

# ***Interim Report to the Massachusetts Legislature***

*Regarding Line Item 0411-1005 and Outside Section 219*

**The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) Review of  
the Department of Children and Families' 2014 Parent and Guardian Survey**

**OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE**

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# **Interim Report to the Massachusetts Legislature Regarding Line Item 0411-1005 and Outside Section 219**

## **The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) Review of the Department of Children and Families' 2014 Parent and Guardian Survey**

In 2014, as part of the General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2015, the Legislature appropriated funds for the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to conduct an emergency review and analysis of the office management, recordkeeping, and background check procedures of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) pursuant to Outside Section 219. Outside Section 219 directs the OCA, in consultation with the Office of the Inspector General (IGO), to survey both clients and employees of DCF and to develop best business management practices and recommendations to ensure the improved administration of DCF relative to seven enumerated areas. In 2015, the OCA entered into a contract with an independent consultant, The Ripples Group (TRG), to assist in performing the Section 219 review, and TRG will present its comprehensive analysis and report to the Legislature by November 2, 2015.

### **About the Survey**

In 2013, as part of the agency's commitment to assessing the impact of its work and including family perspective, DCF developed a multi-year process for gathering and incorporating parent and family feedback into DCF policy and practice. This effort includes an annual survey of parents and guardians with recent experience with DCF.

In the following fiscal year, the Legislature tasked the OCA with conducting both employee and client surveys. On March 31, 2015, the OCA filed an Interim Report with the legislature, including findings from a survey of DCF employees. A copy of the Interim Report is available on the OCA's website: <http://www.mass.gov/childadvocate/docs/interim-report.pdf>.

Given the challenges of connecting with DCF clients in the time frame specified by Section 219 and the methodological problems of conducting two surveys close in time to one another, the OCA elected to partner with DCF in surveying some of their clients, in this case parents and guardians.

The 2014 Parent/Guardian Survey contains the same set of questions as the previous year—12 Likert scaled questions (e.g. strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree), five yes-no, and three open-ended questions—as well as four questions that the OCA has added. The survey covers questions in the following areas:

- initial engagement with the family;
- DCF's communication and work style with the family;
- efforts to build family capacity and focus on family strengths;
- opportunities to engage children;
- promotion of family partnerships in service planning;
- respect for family's individuality and culture;
- access and availability of community services; and
- case closure.

## Methodology

From November 5, 2014, to March 17, 2015, twelve Community Representatives from the DCF Family Advisory Committee—parents with prior DCF experience—began conducting the parent and guardian survey by telephone, in English, Portuguese, and Spanish.

The survey population consisted of 6,168 parents and guardians whose DCF cases were closed within the eight-month period ending August 31, 2014. The Community Representatives attempted to reach everyone in the survey population at least once and at most three times; in all, they were able to reach 1,722 parents and guardians<sup>1</sup> and receive consent from 1,157, reaching an effective response rate of 67% and an overall completed survey rate of 19%.<sup>2</sup>

Before the survey administration, DCF provided the Community Representatives with a survey ‘script’ as well as training on survey techniques in efforts to standardize administration protocols and reduce bias and measurement error. The cases with an identified primary language of Portuguese or Spanish were assigned to Community Representatives who were proficient in these languages; the remainder of cases was divided amongst the Community Representative in a randomized fashion.

The Community Representatives were paid \$30 per hour, and the total cost of Community Representatives’ labor was \$23,295. This sum, however, does not include the time spent by DCF staff to train and supervise the Community Representatives, nor does it reflect the cost of analyzing the survey by DCF, the OCA and Suffolk University’s Moakley Center for Public Management.

For both 2013 and 2014 survey administrations, DCF’s Continuous Quality Improvement Unit has managed data entry, analyzed the responses, and matched survey data to FamilyNet data<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, for this year’s administration, both the OCA and Suffolk University’s Moakley Center have worked together to analyze and make recommendations on improving the survey instrument and its administration.

## Results

DCF’s report—“Continuous Quality Improvement Project: Seeking and Incorporating the Voice of Families – 2014 Parent and Guardian Survey”—and a copy of the survey are attached as Appendix. Below are key findings and a summary of themes from the open-ended responses. For purposes of this report and clarity, “strongly agree” and “agree” were combined to indicate agreement, and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” were combined to indicate disagreement. The four questions that the OCA added are noted with asterisks (\*).

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<sup>1</sup> Bad phone numbers: 1,168; non-English, non-Spanish, and non-Portuguese calls: 56; unable to reach: 3,222; denied consent: 565

<sup>2</sup> Effective response rate =  $\frac{\text{survey completed}}{\text{denied consent} + \text{survey completed}} \times 100\%$

Overall completed survey rate =  $\frac{\text{survey completed}}{\text{bad phone \#s} + \text{non-English} + \text{unable to reach} + \text{denied consent} + \text{survey completed}} \times 100\%$

<sup>3</sup> FamilyNet: FamilyNet is a statewide automated child welfare information system that was implemented in February 1998. This management information system is used for virtually all DCF activities, including intake, investigation, assessment, clinical/case management, adoption, financial, legal and provider services. DCF staffs enter information directly into the central FamilyNet database from their computers or tablets. The aggregate and consumer-specific data available from this database enables DCF to efficiently manage its resources to meet the needs of its clients.

**Scaled and yes-no questions**

	Strongly Agree & Agree (%)	Strongly Disagree & Disagree (%)
Q6. Your DCF worker respected your family’s cultural traditions.	90	10
Q2. Your family was treated with dignity and respect by DCF.	87	13
Q9. Your DCF worker paid attention to your children’s needs and wants.	85	15
Q9a.* Your DCF worker met with you/your family as often as you needed.	85	15
Q3. Your DCF worker understood your family’s strengths.	84	16
Q8. Your DCF worker explained what to expect during your involvement with DCF.	84	16
Q7. Your DCF worker encouraged you to participate in making decisions about your family.	84	16
Q4. Your DCF worker understood your family’s needs.	83	17
Q1. You were satisfied with the communication you had with DCF.	80	20
Q5. Your DCF worker helped you to find ways to address your family’s needs.	80	20
Q17. Overall, DCF helped your family.	75	25

	Yes (%)	No & Don’t Know (%)
Q16. Did your family have the supports you needed at the time your DCF case was closed?	81	19
Q11. Do you know that the “Family Guide to Protective Services” brochure contains information about your rights as a parent involved with DCF?	69	31
Q10. Did you get a copy of the “Family Guide to Child Protective Services” brochure?	58	42

**Scaled and yes-no questions asked to those with Service Plans in FamilyNet**

	Yes (%)	No & Don’t Know (%)
Q12. During your work with DCF, did you have a DCF Service Plan? If “No” or “I don’t know,” skip questions 13 and 14.	66	34

	Strongly Agree & Agree (%)	Strongly Disagree & Disagree (%)
Q13. DCF worked with you to develop your DCF Service Plan.	88	12
Q14. The tasks on your DCF Service Plan have helped make your family better.	84	16

	Yes (%)	No & I am not aware of participating (%)
Q15. Did you participate in a Family Team Meeting where you had a say in who was invited?	44	56

**Open-ended questions**

**Q16a. What additional supports would have been helpful at your case closing?**

Most people skipped question 16a. Among those who answered the question, the majority found DCF helpful and did not think they needed additional supports. A significant portion of respondents, however, felt that DCF can improve its communication, by better explaining the process, following up, and providing timely notices. Others expressed a need for additional services, including mental and behavioral supports, living supports, support for children, etc.

**Q17. Overall, DCF helped your family (please indicate your level of agreement).**

**Q17a. What might DCF have done to be more helpful?**

**Q18. Do you have any additional comments that you would like me to include with this survey?**

Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that overall, DCF helped their families (question 17). When asked what DCF could have done to be more helpful or what additional comments they had (questions 17a and 18), the majority skipped the question or declined to provide an answer.

Among those who answered the question, many found DCF helpful and replied “none” to the questions. Similar to question 16a, many respondents to questions 17a and 18 stated that DCF should strive to communicate more effectively and listen to parents and guardians.

Moreover, in addition to the services mentioned in question 16a, respondents expressed that it would have been helpful had DCF been more supportive in finding resources and ensuring continuity and coordination of services. Others also mentioned the need for improvements in the investigation process, the length of DCF involvement, and the scheduling of appointments with DCF social workers.

**Q17b.\* What, if any, difficulties did you have in working with DCF?**

**Q17c.\* How were these difficulties resolved?**

**Q17d.\* These difficulties were resolved to your satisfaction.**

Many respondents again skipped questions 17b, 17c and 17d. Among those who answered, the vast majority replied ‘none’ and reported no difficulties in working with DCF (question 17b). Others who answered the questions cited the following difficulties in working with DCF:

- 8% of the responses reported that DCF should strive to **communicate** better, explain the process, and provide timely information.
- 6% of the responses that it was **hard to reach DCF staff**, make appointments, follow up, or access information.

➤ 5% of the responses reported that DCF staff **lacked professionalism**, understanding, and neutrality.

While many of those who voiced a difficulty in working with DCF stated that these difficulties were not resolved, others replied that the issues resolved when the case closed. Other respondents reported having resolved the issues by working with DCF, resolving the issues on his or her own, getting new workers, going to courts, and rescheduling appointments with the workers. When asked whether the difficulties in question 17b were resolved to their satisfaction, about 40% reported agreement.

### Recommendations: Survey Instrument and Administration

DCF and the OCA were able to gather multiple viewpoints from the 2014 Parent/Guardian Satisfaction Survey and access past experiences of DCF parents and guardians that are not easily accessible. This second year administration of the survey also helped to compare the results against last year's and find remaining areas for improvement. To build on this progress and to collect richer, balanced perspectives in the future, the OCA and Moakley Center recommend the following improvements to the survey instrument and administration.

1. **Conduct the survey on a rolling basis.** The debriefing with the Community Representatives revealed that many respondents struggled to recall their interactions with DCF staff. Conducting a survey immediately or a few months after the case closure would help with better recollection and accurate depictions of the actual experience. This may additionally diminish the number of 'bad' phone numbers when the survey is administered and help with reaching a sufficient sample size.
2. **Correct for potential non-response errors.** Often times with surveys, there are concerns about 'non-response errors,' in this case, about whether those who are reachable by phone and have responded to the survey are systematically different from those who are not reachable by phone and have not responded and from those who are reachable but unwilling to respond. To reduce non-response errors, DCF could give pre-notifications about the survey at the time of case closure, or offer respondents alternative ways to participate in the survey (e.g. online survey).
3. **Consider a neutral party to conduct the survey.** During the debriefing with the Community Representatives, the OCA observed evidences of interviewer effects<sup>4</sup> on the responses. For instance, a few callers confused the Community Representatives as DCF staff, expressing distrust and skepticism. Additionally, while having the survey conducted by those with personal DCF experiences may help with the initial rapport, interviewers' previous history with DCF may have an influence on the responses. Therefore, DCF could consider having a party that is neutral to DCF and one that can protect the confidentiality and the anonymity of the callers to administer the parent and guardian survey.
4. **Administer "split ballot" questionnaires.** It was apparent from the debriefing that there were variations in how closely the Community Representatives followed the script and in the number of times that they tried to reach the respondents in different stages of the survey process.

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<sup>4</sup> *Interviewer effect* refers to an instance in which a respondent's answer changes due to the interviewer's characteristics.

Additionally, a few survey questions are phrased positively, raising questions about the neutrality of the survey. As such, researchers should randomly assign respondents to two groups that receive slightly different questionnaires, with different question order or wording, and see whether the respondents respond differently.

5. **Conduct a pre-test or pilot study.** The debriefing of the surveyors occurred when all the surveys had been administered, during which it was revealed that many respondents skipped the last few questions, most of which were open-ended questions. Additionally, many thought the survey was too long and had issues with the wording of various questions (e.g. Q16a's "additional supports," Q17b's "difficulties," Q11's "do you know," and Q15's "Did you participate... where you had a say"). In the future, the questionnaire should be administered initially to a small group of people to identify problems proactively and improve the survey before the questionnaire is administered.
6. **Establish quality control.** In order to ensure the quality of the calls, the calls by the Community Represents should be periodically monitored. Moreover, as the surveyors did not transcribe the responses verbatim, the survey answers should be transcribed as the respondents are responding to the questions. The transferring of responses from paper to computer again cost a significant amount of time and labor; therefore, electronic instruments to upload survey answers are recommended.
7. **Incorporate questions about service effectiveness.** As added focus is being placed on Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), targeted questions on the effectiveness of services provided would greatly enhance the quality of feedback and help build a positive feedback loop into DCF management practices.

## Conclusion

The 2014 Parent and Guardian Survey is a part of the essential piece in incorporating the voice of families in DCF's policies and practice. The OCA recommends that DCF consider the improvements mentioned above to better identify DCF clients' expectations, concerns, and level of satisfaction; and find specific areas for continuous improvement.