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Spring 2000 Vol. 1, No. 4

Separate Tables: Interagency Information Sharing in Real Life

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One of the more benign-sounding activities for which the federal government provides funding to local governments under the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant (JAIBG) Program is "interagency information sharing." Specifically, JAIBG funds are available to local communities that wish to "establish and maintain interagency information-sharing programs that enable the juvenile and criminal justice system, schools, and social services agencies to make more informed decisions regarding the early identification, control, supervision, and treatment of juveniles who repeatedly commit serious delinquent or criminal acts."

Actually hammering out a workable information-sharing arrangement between agencies as disparate in outlook and function as those described in the JAIBG legislation can be a long, difficult, frustrating, and sometimes bitterly contentious process.

But real life isn't that simple. Interagency information sharing isn't that innocuous. Actually hammering out a workable information-sharing arrangement between agencies as disparate in outlook and function as those described in the JAIBG legislation can be a long, difficult, frustrating, and sometimes bitterly contentious process.

It can be done, however. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a multidisciplinary working group convened by Allegheny County Juvenile Court Services and funded by JAIBG recently completed the process of negotiating and drafting a proposed memorandum of

Who could be against that? To put it another way, who could be in favor of *less* informed—or more *uninformed*—decision-making? Whether your primary goal is to educate children, to strengthen families, to hold youth accountable, to keep communities safe, or some combination of these, you can surely use all the access to information you can get. Other agencies with similar social goals are in the same boat. Why shouldn't you all pull together?

understanding on local interagency information sharing. County education and human services representatives were involved, along with law enforcement officials and juvenile court services staff. They did not always see eye to eye. At times they hardly seemed to speak the same language. But a detailed look at the way they (mostly) overcame their differences should be instructive to anyone engaged in a similar search for ways to streamline and simplify information exchange among a range of youth service agencies.

YOUTH SERVICES WHAT?

It is worth admitting at the outset, however, that soothing verbal formulas like “youth services agencies” simply do not cover all the ground that “the juvenile and criminal justice system, schools, and social services agencies” does. JAIBG is not intended merely to promote information sharing among agencies that “serve” youth—that would be too easy. The idea is to foster information exchange among agencies with radically different orientations—some that *serve* youth and some that simply *arrest* youth. These agencies need not be at odds with one another. They may, in a general way, understand and support one another’s objectives. But it is silly and counterproductive to pretend that they are somehow “all on the same team” with respect to youth. In fact, they are not even playing the same game.

That doesn’t mean they can’t or shouldn’t cooperate. For one thing, they are often dealing with the same children and families—about whom they need to know many of the same sorts of things. If nothing else, it’s a waste for each of them to be gathering the same basic facts from the same sources. It’s a nuisance to the sources as well. A certain amount of information sharing among agencies with different missions is justified if only to avoid the pointless duplication

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of effort and expense.

But there are better reasons. Different agencies not only learn the same things about the people they work with. They learn different things, too. They learn them at different times.

They take different approaches, operate under different assumptions, and acquire different insights. Often what seems inconsequential or merely puzzling to one (what a school counselor, say, learns from a teacher about a troublesome student) could be useful to another (his child welfare caseworker) and invaluable to a third (his juvenile probation supervisor). Pooling information of this kind can lead to more complete assessments, more effective monitoring, and better decisions on all sides.

Agencies can learn from one another in broader senses as well. There is some value in exposure, not just to different facts, but to the methods and interpretations of different disciplines. Access to information about whole families and their histories, for instance, can expand the outlook of agencies that tend to focus too narrowly on individuals here and now. Knowledge of the whole range of services being provided to the same family can lead to better and more imaginative planning and coordination—making it possible not only to fill in gaps and eliminate duplication, but to attend to how the various services fit together and complement one another. It is a matter of stepping back farther, of making the big picture still bigger.

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Obviously, information sharing can be carried too far. Agencies need to keep secrets, too—to safeguard their clients’ privacy, to foster trust, to enlist cooperation. Even if that were not the case, some caution in disclosing information might be advisable as a policy matter, or simply as a matter of decency. Some things are literally nobody’s business. Others, after a time, are best forgotten, if they can be forgotten.

But if agencies sometimes have good reasons for withholding information from one another, they have not-so-good ones too. They have reasons that hardly deserve the name—blockages built up over time, encrustations of habit and routine and mutual misunderstanding that have dried and hardened with age. Promoting sensible information sharing under these conditions may be less a matter of meeting reasoned objections than of overcoming reflexes, working out stiffness, disarming suspicions.

GETTING STARTED

In Allegheny County, the process began with a series of Monday morning meetings over a period of three months in the summer and fall of 1999. The “Allegheny County Juvenile Court

Services Information-Sharing Task Force”—a group of ten juvenile probation supervisors, administrators, and planners, with staff assistance from the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ)—was essentially charged with assessing the local information-sharing landscape, laying out its pertinent features from the juvenile court’s point of view, and determining where the critical info-boundaries lay. Part of the time, the Task Force was engaged in sorting out the court’s own fragmented and far from simple information management system. But its larger task was to consider the juvenile court’s information sharing relationships with the other principal agencies involved with Allegheny County youth—the numerous municipal police forces; the criminal courts and district magistrates’ offices; the schools, school districts, and school police; and the various human services sub-agencies—to determine whether the court’s needs and obligations were being satisfactorily met.

What emerged from these discussions was a three-fold purpose. The court wished to (1) find ways to meet its own legally imposed information-sharing obligations to the schools and to the police; (2) facilitate individual case management by determining when, where and how juveniles before the court have already come into the larger system, been assessed, received services, etc.; and (3) identify families whose chronic problems have involved them with multiple agencies, in order to search for better, more efficient, and less duplicative ways of meeting their service needs.

As a practical matter, all they had at the start was an information wish list.

BUILDING AN INTERAGENCY INFORMATION-SHARING SYSTEM: STEPS 1-20

According to Tamryn Etten and Robert Petrone, authors of “Sharing Data and Information: An Analytic Review of the Literature,” interagency information sharing is a twenty-step process, from start to finish:

1. Appoint an information management committee.
2. Determine the information currently collected and maintained by all partner agencies.
3. Evaluate each partner agency’s information needs.
4. Evaluate overlapping agency goals.
5. Determine overall system goals.
6. Clarify reasons to share information.
7. Identify specific elements to be shared and who needs access to each item
8. Determine the requirements of federal, state, and local law governing information collection and dissemination.
9. Determine exceptions to statutory requirements.
10. Draft an interagency agreement.
11. Designate liaisons or “gatekeepers” in each agency.
12. Fund the information sharing system.
13. Build the information sharing system.
14. Prepare and/or revise interagency information sharing policies and procedures.
15. Train staff with regard to the new policies and procedures.
16. Provide supervision to staff on information sharing.
17. Review policies regularly.
18. Review needs regularly.
19. Revise system as necessary based on audits and system needs.
20. Repeat steps 14 through 19.

Source: Tamryn Etten and Robert Petrone, “Sharing Data and Information: An Analytic Review of the Literature,” in Gottfredson, Don. M. (Ed.) (2000) *Juvenile Justice With Eyes Open: Methods for Improving Information for Juvenile Justice*. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.

In considering how they did their work as a rule, and how they might do it more efficiently under ideal conditions, Task Force members had no trouble identifying situations—whether at intake, in pre-disposition investigations, in the development of individual treatment/supervision plans, during follow-up, or for research, service

monitoring or evaluation purposes—in which ready access to certain kinds of information from outside sources would help. Situations in which it might be useful, for example, to know more about a court-involved juvenile’s school performance or conduct; about the history of his family’s involvement with the local child welfare agency;

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about drug and alcohol problems he may be having now, or mental health treatment services he may have needed in the past; about some minor offense that landed him in front of a district magistrate, or some major one that brought him under the jurisdiction of the adult criminal justice system. Based on their own experience, Task Force members knew in a general way where information like this resided, and how easy or hard it was to get—but they did not always know why. They knew who returned phone calls and who didn't. Some agencies had faces and names attached to them, and definite places on the info-map. Others were simply terra incognita.

**SEPARATE TABLES:
THE WORKSHOP**

The next step, then, was to invite representatives of these other agencies, the familiar and the blank, the cooperative and the remote—the “partner agencies,” as they were all somewhat optimistically dubbed—into an interdisciplinary discussion of information sharing.

The formal goal of the two-day “Allegheny County Multi-Disciplinary Information-Sharing Workshop,” as the invitation letter expressed it, would be to “identify areas of mutual interest, achieve consensus regarding information that can be shared, and develop

strategies for sharing information.” It was held at a neutral site. Apart from juvenile probation representatives and staff facilitators from the NCJJ, participants included senior staff of the City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police and the Allegheny

County Department of Human Services, including administrators from the Department's central policy office as well as the Department's mental health, drug and alcohol, and child welfare divisions. Although the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, which provides various educational services to Allegheny County school districts and the local juvenile detention facility, was represented at the workshop, invited officials of the Pittsburgh Public Schools did not attend.

The workshop agenda was simple. There was to be a sort of getting-to-know-you session, in which participants would lay out the missions and goals of their agencies. Everyone would talk about their legitimate information needs in the context of their work—that is, not just what they needed to know but why, how they would use the information, how they would safeguard it, and so on. This would be followed by extended small- and large-group brainstorming on strategies for facilitating information sharing, and the effort would culminate in the roughing out of an inter-agency memorandum of understanding on the subject. In a broader sense, as the agenda put it, the product of the workshop was supposed to be “consensus.” After that, it said “Adjourn.”

Did it really happen that way? Not exactly. Representatives of a range of disparate agencies

did come together, it's true. But they sat at separate tables. They groped for consensus, without always finding it. If they learned more about one another, if they discovered things they had in common, they discovered differences too, and did not feel inclined to slide over them.

OUR CLIENTS, OUR PERPS

The most fundamental division between workshop participants had to do with their professional orientation toward court-involved juveniles. For those to whom these young people present themselves from day to day as “clients” or “patients”—even, on occasion, as “victims”—it is not always easy to communicate with those who see them as “delinquents” or simply “offenders.” The same is true in reverse. It's not just a matter of having different words for everything. The assumptions behind the words are different too. So are the training, the education, the sources of pride and prestige, the working definitions of progress and professionalism—almost everything about these two broad groups is radically different. It would not be too much to describe them as different tribes altogether.

Which is not to say that inter-tribal information sharing is impossible. Tribes can barter, even if they don't

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like or understand one another, as long as each has something the other wants. But in Allegheny County, at least, there is a basic information imbalance that makes this unlikely. Human services agencies are often "loaded with information," in the words of one workshop participant; they seem to have little use for the sort of additional data that, say, law enforcement can offer them. Indeed, at one point in the workshop, when representatives of the various Department of Human Services divisions huddled together to list their information needs, all they could come up with were items that they would like to get from each other. There was nothing they wanted, they said, from the other agencies represented.

This is not much of a basis for bartering. Voluntary information sharing under these conditions is possible only if differing tribes can be convinced that they actually share common interests and common goals.

"IT'S NOT SCARY BECAUSE WE'RE DOING IT RIGHT NOW"

Fortunately, this is not quite as hard as it sounds. In fact, the second broad point that would have struck anyone listening in on the workshop discussions—after the sharp differences in language, assumptions, and style that characterized the separate tables—was that interagency information

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sharing was going on despite these differences. Some of it was compelled—as when the police needed

information in connection with the investigation of a crime. But most of it was what might be called relationship-based. That is, tribes or no tribes, information was being shared between human beings for whom reciprocal familiarity had fostered reciprocal trust.

This is not, of course, the sort of information sharing JAIBG was intended to promote. It's fitful and roundabout rather than smooth and straightforward. It's unreliable in a crisis, or over the long term. It happens, as one participant put it, when it happens to happen, and not necessarily when it's supposed to happen. But the very existence of this kind of one-on-one information sharing is encouraging. It offers a basis to build upon.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

One workshop attendee, a police sergeant who served as liaison between the juvenile court and the police bureau and was physically stationed at the juvenile court building, represented a kind of physical embodiment of inter-agency information sharing on the one-to-one, human level. The striking rapport between the juvenile court services and law

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enforcement participants at the workshop was clearly related in some way to her mediating presence. Both in her day-to-day work and at the workshop itself, she was effectively bilingual, translating the slang and shorthand expressions of the one group to the other, explaining the forms and routines and procedures of each in ways that were mutually comprehensible. And that made her a much more effective channel between the two. When the court needed law enforcement information, she not only knew where to ask but how to ask. And when the police needed information from the courthouse, she said at one point, "I will go door to door" to get it. "If one door's shut, I'll go to another door."

This imagery is telling. Gaining access to information is often a matter of literally knocking on doors. Asking around. Collaring people who might know—or might know who might know. In any information search, there is a significant element of randomness, of labor-intensive casting about. In ways that would be impossible to diagram, it involves a combination of inter-personal familiarity, physical proximity, luck and legwork. That is why the physical work location of a liaison worker matters so much. Whether or not it was by design, the police and the juvenile court could not have contrived any more effective

way of facilitating the sharing of information than by physically stationing an employee of one in the courthouse of the other.

Workshop participants suggested other ways of realizing at least some of the information-sharing benefits of collocation. Designating one employee as a "single point of contact" for interagency information requests was one often-repeated idea, and it does have the virtue of giving a "face" to the agency receiving the request. Over time, it may be that personal familiarity between the information requesters and the single point of contact will smooth information flow somewhat. But it should be noted that, where it is a mere bureaucratic reflex, appointing an "information officer" accomplishes very little from the point of view of outside agencies. Indeed, it may amount to yet another hurdle for them to jump.

CROSS-TRAINING

A more promising suggestion that emerged from the workshop was that agencies make formal efforts to educate one another regarding their work. To some degree, interagency info-blockage may often be a function of basic ignorance regarding what other agencies are up to. The workshop itself provided ample illustration of this. For instance, the most basic

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purposes of juvenile probation investigations were not clearly understood by human services agency representatives—who seemed to assume that probation officers gathered information about court-involved youth in order to establish their guilt, rather than to determine their needs. Learning otherwise—learning, in fact, that a juvenile probation officer's motivations in striving for an accurate assessment of an already adjudicated youth are not really so different from their own—had the effect of making them see a benefit to information sharing where before they had seen only a betrayal. As one of the attendees pointed out, the court is going to make a decision—about placement, about services—whether it has good information or not: "The only chance of improving decisions is with more information." Refusing to contribute what information you can to the process isn't likely to help anybody.

This, of course, is exactly the sort of attitude JAIBG was intended to foster. Some of the most productive and harmonious moments during the workshop occurred when participants managed to step back and take this big-picture view: we are all just information-contributors in one vast decision-making system. The parties saw at once the primary obligations that this view imposed on them: not simply to contribute information but to contribute *good* information—current, concise, relevant, reliable information. And conversely, to avoid contributing bad information—shaky hearsay, old addresses, arrests without dispositions. The more

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information was shared across the system, the more decisions would be affected, and the more outcomes tainted by incomplete or erroneous inputs. So cleaning up your data *before* sharing becomes a matter of urgent moral necessity. "The most confidential information," as one attendee put it, "should be lousy information."

The workshop functioned at times, then, as a combination cross-training session and motivational exercise. It not only served to educate agency representatives regarding what their colleagues at sister agencies do, but imparted a sense that they had some larger goals in common. And it gave everybody an opportunity to explain what information they needed to accomplish those goals, and why. A formal, ongoing program of cross-training could spread the same benefits wider and deeper.

GROWING TRUST

There is always a danger, however, of making interagency information sharing sound easier than it is. In practice, people share secrets with those they trust. Fostering interagency information sharing is a matter of growing trust—a notoriously delicate plant—on a large scale. One workshop attendee suggested that what is really needed conceptually is "a

CONFIDENTIALITY LAWS

There are few if any absolute legal barriers to information sharing. At the very least, laws restricting access to or dissemination of information and records pertaining to juveniles tend to make exceptions for disclosures made (1) with the juvenile's (or in some cases the juvenile's family's) informed consent or (2) pursuant to a court order. In addition, many confidentiality laws specifically authorize juvenile justice agency participation in formal interagency information sharing networks.

The most important of the federal laws bearing on the confidentiality of information and records concerning juveniles are the following:

- Freedom of Information Act of 1966 (5 U.S.C. Sec. 552(a)(2); 45 CFR Part 5b)
- Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. Sec. 522(a); 1 CFR Sec. 425.1 *et seq.*)
- Youth Corrections Act of 1977 (18 U.S.C. Sec. 5005 *et seq.*; 28 CFR Sec. 524.20 *et seq.*)
- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (20 U.S.C. Sec. 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99)
- Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (P.L. 103.302)
- Computer Matching and Privacy Protection Act of 1988 (5 U.S.C. 552a)
- Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation Act (1970) and Drug Abuse and Treatment Act (1972) (42 U.S.C. Sec. 290ee-3; 42 CFR Sec. 2.1 *et seq.*)
- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act (1977) (42 U.S.C. Sec. 5106a(b)(4); 45 CFR Sec. 1350.14(j))

In addition, state laws that bear on juvenile justice information sharing might include laws governing access to and dissemination of juvenile law enforcement records, school records, juvenile court records, child welfare agency records, and mental health records.

See: Establishing and Maintaining Interagency Information Sharing (JAIBG Bulletin NCJ 17828, March 2000); Sharing Information: A Guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Participation in Juvenile Justice Programs (NCJ 163705, June 1997); A Guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (Fact Sheet #78, May 1998). These publications are available from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736 and also available online at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org. See also: Sharing Information: A Guide to Federal Laws on Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information for Child Welfare Agencies (American Bar Association, Washington, DC, 1997).

feedback loop"—a way for information-givers to learn what happens as a result of the information they give; what changes, how the outcome is affected. Only this sort of concrete knowledge will give them confidence, when faced with the next information request, that sharing is the right thing to do.

Doubts regarding this point were rampant at the workshop, at least on the human services side of the room. They were expressed most often in

terms of doubts about the legality of information sharing across agency boundaries, doubts about whose interests are actually served by more openness, and doubts about where the right to decide such questions lies. At times, the workshop seemed on the point of sinking under the weight of all these doubts. Some were at least partially dispelled by discussion. Others remained in the air when the discussion was over. But all can be said to have served a useful purpose, in that they raised legitimate questions

about the appropriate limits of information sharing.

BYO CONFIDENTIALITY LAWS

One practical lesson that emerged from the workshop: interagency information-sharing meetings should be strictly Bring-Your-Own-Laws affairs. Time and again throughout the two days of the workshop, statutes safeguarding clients' privacy and insuring

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the confidentiality of agency records were invoked by participants, always with the intention of settling disputes and putting questions to rest; but somehow they never did. "The Law" was a brooding presence just off-stage, substantial and definite enough to induce hesitations and doubts, but not to resolve them. "People in this room know *pockets* of law," a workshop participant confessed at one point. And that was the problem.

To those who were uncomfortable with systematic, formal interagency collaboration—as opposed to the ad hoc kind—barriers imposed by confidentiality statutes seemed to have a flickering quality: insurmountable one moment, insignificant the next. At one point in the workshop, for example, it was asserted that it was illegal to disclose a certain kind of information to the juvenile court. "We have systematically violated that law for years," retorted a juvenile probation administrator—and nobody appeared to dispute this. The law functioned here, not as a specific, practical prohibition, but as a more general taboo against formalization. You could do whatever you liked, as long as you didn't *agree* to do it.

The fact is, confidentiality restrictions are seldom if ever absolute. They are designed to protect individual and family privacy, but they invariably recognize and provide for competing values and social interests as well. Legitimate interagency collaboration is

not prevented thereby, as long as it takes place within the framework of the law. That might mean routinely collecting written releases from those to whom the

information relates, taking appropriate steps to guard against the unauthorized or illegitimate use of the information disclosed, storing records securely, and so on.

Having copies of the pertinent confidentiality statutes and regulations available during the meeting—or better yet having lawyers from the various agencies in attendance, to clarify the law's practical requirements—would have eliminated a significant stumbling block to consensus. As it was, doubts concerning the legality of what was being contemplated cast a shadow over the workshop, and made all agreement seem tentative and conditional.

SOMEBODY ELSE'S MONEY

A much deeper objection to interagency collaboration revolved around the unrepresented interests of those people about whom agencies were proposing to share information.

"Whose information is it?" one workshop participant asked rhetorically.

"It's not our information. We're playing with somebody else's money."

Another asserted that what was critically lacking in the discussion was "the client/consumer perspective"—which showed that "system conve-

nience" was all that mattered to those who had convened the workshop. Her own agency, she said, would never have arranged such a meeting without inviting client representatives to participate.

In one way or another, the human services attendees returned again and again to this troubling point and its implications. After all, if we think of juveniles and their families as the "owners" of the information that is collected about them by the various agencies with which they are involved, why shouldn't they have a say in how it is disposed of? Interagency trust seems beside the point when the question is presented this way. The issue, as one participant put it succinctly, is "not just whether I...trust the police or the court, but whether *these folks* do."

A general requirement that information sharing be authorized by written releases from clients/consumers does not make the problem go away, either. For one thing, participants pointed out, it is not always clear exactly *whose* consent is needed for disclosures. The juvenile alone? The juvenile's family—all of them? Foster parents? Biological parents? Interested relatives? Information might be said to "belong" to any of them in a given case. In any case, should social workers and treatment providers encourage or discourage these releases? Should they even ask for them? One workshop participant

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seriously questioned whether asking for a release might not constitute “a coercive use of the therapist relationship.”

Some participants implied that their anxieties about information sharing were related to our nation’s history of class and race bias. Privacy is not less precious to the disadvantaged than to others—if anything it is more so. And given the government’s long record of intrusiveness and insensitivity to the privacy interests of poor and minority citizens, the latter could be forgiven a certain amount of skepticism about the benefits of frictionless interagency information sharing.

COMMON GROUND

In the end, however, the parties to the workshop did manage to find significant areas of agreement. They were able, as a rule, to agree on *concrete situations* in which information sharing was appropriate across agency boundaries—sets of specific facts that ought to trigger sharing, as opposed to abstract formulas purporting to govern all cases. Where a child might be endangered by silence, for instance, or where duplicative or inappropriate services would result from lack of communication, there was little real disagreement among participants.

In the same way, workshop participants were considerably more comfortable with the idea of professional-

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COMING TO AN UNDERSTANDING: ELEMENTS OF A GOOD MOU

An effective Memorandum of Understanding is a balancing act. It acknowledges the tension between the individual’s privacy rights and the agency’s need to know, and manages it by clearly articulating what information is to be shared, why it is needed and how it will be used.

Each of the following elements is essential to a complete MOU:

- List of parties to the agreement.
- Purpose (“whereas”) clauses articulating common goals and reasons for sharing information.
- General covenants: what all parties agree to do collectively to promote information sharing (e.g., participate in future planning meetings, train staff in information-sharing functions, etc.).
- Specific covenants: what each party agrees to do individually to promote information sharing (e.g., share particular items of information or notify partners of particular events, develop information-sharing plans or procedures, designate contact people, etc.).
- Administrative provisions: the effective date of the agreement, procedures for monitoring and modifying it, etc.
- Signatures.

to-professional communications regarding particular cases than with that of committing themselves to compliance with blanket, agency-to-agency requests for information. It was striking, in fact, to note how often workshop disputes over information sharing were resolved in this way. Juvenile probation representatives’ attempts to negotiate concessions on the sharing of broad *types* of information—what human services were being provided to court-involved juveniles’ families, say—met with determined resistance. But there was much less bristling at the notion that a juvenile

probation officer ought to be able to learn whether a given juvenile’s family is “active” with the child welfare agency, and the identity of the family’s

caseworker—with the understanding that the probation officer and the caseworker would then share information as they see fit. This could be seen merely as a way of putting off the basic dispute, or transferring it to different ground. As we have seen, however, information has a way of flowing more freely between individuals than between bureaucracies. A formal structure that insures that individual professionals from different agencies will confer over individual cases they have in common, making sensible disclosures within the framework of the law, may be the most effective and responsible information sharing arrangement of all.

The draft Memorandum of Understanding cobbled together at the conclusion of the workshop reflects the parties' limited consensus on information sharing as well as any document could.

TO BE CONTINUED

The draft Memorandum of Understanding cobbled together at the conclusion of the workshop—to be reviewed by agency higher-ups, vetted by attorneys, and perhaps modified in subsequent meetings—reflects the parties' limited consensus on information sharing as well as any document could. It is not, in itself, a charter for radical change. Indeed, it is difficult to point to any provision that commits the parties to do anything they aren't already doing, at least on an ad hoc basis. And in some places it is hedged around with potentially nullifying phrases ("as appropriate," "where feasible," "consistent with State and Federal laws," etc.), which could serve to prop up the status quo a while longer.

Yet, as a first step, the draft agreement could well prove significant. If nothing else, it articulates for the first time both a commonly accepted rationale for inter-

agency information sharing and a set of steps that, at least in principle, each of the parties might be willing to take to make it a reality. There are provisions that would commit participating agencies to joint training initiatives and to staffing changes designed to facilitate information exchange, as well as specific undertakings to make certain categories of disclosures in a prompt and consistent manner.

Perhaps more importantly, the parties agree to continue *trying* to agree. They commit themselves to attending future planning meetings on the subject of information sharing, to assigning staff to a proposed county-wide consolidated human services case management system, and to participating in a future interagency task force that will begin to deal with the practical nuts and bolts of information sharing,

including the coordination of automated information management systems.

Interagency information sharing is, in any case, a process, not a product. It is a set of relationships and understandings that is continually changing and being renewed—a work perpetually in progress. In that sense, Allegheny County's information-sharing work is not "done"—and never will be. But it is well begun.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE

The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) was founded in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1973 by U.S. District Judge Maurice B. Cohill, Jr. NCJJ is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of justice for children and families. This mission is pursued by conducting research and providing objective, factual information that is utilized to increase the juvenile and family justice systems' effectiveness. NCJJ is the Research Division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, but has its own charter and policy board and is responsible for raising its own operational support. The Center concentrates its efforts in three areas of research: applied research, legal research, and systems research.

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inFOCUS is a publication of the National Center for Juvenile Justice, the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. These occasional papers provide information to juvenile court judges, court administrators, juvenile probation administrators, policy makers and legislators about promising approaches to responding to juvenile crime.

Production Editor: Kristy Bronson

ISSN: 1524-1742

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This issue was supported by funds under grant #98-JB-VX-0102 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent any official position, policy, or view of the U.S. Department of Justice.