

Family Assessment Response (FAR) Application

Name of Applicant County: Niagara

Name and contact information for the person in your agency to contact regarding this application:

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Please complete all items in this application, unless marked “if applicable,” in which case the information should be provided if appropriate. It may be helpful to refer to the *Family Assessment Response Readiness Checklist* for ideas about the information to be provided in each section.

I. Rationale for Implementation of FAR

- A.** Describe your rationale for applying to implement Family Assessment Response (FAR) and for undertaking the practice shift to FAR.

Niagara county believes that the FAR program has the potential to place Child Protective Services/Child Welfare in a positive light in our community, better serve families where immediate safety concerns do not exist and reduce long term care. Reductions in SCR reports and CPS recurrent involvement with families are also anticipated.

Niagara County has a high number of maltreatment reports with allegations of inadequate guardianship and educational neglect.

- B.** What benefits are you seeking for your district through implementation of FAR? For the families reported to your district? For your community?

The benefits we seek are a decrease in the number of children and youth at risk of placement in foster care, a new paradigm in assessing and working with families struggling with challenges (socioeconomic, community, education, etc.), proactive prevention, and significant cost savings. Families who partner with FAR/CPS will demonstrate increased involvement and commitment to proactive planning, increased

knowledge and use of community supports, and report positive experiences in outcomes. FAR provides us the opportunity to be a community support and establish reciprocal working relationships with churches, neighborhood associations, nonprofit agencies, schools, and other community groups.

- C. Provide a brief assessment of your district's current child welfare/CPS case practice, including an assessment of your district's current strengths regarding family engagement, assessing safety and risk, family-led strengths and needs assessment, and solution-focused practice.

The Niagara County Department of Social Services (NCDSS) has 5 Child Protective units that respond to and investigate all reports of abuse and maltreatment. There are 4 Undercare (Preventive/Foster Care) units that provide services both to cases opened through Child Protective Services and to families that have been petitioned to Family Court. In Niagara County, we take ownership of our children and families. Our staff turnover is historically the lowest in the state. We know our communities, school personnel and community agencies. We work as a team in Child Protective Services and Undercare. NCDSS received 3,440 reports of abuse and neglect in 2010 and a comparable rate of reports to date in 2011.

The Niagara Falls office receives the highest numbers of reports. There are two CPS units in the Niagara Falls office and the unit in North Tonawanda also covers part of the city of Niagara Falls. There are serious drug issues in the city. We work closely with law enforcement and the Child Advocacy Center in many of our cases. We are well trained in risk assessment and have a reputation for finding other family members for children when out of home placement becomes necessary. We are piloting family group conferencing in our Lockport office with the goal to expand it county wide. The agencies that we contract with for preventive services are trauma focused and situation based. Niagara County Department of Social Services Administration supports change.

Niagara County has a longstanding relationship with New Directions Youth and Family Services. Their Wyndham Lawn Campus is located in Lockport, New York. They have been a major provider of preventive services in CPS and Child Welfare cases, providing in-home parenting customized to meet the families' needs.

- D. Identify areas of practice where you anticipate that development and support will be needed in the successful implementation of FAR.

The Niagara County Department of Social Services anticipates that we will become even more skilled in engaging families through using FAR. We have been very transparent about this program in developing our workgroup and in communicating with our agency staff; therefore, there is a high level of buy-in with our FAR team and agency staff. Training in solution focus will increase our workers' skills in partnering with families. Child Welfare staff will also be included in ongoing training, ongoing coaching from AHA, and will also enhance the skill set.

Niagara County Department of Social Services will partner with New Directions to provide services to the FAR families.

II. Intake - Criteria for Assigning Reports to Family Assessment Response

While New York State Law excludes assignment of Child Protective Services (CPS) reports containing certain categories of allegations to FAR, a majority of all CPS reports remain eligible for FAR assignment. OCFS has found that when districts severely limit the types of allegations assigned to FAR, it impedes the successful implementation of FAR. Therefore, OCFS policy requires districts to commit to screening in a broad range of allegations for FAR assignment.

As per New York State law, reports with allegations said to have occurred outside of family settings (day care, foster care) cannot be assigned to FAR. Also in accordance with State law, reports containing the following allegations cannot be assigned to FAR:

- sex abuse (i.e., commission of a sex offense against a child)
- child prostitution
- incest
- a child engaged in, or use of a child for purposes of, child pornography
- assault against a child
- attempted or committed murder or manslaughter in the first or second degree
- child abandonment
- severe or repeated abuse
- neglect resulting in failure to thrive

A. List additional criteria you will use to screen out reports from FAR (if applicable):

- *Sensitive Reports*
- *Fatalities*
- *Reports that resulted from a recent arrest of endangering the welfare of a child*
- *Domestic Violence*

B. List the types of reports to be screened into FAR:

Initially:

- *Inadequate Guardianship (no indicated history)*
- *Lack of Supervision (no indicated history)*
- *Educational Neglect*

These criteria will be reviewed monthly to determine if a request and change is needed from OCFS.

C. Describe the procedures you will use to screen reports into FAR:

Upon receipt of reports from the SCR that contains allegations of Educational Neglect, Lack of Supervision, or Inadequate Guardianship, the FAR and CPS supervisor will

utilize the Niagara County FAR screening tool (see attached). Each weekday morning, the FAR and CPS supervisors will use the screening tool to accurately establish the number of cases that are appropriate for FAR. The Director of Services will be consulted as needed. Initially, on call reports will be handled in the traditional investigative manner. However, as supervisors and caseworkers become more familiar with the FAR core principles and process, we will transition to using the FAR approach for all reports that are received nights and weekends that are deemed eligible.

III. Projected Caseloads and Workforce Allocation

Developing a successful FAR program requires assigning a sufficient number of cases to FAR to foster a vibrant FAR program. Agencies should commit to assigning to the FAR track a meaningful percentage (minimum of 30-40%) of the CPS reports that fall within the categories of cases that meet their criteria for FAR. Alternatively, medium to large sized districts may wish to serve one or more communities that have a disproportionately large number of CPS reports and/or a disproportionately high minority representation in their CPS reports, with a commitment to assigning a minimum of 15-20% of all such allowable CPS reports to FAR.

- A. Caseload projections** - After considering the criteria you plan to use to assign FAR cases and reviewing past CPS data, estimate your **projections** for assignment of cases to FAR in the first 12 months of operation:

% of all CPS reports received:

30% of all reports received at the Niagara Falls office

% of CPS reports meeting criteria for inclusion in FAR:

100% of the FAR-eligible cases (in Niagara Falls only, for now)

Total number of reports to be assigned to FAR:

600 in first 12 months (based on 3440 reports received in 2010, of which about 2000 were in Niagara Falls; 30% of 2000 is 600)

Additional comments (optional):

These numbers will be reviewed quarterly to determine if additional staff may be needed for FAR cases or if we should consider requesting a change in criteria for FAR inclusion from OCFS.

- B. Decision-making about staff allocations**

Describe how you plan to staff FAR. (Please note: because FAR is a CPS service, the basic training requirements for staff assigned to FAR are the same as those for other CPS staff.) Include a description of your process for the identification of staff who will implement FAR. Are you assigning based on specific criteria, asking for volunteers, etc.?

In August 2011, Niagara County Child Welfare and Child Protective Services staff was provided with information about Family Assessment Response and the local district's interest to implement FAR in Niagara County. Niagara County DSS administration asked staff to volunteer to become part of the FAR program based on their CPS and Child Welfare experience. There were many staff members who volunteered to become

part of the FAR team, more than were needed. These staff will be considered when we expand the program. This speaks well of our transparency and positive attitude towards this approach.

C. Staff allocations projected for the first year

Field experience has demonstrated that FAR is implemented most easily and most effectively when staff assigned to FAR are responsible for FAR cases only and do not have mixed caseloads. Therefore, OCFS will not approve any applications with a plan to implement FAR in which individual caseworkers carry case loads of both FAR and Investigation cases. Supervisory oversight of mixed units should be considered only in small districts with two or fewer CPS units.

1. Number of units to be assigned to FAR

Designate the number of units that will be responsible for FAR cases only and the number of any units that will have mixed caseloads (if applicable) and include the number of caseworkers / senior workers or supervisors assigned to each unit:

There will be one FAR unit consisting of one supervisor, one senior worker and four caseworkers. The FAR unit will carry FAR cases only and there will be no mixed caseloads. New Directions contract staff will carry FAR caseloads once they have completed the required Child Protective Services and American Humane training.

2. Number of Supervisors to be assigned to FAR / experience and qualifications

Describe the experience and qualifications of supervisory staff:

There will be one FAR supervisor with 19 years of experience (17 years in CPS and 2 years in PINS/JD). The supervisor has been a CPS supervisor for 1 ½ years and was a senior worker for 5 years.

Designate the number of supervisors responsible for FAR cases only, and those that will have mixed caseloads (if applicable):

The supervisor will be responsible for FAR cases only. The Senior Caseworker is fully trained and will serve as backup.

3. Number of caseworkers assigned to FAR / experience and qualifications

Describe the experience and qualifications of caseworker staff:

Three of the caseworkers assigned to FAR have CPS experience and are currently in the investigation unit. The fourth worker has completed CPS response training and is currently working in the children's services unit. The senior worker has extensive CPS experience.

Designate the number of caseworkers who will have FAR caseloads:

4 caseworkers and 1 senior caseworker (plus 2 staff and 1 Supervisor at New Directions)

4. Describe other staff resources to be dedicated to FAR (if applicable):

Niagara County has contracted with New Directions Youth and Family Service to provide two caseworkers initially as part of the Niagara County FAR team. Two experienced professionals, Garrett Dickinson and Cindy Wilson, are the identified caseworkers and their supervisor is Gina Tasca-Burket, also from New Directions. New Directions staff performing FAR duties will complete all training required by OCFS for FAR and CPS. Ms. Tasca-Burket will oversee New Directions involvement in FAR and be capable of accepting cases on a need for basis. Referrals to New Directions will be initiated by the local district's FAR supervisor.

New Directions staff experience and qualifications are summarized below:

Gina Tasca-Burket, BS, (MSW 2012): Work experience includes but is not limited to: CASA Court Appointed Special Advocate (8 yrs.) and with New Directions: Supervisor for Partners in Parenting for NCDSS, Youth Counselor, Caseworker, Home Finder, Intake Coordinator, and Trainer. Certifications and Trainings include CDHS Family Meetings, MAPP, Common Sense Parenting, ABC Behavior Module, Mandated Reporting, Sexual Abuse Leadership, Casey Life Skills, Life Books, and Trauma-Informed Treatment and High Functioning Autistic Spectrum. Ms Tasca-Burket is also the co-chair of CAFFA. Proficient in Connections.

Garrett Dickinson, MSW: Work experience includes but is not limited to: Child Welfare Court Improvement Project for WNY, Subla Center in Ireland (community outreach), Residence Counselor for Unity Hospital in Rochester, Special Education aide and for New Directions: Parent Trainer for Partners in Parenting for NCDSS. Trainings include: Mandated Reporting, Trauma Informed Approaches for Caseworkers, Muslim Collaborative Training in Buffalo, Solution Focus Work with Families, Youth in Court and MAPP. Proficient in Connections.

Cindy Wilson, BSW (MSW 2013): Work experience includes but is not limited to: Kidspace (6 yrs.) - homefinder, intake coordinator, supervisor, and family court. Compass House. New Directions. Trainings include MAPP, Fostering and Adopting Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused, Together Facing the Challenge, Interviewing Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused and Mandated Reporting. Proficient in Connections.

The role of the New Directions FAR staff:

If they are available, the New Directions FAR workers will accompany the NCDSS FAR CPS workers on the initial scheduled visit to the family. Once a case is determined to be opened as a FAR case, there will be a case by case determination, made in partnership with the team and family, about whether to

assign New Directions a supportive role in the case. Some of the factors to be considered in determining whether to assign a case to New Directions are:

- *Need for after hours support to family*
- *Immediate need for purchasing items*
- *Frequency of home visits needed*

New Directions and their FAR staff will support NCDSS FAR Caseworkers, but NCDSS will maintain primary responsibility. Even if New Directions caseworkers are not directly working on a case, NCDSS will be able to access funds from the New Directions petty cash fund to help meet the needs of FAR clients.

- 5. Include additional information** about units and/or workers to be assigned, including **location** information if implementation will not be countywide (if applicable):

The FAR unit will be located in the Niagara Falls office. Future plans are to expand the use of FAR to the Child Protective Services office which is located in Lockport, New York.

D. Phase-in or Rollout Plans for Workforce

Describe your plans for phasing in your FAR workforce (if applicable):

In anticipation of the approval of our application, a workgroup comprised of Child Protective and Child Welfare staff, New Directions staff, Director of Services, and Regional Office staff meets bi-weekly to discuss the FAR process and to discuss concerns and issues. We have developed our FAR screening tool and flow chart. The workers in the proposed FAR team have demonstrated the ability to engage families and maintain professional relationships with families. Our focus is to build on staff's skills and experience and on our commitment to solution focused and family centered casework practice. We anticipate our start up will be January 3, 2012.

All child welfare staff will attend informal informational sessions and trainings regarding FAR. Formal meetings have been conducted with several school administrators, social workers and teachers regarding the FAR model. Niagara County plans to meet with stakeholders to provide information and seek input regarding the FAR process. Program protocols and procedures are in the process of being developed, including the use of the FLAG on every case that is designated as FAR.

Niagara County plans to expand the FAR model to the Lockport Child Protective unit in 2012.

E. Future Plans (After the First Year)

Describe any additional plans you may have regarding the future size of the FAR program and staffing patterns to accommodate the program after the first year (if applicable):

After the first year, the local district plans to expand by adding two additional caseworkers to FAR. In addition, a second unit will be created and located in the Lockport office.

IV. Plan for Service Provision

Describe

- the types of services and supports you plan to provide to families in FAR
- the procedures you will use in offering these services, including:
 - your strategies to apply the principle of actively engaging and empowering families in an ongoing process of assessing their strengths and needs, assessing child safety, and decision-making; and
 - how you plan to link families with needed services and goods through relationships with preventive services staff, TANF staff, and community service providers, including any plans to contract for such services.

FAR families will be assisted in the assessment process of identifying their strengths, needs and family visions based on their unique family culture. Services will be offered initially and throughout the FAR process to address the needs identified through discussions with families. In conjunction with our contract agency staff, families will be offered services, to include parent skill training, family advocacy, mentoring, respite, behavior management, parent aide, transportation and other needed services. Other DSS services provided may include day care subsidy, public assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, child support services and emergency services. FAR and TANF staff will work together in assessing needs and eligibility. When needed, TANF staff will become part of the FAR team working with the family. The full range of services will be available to FAR tracked families. Families that have children at risk of being placed in foster care and that need ongoing services will have a preventive case opened.

The role of the FAR worker is different from the CPS caseworker's role. It is not allegation focused. It is a partnership with families. The FAR staff will link families with needed services and advocate on their behalf. FAR staff will interact in partnership with other service providers on behalf of families with the ultimate goal of child safety and well being.

V. Community and Other Resources

The success of every FAR Program is dependent upon the creation of vibrant and cooperative partnerships with services and programs in the community.

- A. Identification of stakeholders** – List the stakeholders for FAR that you have identified in your district and in your community:

Niagara Falls City and Lewiston-Porter School Districts - (Phase 1), other public school districts (Phase 2), charter schools, our local churches, local district staff, Child Advocacy Center, Niagara County Family Court, Niagara County Legislators, and other community helping agencies within the community.

- B. Community outreach** – Describe how your district has reached out to and coordinated with community stakeholders (or plans to do so) in the planning of FAR:

Internal information and the local district's power point were presented by the Regional Office staff to our Child Welfare and Child Protective Services staff. We have held several presentations with the local school administrators and social workers and presented our FAR power point. These activities will continue, both internally and externally. We also plan to reach out to the Courts, law enforcement, and mental health.

- C. Community resources** that may be used to assist families in FAR. Specify:

- Government agencies or resources:

Niagara County Dept. of Mental Health, HEAP, TANF, Medicaid, OPWDD, OASAS

- Non-government agencies or resources:

Human Services Agencies (New Directions, Catholic Charities, Family and Children Services, Community Missions, Hillside Children's Services, Kidspace, Cornell Cooperative, etc.) for mental health, skill building, tutoring, mentoring, parent skill building, budgeting, and other customized support services; YWCA, YMCA, Compeer, Mental Health Association, Boys and Girls Club, North Pointe Council, for support and community involvement.

- D.** Describe how you will use community resources to **reduce government involvement** (including that of child welfare services) in the lives of families while maintaining child safety and preserving families:

Increasing families' knowledge and access to community supports and resources (neighborhood associations, food pantries, churches, cultural associations, support groups, parent networks, etc.) will increase self-sufficiency and self-advocacy to meet challenges and needs. FAR workers will support families in developing proactive plans to address the concerns that led to FAR involvement, as well as other issues identified through the ongoing FAR assessment and response.

Niagara County Department of Social Services will link families with community agencies such as St. Vincent DePaul Society, Community Missions, NiaCap, Catholic Charities, Mental Health Association, and numerous food pantries in the county.

As families link to these community agencies, it will reduce government involvement in the families' lives.

E. Additional Funding

A key component of FAR is the provision over the short term of needed goods and services, including wrap-around services, to families and children. While OCFS has had FAR flex funds (with no local share) available to districts that previously applied to participate in FAR, there is no current plan for the provision of State-only FAR flex funds going forward. Affirm that you plan to fund these services for FAR families with a local share of the costs, and describe your policy for the use of those funds. (Note: local share is to be claimed through the use of protective funding).

Niagara County Department of Social Services will first attempt to utilize community resources, focusing on long-term planning, self-sufficiency.

Niagara County Department of Social Services will contract with New Directions and utilize the local share of protective funding. Workers will be supported through the use of protective funds for legitimate expenses that impact the stability of the family and safety of children.

VI. Maintaining Safety/Assessing and Responding to Risk

- A. Intake**– The initiation of a safety assessment within 24 hours is a FAR requirement. Describe the procedures and processes you will follow to initiate the assessment of the safety of children including how you will or will not screen and assess SCR reports for FAR inclusion during on-call hours:

Child safety and risk will be assessed from the receipt of the report from the SCR and throughout our work, in partnership with the family. Reports will be screened for suitability for FAR, using our screening tool and FAR inclusion criteria. A safety assessment will begin within 24 hours. The FAR caseworker will immediately begin assessing strengths, needs and risk with the family, using the FLAG. The seven day safety assessment will be completed by the CPS worker and the suitable cases will be tracked as FAR in Connections at that time. Family strengths that are identified by the family will be used to best match their needs. If children are assessed as safe, the worker will track to FAR.

At the present time, due to staffing, our on-call program will not be part of FAR.

- B. Assessment** - The completion of a safety assessment within seven days is a FAR requirement. FAR staff must also complete an assessment of risk and an assessment of family strengths and needs. OCFS requires that districts use the Family Led Assessment Guide (FLAG) for these comprehensive assessments and that a completed FLAG be maintained in the case record. Describe the procedures and processes you will follow to

protect the safety of children and engage families in a full assessment of safety, risk, strengths and needs.

The primary focus is child safety, which will be assessed, together with risk factors, from the time we received a report and throughout our work together with parent participation. We will utilize a family support approach and immediately begin to work with the family to assess their strengths and needs, as well as risk. The FAR process will be explained to the parents to help them to become engaged in the FAR process. High priority will be given to the well being of the child. Included in this process will be personal interviews with all family members, their identified supports and other stakeholders. Family meetings, genograms, motivational interviewing, and solution focused approach will be used in order to have open and honest discussion with the family, so as to empower them to identify and meet their own needs. In partnership with the family, we will develop objectives and outcomes.

After the case has been tracked to FAR, if there is a safety issue or the family ceases to cooperate with FAR caseworkers and there is evidence of maltreatment of a child, the CPS worker will call in a new report to the SCR.

Niagara County CPS FAR workers will immediately begin assessing strengths, needs, and concerns, in partnership with the family. Child safety and risk will be assessed from receipt of the report throughout the length of the case, in partnership with the family, using a strength-based family support approach.

After completion of the initial assessment, the FAR worker will complete a 7 day safety assessment to insure that safety needs have been addressed adequately. The FAR workers will meet with the parent(s) to explain the FAR process and will engage them in the family assessment. We will request permission from the parent(s) to involve other community supports and will assist them to meet the needs that have been identified throughout the assessment.

Seven (7) days after the initial report, the formal safety assessment will be completed and approved through the Connections System. The SCR will be notified that the case will be tracked to FAR.

A strengths and needs assessment will be conducted in partnership with the family, identifying family strengths and needs, with the highest priority being the child's safety and well being.

- C. Service provision** – Describe how the FAR Program will enhance your ability to protect children, maintain their safety, reduce risk, and preserve families:

The FAR program will enhance the ability to protect children and preserve families by altering the community perception that the primary aim of CPS is investigation and enforcement. Instead, families will begin to experience CPS as a genuine source of

support without a punitive component, which may lead to increased openness and honesty in sharing concerns with CPS FAR staff.

Child safety will be continually assessed and evaluated throughout the process by engaging the family in an open discussion about what they think their family need and empowering the family to make changes if necessary.

- D. Domestic violence cases** – Describe the protocol that you have developed to maintain the safety of child(ren) and the non-offending caretaker in FAR cases with suspected or confirmed domestic violence:

Domestic violence cases do not meet the FAR criteria for Niagara County.

VII. Training

District staff and any non-district staff who are contracted to provide FAR assessment and services must participate in the FAR training and coaching programs, as designed by OCFS.

- A.** Describe training already provided or planned for FAR district staff:

Child Welfare and CPS staff has been provided with an overview/ presentation of FAR. FAR Process and Practice training was provided by AHA on November 1st and 2nd. Trainings in Solution-Focused FAR Practice, Supervising to a Practice Shift in FAR, and Assessing Safety and Risk in FAR are being scheduled for November/December 2011 and into 2012, if needed, by American Humane. All FAR staff will receive training on the principles, the model, and the requirements of the FAR approach. Staff has and will continue to participate in the AHA Webinars.

- B.** Describe any cross training, orientation, or preparation that has already been provided or is planned for FAR staff, CPS investigative staff, any other child welfare staff, and/or other district staff:

Cross training for FAR and CPS investigation staff will be provided, as appropriate, including specific trainings in domestic violence, substance abuse dynamics, critical thinking, safety and risk, motivational interviewing, family meetings, solution focused interviewing, and identifying and building on family and community strengths to meet the goals of child safety and well being. In addition, the New Directions staff will complete all CPS training requirements and FAR training.

- C.** Describe FAR training/orientation that has already been provided or is planned for non-district organizations or entities:

Formal informational meetings have been conducted with several school district administrators and social workers. FAR staff will participate in a Family Night at the Niagara Falls middle school and the Niagara Falls Board of Education Professional Development Day. Continued outreach efforts to educate the community are planned that include but are not limited to: Niagara County Department of Mental Health SPOA, agencies, neighborhood associations and organizations.

VIII. Monitoring and Assessment

Each district must agree to participate in any monitoring or quality assurance activities with OCFS and its agents as may be designated by OCFS. Each district must commit to engage in internal quality assurance activities that will enable them to continuously assess their fidelity to the FAR practice model and the efficacy of their FAR program, and adjust procedures and practices as necessary.

- A.** Describe the **quality assurance procedures** that your district plans to follow in order to monitor and assess the success of your provision of services in FAR cases:

The Director will meet monthly with the FAR Supervisor, FAR Senior Caseworker, and New Directions FAR Supervisor to review caseloads, gauge successes, and identify barriers and/or gaps that must be addressed. Established milestones will be tracked and reviewed. Case record reviews will be conducted quarterly, using the OCFS FAR case record review tool.

- B.** Describe the procedures your district will use to **monitor and assess** the provision of services to families in the FAR Program by agencies with which you contract to provide services:

FAR services will be monitored directly by the local district. The FAR supervisor will monitor all cases through the use of weekly case conferencing, team meetings and group supervision. Established milestones will be tracked and reviewed by caseworkers and supervisor. Preventive services contract providers have incorporated outcomes and performance provisions according to 07-OCFS-LCM-12, Preventive Services: Performance- or Outcome-Based Provisions.

The County will conduct case record reviews quarterly using the OCFS FAR case record review tool.