in a negative light. In contrast, stability in staff roles and responsibilities at OFC, in general, was viewed positively by regional forum participants who valued the opportunity to get to know and develop professional relationships with OFC staff.

A second common concept of the regional forums and survey responses was Empowerment. When contacting OFC for assistance, such as rule interpretation, county and private agency staff often complained that OFC staff were not empowered to provide the necessary assistance. The OFC staff were described as either lacking the authority to provide the requested assistance or being unwilling to provide the requested assistance because they believed that their actions would not be supported by OFC leadership. This lack of empowerment was viewed as an impediment to the delivery of TA.

A third common concept emerging from the regional forums and the corresponding survey was Responsibility. A common complaint was that OFC was unwilling to share in the responsibility when things went wrong, but instead, tended to pass on the blame. In contrast, respondents suggested that a true partnership or collaboration between OFC and the county and private agencies would involve a sharing of responsibility and a willingness to work together when improvements are necessary, rather than simply “finger-pointing.”

A final concept emerging from the forum process was that of Reactionary/Collaborative. Staff of county and private agencies frequently complained that OFC was very reactionary when something went wrong, such as a child death. The reaction generally involved the creation of new rules that complicated their work and were seen as roadblocks or impediments to their tasks of working with families and children. In contrast, participants suggested that OFC needed to be more collaborative in developing rules for protecting children. In other words, the rule-creation process needed to be more collaborative by including the viewpoints of individuals who were actually in the field doing the “hands-on” work. These concepts are summarized in Table 9.
Table 9: Concepts Organizing Feedback on Positive and Negative Interactions with OFC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships/Bureaucracy</td>
<td>OFC staff stability allows the building of professional relationships</td>
<td>OFC staff instability results in impersonal, bureaucratic relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>OFC staff are empowered to make decisions in providing TA</td>
<td>OFC staff lack empowerment, impeding TA provision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>OFC shares responsibility &amp; works in collaboration to address problems</td>
<td>OFC points fingers and passes the blame when problems arise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactionary/Collaborative</td>
<td>OFC is collaborative in forming rules, seeking input &amp; integrating suggestions of frontline staff</td>
<td>OFC is reactionary in forming rules, ignoring their impact on work with children &amp; families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The qualitative analysis concludes with participants’ suggestions for their ideal vision for the specific types of assistance and collaboration from OFC that would be most beneficial in supporting their work with families and children. This section is organized according to the six types of technical assistance and collaboration that were included on the regional forum survey: 1) Policy clarification/rule compliance, 2) Monitoring or licensing, 3) SACWIS/automated systems, 4) Financial assistance, 5) On-site support, 6) Organizational/administrative support.

Note on the Presentation of Qualitative Data. Whenever possible, direct quotes from the survey responses are provided in italics and, when available, brief descriptive information on the characteristics of the respondent’s agency and county are included in parentheses to provide additional context. Direct quotes are provided from regional forums when possible. When direct quotes were not collected through the note-taking process, paraphrased quotes are provided in a fashion that does not change the meaning of the content.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Bureaucracy vs. Building Relationships. A common theme emerging from the regional forums was a desire for the development of professional relationships between OFC staff and the staff of county and private agencies. The negative side of this theme was illustrated by bureaucratic relationships that were impersonal in nature. Forum participants expressed frustration in dealing with an impersonal bureaucracy, rather than with people they knew.

“For the most part, we work well with the people in OFC, it is the bureaucracy that is difficult to deal with.”
[PCSA/Metro/Stand-alone/Levy]

“The bureaucracy is huge, cumbersome.”
[Regional Forum participant]
“It is not a specific incident, but general experiences of not feeling I can “get through” to a person who could assist me. A feeling of being too far away from the source of information and clarification.”
[PCS/Stand-alone/Levy]

90% of contact is with my regional office, not Columbus. I’ve had a good experience because my Technical Assistance Specialist has been consistent. There has been so much turnover in Columbus, so when you would go to a meeting you wouldn’t know who you would see. Made it difficult to establish relationships. When turnover occurred, people were moved into different positions and maybe they were qualified and maybe they weren’t.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

In addition to bureaucracy, frequent discussion of the OFC organizational chart reflected the disruption caused by turnover, layoffs, and organizational shuffling in the structure of OFC.

A useful, meaningful, helpful, and available organizational chart would be great.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Our TAS keeps changing and our new one interprets things quite differently from our old one. Things we were doing OK before are now a problem. The Table of Organization has been changing a lot.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“It can be frustrating when asked to implement new rules, policies and you don’t have the necessary support. There have been cut backs at the state and I am not always sure who works where or what the new roles are.”
[PCS/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

These requests reflected a frustration with the instability in the organization of OFC, but they also were telling of the broader phenomenon in which bureaucratic interactions had replaced relationships between OFC staff and staff at the county and private agencies. For example, a participant in the Loveland Regional Forum suggested that it was “all about relationships…put a face to a name…have some small talk before you get to business.” Moreover, many survey respondents complained about the lack of relationship-building between OFC and local agencies.

Personnel changes and turnover within OFC impacts their responsiveness.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Lack of relationship results in less supportive reaction to request for help.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
An important thing is the relationship building that cannot occur when there is a lot of turnover.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Lack of a relationship with OFC is a real barrier.”
[Regional Forum participant]

Technical assistance is valuable. The problem is with relationships. Some people hate TA because they've had so many different people tell them so many different things.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Suggestions for improving the partnership between OFC and local agencies often included discussions of relationships and relationship-building. For example, a number of respondents commented on the importance of building a relationship with their technical assistance specialist (TAS).

“Our area’s TAS is very helpful, responsive and timely in her response. It feels like a partnership as opposed to an oversight entity.”
[PCSA/Metro/Stand-alone/Levy]

“We’ve had the same TAS for a number of years and we have a good relationship with them and they are helpful. This is the relationship building that cannot occur when there is a lot of turnover.”
[Regional Forum participant]

“Our TAS is empathetic and verbally supportive when I contact her with questions/clarification. She was a county worker for many years so knows how hard our work is.”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

“Our specific TAS—there is a great working relationship.”
[PCSA/Rural/Triple combined/Levy]

These additional quotes point out the benefits when a relationship builds between OFC staff and local staff:

“State support in clarifying rules/procedures in complex, unusual cases has been prompt and reflected compassion and concern for local situation.”
[PCSA/Rural/Mid-size/No levy]

Relationship-building is essential; it facilitates better outcomes.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Good relationship; willingness to listen to us; sharing of ideas and successful strategies”.
[PCSA/Metro/Stand-alone/Levy]
“Good personal relationships. The staff of OFC desires to be helpful and is limited in their time available.”
[Private network/Mid-size/Stand alone/Levy]

Finally, forum participants mentioned the need for the state to coordinate the development of relationships among states as well.

The state could better facilitate relationships between the counties. When cases get transferred between counties it causes problems. Practice differs dramatically across counties. We aren’t all partners working together.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

In summary, it is clear that the building of professional relationships between OFC staff and staff at private and county agencies is viewed very positively, whereas the anonymous or “faceless” interactions that become characteristic of bureaucracies were viewed as unsatisfactory and unproductive. Positive relationships, even in the face of financial and other difficulties, were viewed as resulting in a more collaborative partnership between the OFC and local agencies.

**Empowerment.** Another positive theme arising from descriptions of interactions between OFC and their clients is the desire that OFC staff be empowered to make their own decisions in technical assistance provision. OFC support staff that had organizational authority and were supported by their leadership was viewed by many forum participants as central to their operations. For example, a Regional Forum participant suggested that OFC should look at technical assistance provision from a customer service standpoint: take personal responsibility and do not shift the blame to someone else in the organization. Another forum participant suggested that the OFC “needs empowered project managers”; not just people that have the necessary skills, but are empowered to make a change. Further, it was suggested that no one at OFC has any accountability: “individuals are great, but they are not empowered to have any authority” (Regional Forum participant). In the minds of these forum participants, the structure of OFC, not individuals within the structure, served as an impediment to the satisfactory delivery of technical assistance.

Descriptions of a lack of empowerment were common in the regional forums and survey responses.

“Many of the state workers are not very empowered; they are worried that if you get caught, they will get caught, and that’s why they are so prescriptive. They don’t think out of the box.”
[Regional Forum participant]

“When you deal with many of the folks individually at OFC, it is almost always positive. However, they are often powerless to provide direction and approval.”
[PCSA/Metro/Combined/Levy]
Typical interaction with regional office: “wonderful,” “supportive,” “not empowered.”
[Regional Forum participant]

From a manager perspective at the state level, it’s like the people that are supposed to help us, they are not empowered to help us.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Individuals (at OFC) are great, but they are not empowered to have any authority.”
[Regional Forum participant]

They are guarded when they come to our meetings because they are disempowered. They don’t see themselves as team members with us, as people at the table helping make decisions.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Regional forum participants and survey participants provided numerous suggestions for addressing the empowerment issue among OFC staff.

“Empower the regional offices—let them network with each other; the regional offices are like OFC’s step children, but they’re their greatest resources.”
[Regional Forum participant]

Need to enhance and empower regional offices. OFC needs to communicate and share resources with regional office.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Remove bureaucratic barriers by allowing certain staff the authority to make/authorize decisions.”
[PCSA/Metro/Stand-alone/Levy]

“Give me educated assistance, and someone who will stand by their stated position on a subject. Someone who can make a decision and support me when that decision is questioned.”
[PCSA/Rural/Combined/Levy]

“Answer questions with a definite answer. It is almost like they are afraid of getting sued if they give an answer.”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

Need top-down change from a guarded disempowered culture to one where they are open.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

In summary, county and private agency staff expressed substantial frustration with the lack of empowerment of the OFC staff providing technical assistance. Regional forum participants called for changes in the organizational structure to allow for more autonomy
and authority for these staff. They asked for OFC staff that were well-trained in their positions and would be supported by their superiors for their actions and decisions in providing technical assistance to local agencies.

**Responsibility.** A common complaint was that OFC was unwilling to share in the responsibility when things went wrong, but instead, tended to pass on the blame. One way that blame was passed was from the state to the local agencies, as described in the following quotes:

*I feel like OFC is always pointing their finger at us.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*They tell us what the rules are, they tell us what to do, but if something goes badly, it is the fault of the county.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Change in attitude towards the counties. Not be so quick in placing blame on counties. Realize that the counties are part of the team—need to work collaboratively.”
[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

Another very common form of avoiding responsibility described in the forums and surveys was for OFC staff to shift the responsibility for providing technical assistance to another person (frequently their superior) or to another division in the agency.

*When you talk to someone individually, they are usually nice and helpful, but they don’t want to take the blame for anything. They don’t take responsibility. They pass it off to someone else of a different division.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*Different divisions within OFC will pass the buck and not take responsibility. No one calls me back.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*No one at the state has any accountability. They all pass it off.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*They’re limiting liability, saying “that decision is not made by us, but by someone higher up in the hierarchy.”*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*It’s a bureaucracy, so no one wants to be clear-cut on their purpose, because you will quote them and they’ll be in trouble.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
OF staff never want to take responsibility—always blaming another division, such as SACWIS or licensing. They don’t cross “boundaries” within the agency to help us. You call around until you find someone who will help.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

We need child welfare experts that a county can call for advice. OFC staff don’t want to be liable. We need somewhere to go to get answers. “I would go to a supervisor in another county before I’d go to a TAS for advice.”
[Regional Forum participant]

Suggestions for improvement in this area revolve around changes in the structure and culture of OFC that would enable staff providing technical assistance to assume responsibility for their actions and decisions. Related to the previous issue of “empowerment,” technical assistance providers will not be enabled to accept responsibility without the support of organizational leadership.

OFC should take on personal responsibility—don’t shift blame to others in your organization. Approach it as a performance issue and training.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Change in attitude towards the counties. Not be so quick in placing blame on counties. Realize the counties are part of the team.
[PCSA/Metro/Triple-combined/Levy]

People at the state should take responsibility for the decisions that they make and explain why.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

It’s all about organizational culture and what is expected from the top, down. It must be a top-down approach from a guarded culture to a “I want to help you in any way I can” culture.
[Regional Forum participant]

“To get better, it has to stop just being about monitoring. We’re not in this together anymore.” Counties are responsible and the state is responsible for monitoring and then we all must answer to the federal government. To get better OFC “can become our partner again.”
[Regional Forum participant]

In summary, participants asserted that a true collaborative partnership in which OFC works in cooperation with the county agencies and private agencies to produce the best outcomes for families and children is not possible in an environment where the monitoring agency is not willing to accept responsibility for decisions and technical assistance provision. The data in this section describe OFC practices in which blame for inadequate technical assistance is passed to other divisions within OFC and blame for negative outcomes with families and children is often placed on the county and private agencies.
Improvement in this area is tightly bound to the theme of “empowerment” in the culture and structure of OFC.

**Reactionary vs. Collaborative.** Discussion of rules was the most frequent regional forum topic. Participants frequently complained that OFC was quite reactionary when something went wrong, such as a child death, often creating new rules that complicated their work and were seen as roadblocks or impediments to their tasks of working with families and children. Here is a sample of these comments:

*Rules are reactionary. New rules and policies are created after incidents.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*Rules are often written in response to legislation and are not practical.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*Rule changes are reactionary and lack common sense as to current practice.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*“Rules have been absolute kneejerk reaction.”*
[Regional Forum participant]

*Just because something bad happens, we don’t need a rule created. It’s sensory overload.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*“They’ve lost sight of what it’s like to be in the field when they’re writing rules.”*
[Regional Forum participant]

*When a child fatality occurs, new rules seem knee-jerk and superficial. There’s no additional training or things to be looked at... just new rules.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*You aren’t working with children & families. You are tied to a computer, looking over your shoulder to make sure someone is not charging you with violating a rule.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*It seems the only time we hear from them is when we have a problem. Very punitive focused. I think they get in the way. When we ask about rules, what we get is a very restrictive interpretation, so we don’t ask anymore, so we can avoid their interpretation.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*It feels like rules appear out of nowhere. I don’t recall being asked to provide input on new rules, to ensure the rule is based in practice. Rules are so foreign, so outside of us.*
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
By the time you see the rule in the clearance process, it doesn’t feel like you have real input. We don’t have time to provide input into big rule changes.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“We are no longer partners, we are ‘sub-recipients.’” They tell us what the rules are, but if things go badly, we are on our own.
[Regional Forum participant]

Forum participants provided a number of suggestions for how the issue of compliance could be more collaborative, and less reactive, in nature.

Need true partnership, clarity of vision, mutual respect, understanding of roles and responsibilities, and a belief that we’re all here to serve the same purpose and vision.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Need discussion regarding the interpretation of rules. Counties need to be involved in the discussion of what rules mean and how rules are interpreted. Practitioners need to be involved in the process.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

We need county/provider involvement in the rule-making process. Legislation comes first, then OFC takes the law and makes it into a rule. They need to re-start the rules training which stopped 10 years ago. The rule trainers learned as much from the field staff as the field staff learned about rules. Was seen as very valuable.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Need realistic understanding of actual work when writing rules.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Need practitioners involved in both the project rule review and in future rule promulgation.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

We can sometimes provide feedback after a rule is adopted, but we don’t have meaningful opportunity to do that before.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Be preventative, rather than reactive. Have training ahead of rule changes, not 4 months after.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum Participant]
“We need more flexibility in rules. Some rules that are not necessary to maintain child safety need to be revised/eliminated. More of the OFC staff need to have a reality check on how policies impact those in the field doing the work. There should be more discussion with frontline staff when developing these rules and not just from Urban areas- Rural areas also should be given same input opportunities to discuss how rules will impact practice in their counties.”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Stand-alone/Levy]

“An open, transparent partnership.” There shouldn’t be a lot of secrets at the state level. You hear that things are happening, but when you ask, nobody will share. I feel like there is some sort of secret society there. One of the most critical things that came out of AR was when there was honesty and transparency, there wasn’t the amount of resistance and distrust.
[Regional Forum participant]

In summary, local agencies commonly feel that rule changes and rule creation are reactionary in nature, failing to take into account the impact of the rules on child welfare workers. The primary suggestion for improvement is to allow input from county agencies and private providers as rules are being created or changed, so the purpose of the rule does not conflict with efforts to work with families and children.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE
The conclusion of the Regional Forum Survey asked respondents to describe their “Ideal Vision” for the relationship between their agency and OFC. Responses have been classified according to the six technical assistance/service areas listed on the survey: 1) Policy Clarification/ Rule Compliance, 2) Monitoring or Licensing, 3) SACWIS/Automated Systems, 4) Financial Assistance, 5) On-Site Support, 6) Organizational/Administrative Support. There is a great deal of variety in the suggestions provided for each of these areas. Consequently, rather than trying to summarize these suggestions, we largely let them speak for themselves.

Policy Clarification/Rule Compliance. The complaint that there are “too many rules” was echoed at each regional forum. The second most common complaint was that when local agencies sought rule clarification or interpretation, they would simply have the rule quoted back to them. These complaints were voiced at every forum. Selected ideal visions for the future of Policy Clarification and Rule Compliance follow.

“All public and private agencies are given the same information about rules and compliance; consistent information needs to be given—we get different information from different staff.”
[Private Network/Mid-size/Stand alone/Levy]

“Need realistic understanding of actual work when writing rules.”
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
“Need practitioners involved in both the (MCWIC) project rule review and in future rule promulgation.”
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Guidance on rule implementation, solid answers to questions, less mandates with no financial support.”
[PCSA/Rural/Triple combined/No levy]

“Clear rule interpretation and consistent support/assistance when needed.”
[PCSA/Metro/Stand-alone/Levy]

“Become a state of one without fragmented ideas/policies.”
[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

Rules and policy should be connected and support the front-line. Changes in rules need to be communicated immediately.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Much more open rule review/creation process. Providing needed tools and resources to meet the mandates. Think outside the box when it comes to meeting the mandates. Move more towards evidence based solutions.”
[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

Rule interpretation should follow good casework practice. Have discussion and a parallel process.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Reinstate regional meetings so folks can network and hear rule interpretation at the same time. Also, this would put OFC more in touch with front-line practice, so they can hear about issues and how what they do/say impacts front-line practice.
[Paraphrased from Loveland Forum participant]

**Monitoring or Licensing.** Regarding Monitoring and Licensing, there is a call for being pro-active, consistent across agencies, and collaborative. Selected suggestions are provided.

“For all licensing specialist to uphold same standards as other licensing specialists.”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

“More of a partnership approach rather than punitive, especially in licensing and foster care. More flexibility at the local level.”
[PCSA/Rural/Triple combined/No levy]
The monitoring doesn’t review the things that don’t matter. Outcome indicators need to be focused on things that are relevant to CFSR outcomes for our agency. There’s no overarching practice model for Ohio—why not?  
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Want OFC to take a more positive approach. More involved, not just compliance monitoring or when there’s an issue with non-compliance...more open relationship.  
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Have monitoring look more like CFSR—identify pockets of state that are doing well and share best practices across the state; they may think that’s what they currently do, but it isn’t effective.  
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Give supervisors ways to monitor compliance with rules. This would be a way the state could help us. Put these tools into SACWIS so we can see ways to monitor our staff. We should be able to click in SACWIS and see how many safety assessments are in compliance and how many are not. But no supervisory reports are available.  
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

SACWIS/Automated Systems. Complaints with the time commitment required by SACWIS were common. Many forum participants expressed a desire to do away with SACWIS altogether and return to a focus on working with children and families. The following are a selection of suggestions for improving technical assistance in relation to SACWIS/Automated Systems.

“Assist in responding to SACWIS issues as quickly as possible. SACWIS training for new staff.”  
[No information provided]

“SACWIS support!!! Desperately needed. More timely. Providing uniform work standards for counties in SACWIS. We use the same system in very different ways.”  
[PCSA/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

“SACWIS fixes to occur more timely. CPOE to focus on issues/aspects that are truly important to helping our families.”  
[PCSA/Rural/Combined/Levy]

Private agency lack of access to SACWIS. For awhile, there was a worker-led initiative to get private agencies access, that was supposed to happen in 200. If we had access, we could be better partners with counties. We have to communicate compliance on paper, give that to county, and the county has to enter into SACWIS. Counties have varying ways of requiring private agencies to provide that information—some have created forms, some accept our reports, etc.  
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
Rules don’t match with SACWIS—these two departments don’t understand each other, creating a big gap between the two which leaves counties stuck in the middle. Need rules and SACWIS at core training.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

We used to have quarterly meetings with state folks to have questions answered. We’re taking shortcuts on SACWIS so we’re not using it as it was intended. They need to have regional meetings again for SACWIS support. We don’t all understand SACWIS so it’s not being used correctly.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

It would help if my supervisor could fix errors ...more local control to change things in SACWIS. Disconnect the case plan from other parts of SACWIS (its confusing to families) until it can work well.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Financial Assistance. Of course the number one complaint in this area was lack of funding and requests for more of it. However, forum participants did provide a number of specific suggestions for state/local collaboration in the area of Financial Assistance.

“Timely completion of contracts and release of funds.”
[PCSA/Midsize/Stand alone/Levy]

 Counties are inhibited in ability to participate in grants, etc. because they can’t front the money. Barrier to system reform because we don’t have matching funds or can’t front the money because the state takes 6 months to reimburse us.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

“Giving financial assistance for mandated procedures and rule compliance.”
[Private/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

 Finances not being so prescriptive...setting aside categories where money can be spent when need is in other categories.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

Also need to focus on prevention, but instead all people do is triage or get involved so late that there is no other recourse for the families; there is no mandate for prevention programs; state gives no money for prevention; get reimbursed for putting kids in care, but do not get reimbursed for prevention programs.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

More flexible funding would be a good thing. We have money left over at end of year we could use in other way, but we have to send back.
[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]
"I'm scared to death for families in our counties: funding is drying up, stress is increasing; heroin, domestic violence; joblessness." State needs to know that it's worse than it has been in 20 years. "We're collecting peanut butter and jelly, how sad is that?" Communities are in crisis.

[Regional Forum participant]

**On-Site Support.** A general theme in this area was the request for more on-site support or a return to on-site support activities that had been discontinued in previous years. Specific suggestions are listed.

"Having quarterly training on rule changes and policy."

[No information provided]

"On site regular contact with PCSA management staff to address issues as they arise."

[PCSA/Mid-size/Stand alone/Levy]

"More knowledge about your services and support. If workers had a way to get help with SACWIS, policy clarification etc directly from OFC that would be beneficial."

[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

"County assigned a support person who visits office regularly maybe 3x a year to go over changes, rules, laws, policies to ensure everyone is on the same page."

[PCSA/Rural/Stand-alone/Levy]

*Ideally would have permanent state staff member on site for larger agencies.*

[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*Back in “old days,” OFC used to come to agency to do rule-related trainings here on site. We want that again.*

[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

*Free up TA people to actually get out to the counties. Face-to-face, on site communication is very helpful.*

[Paraphrased from Regional Forum participant]

"Training with frontline managers around new rules and policies. Training or team building exercises with frontline manager staff. Better consistency with practice across the state."

[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

"As local budgets shrink, I would expect more direct support in technical support training, policy development and implementation of new practices."

[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

**Organizational/Administrative Support.** Suggestions for improving Organizational/Administrative Support are related to increased collaboration and
working towards a shared mission and vision. Specific ideal visions for this area are listed.

“That OFC would be the convener and leader in bringing people together, going after grants, supporting to private sector, being engaged with.”
[Private Network/Mid-size/No other information provided]

“The main challenge is managing resources. The main need is directors who understand the field. Real effort must be made to teach directors, individually, if necessary, how to manage the reports, funds, and RMS system.”
[PCSA/Rural/Combined/Levy]

“A sensitivity to what counties experience daily. Appreciation of the strengths of counties. Two way communication rather than unidirectional”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Combined/Levy]

“A shared vision that value child safety and family stability and everything we do is done to achieve that vision. All training and all tech support would be geared to supporting that vision.”
[PCSA/Mid-size/Triple combined/Levy]

“A clear mission for all 88 counties. Leadership from OFC or interpreting and putting in practice this “mission.” Advocacy by OFC with state government and state legislature on needs or child welfare.”
[PCSA/Metro/Triple combined/Levy]

“The “system” would work closer together.”
[PCSA/Rural/Triple combined/Levy]

“Find positive ways to get to Yes. Define parameters leading to good outcomes versus detailed mandates. Stay flexible, minimized detailed, focus on desired outcomes. State has essential role for infrastructure, esp regarding SACWIS—meet needs for county info and reports.”
[Other private entity/No other information provided]

SUMMARY OF THE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

By far, the topic of “rules” was the most common topic of discussion at the forums. Discussions regarding the rules often revolved around seeking assistance in rule interpretation from OFC as well as the impact of these rules for the practice of county and private agencies. The second most common theme was “children and families,” generally in the context of how rules and the assistance provided by OFC impacted the work of county and private agencies with their child and family clients. The third most common topic of discussion at the forums reflected whether or not the forum participants felt that OFC supported their work.
The content of the qualitative data from the surveys and forums was analyzed according to four concepts:

1) **Relationships/Bureaucracy** reflected a common concern among forum participants that OFC represented an impersonal bureaucracy, which was viewed in a negative light. In contrast, stability in staff roles and responsibilities at OFC, in general, was viewed positively by regional forum participants who valued the opportunity to get to know and develop professional relationships with OFC staff.

2) **Empowerment** reflected the complaint that OFC staff were not empowered in providing technical assistance. The OFC staff were described as either lacking the authority to provide the requested assistance or being unwilling to provide the requested assistance because they believed that their actions would not be supported by OFC leadership.

3) **Responsibility** was a third issue of concern. A common complaint was that OFC was unwilling to share in the responsibility when things went wrong, but instead, tended to pass on the blame. In contrast, respondents suggested that a true partnership or collaboration would involve a sharing of responsibility and a willingness to work together when improvements are necessary.

4) **Reactionary/Collaborative** was the final concept reflecting the concerns of forum participants, who complained that OFC was very reactionary when something went wrong, such as a child death. Often new rules were created that complicated their work and were seen as roadblocks to their tasks of working with families and children. In contrast, participants suggested that OFC needed to be more collaborative in developing rules for protecting children.

The report concludes with a compilation of statements of the ideal vision for the future, as expressed by participants in the forums and surveys. Specific suggestions for improvement included ideas regarding:

- Methods for improving the rule making process and for providing clearer and more consistent interpretation of rules
- Providing more consistent, proactive, and collaborative monitoring processes
- Providing more timely and meaningful SACWIS support
- More flexible funding options
- A return to provision of on-site technical assistance and support
- A call for OFC to lead more collaborative, statewide efforts to achieve a clear, shared vision and mission for all 88 counties