DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
311 West Saratoga Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21201

DATE:	August 14, 2009
POLICY DIRECTIVE:	SSA # 10-08
TO:	Directors, Local Departments of Social Services Assistant Directors, Local Departments of Social Services Child Welfare Administrators, Supervisors and Caseworkers Local Departments of Social Services
FROM:	Carnitra White, Executive Director Social Services Administration
RE:	Family Involvement Meetings (FIMs)
PROGRAMS AFFECTED:	In-Home & Out-of-Home Placement Services
ORIGINATING OFFICE:	Office of Children & Family Services
ACTION REQUIRED OF:	All Local Departments of Social Services
REQUIRED ACTION:	Guidelines for conducting family involvement meetings
ACTION DUE DATE:	Immediately
CONTACT PERSON:	Debbie Ramelmeier/Karen Powell Office of Child Welfare Practice & Policy (410) 767-7506/(410) 767-7788

Overview and Purpose:

A family involvement meeting (FIM) is a casework practice forum to convene family members during key child welfare decision points. The purpose of the FIM is to establish a team to engage families and their support network to assess the needs and develop service plans. The goal is to develop service plan recommendations for the safest and least restrictive placement for a child while also considering appropriate permanency and well-being options for that child. Supervisors shall assume the primary responsibility for family engagement and teaming within their respective units.

Local directors shall designate at least one trained facilitator; however, a trained facilitator is not required to participate in an FIM. A supervisor may facilitate FIMs. Prior to the initial court intervention when a removal from the home is being considered, local departments shall designate a trained facilitator or supervisor not assigned to the case, to oversee the FIM. Local directors shall establish coaching protocol to support supervisors assuming the role of facilitators.

The mandatory key decision points or "triggers" for scheduling family involvement meetings are:

- Removal or Considered Removal;
- Placement Change;
- Recommendation for Permanency Plan Change;
- Youth Transitional Plan; or
- Voluntary Placement Agreement.

The FIM mandatory triggers do not preclude the caseworker and supervisor from coordinating other meetings to discuss the case. An FIM or any other non-FIM meetings may be convened at the request of the family, child or caseworker whenever a party believes it may be helpful. The local departments shall comply with the court order regardless of the agreements reached during the family involvement meeting; however, engaging the family in the decision making process will support reasonable efforts for making a decision in the child's best interest. Based on the clinical assessment of the caseworker and supervisor, a child may participate during an FIM or non-FIM if it would not be contrary to the child's social or emotional adjustment. Whenever appropriate, accommodations may include the child to share input for a portion of the meeting.

Triggers for Convening a Family Involvement Meeting

Removal or Considered Removal:
When local departments are considering court action based on safety and risk assessments, but the child is not in imminent danger, supervisors shall request an FIM to explore the options to divert the need of removal and develop a safety plan. If the threat to a child's safety is too great for the child to remain in the home and the child is in imminent danger, a shelter care authorization shall be initiated immediately. If the FIM is not held prior to the shelter care hearing, a meeting must be held prior to the adjudicatory hearing.

For all children diverted from out-of-home placements after an FIM, an in-home family service case must be opened. This includes services for children remaining in the care of the parents or placed with relative resources. The level of service recommended for a family is based on the result of the risk and safety assessment. (Refer to the Integrated In-Home Services Policy). A safety plan and a comprehensive service plan should be developed for each family. The safety plan must address threats to a child's safety that warranted intervention. In addition, a service plan should not only address the needs of the birth parent and the identified relative resource, but the elimination of the risk factors that pose a threat to the overall safety and well-being of the child. In-home family case management services must be reassessed within 90 days after the date of the initial FIM. In-home family case management services shall include, but not be limited to:

- Enhancing a caregiver's ability to create a safe, stable, and nurturing home environment that promotes healthy child development;
- Preventing out-of-home placement of children when safety is not the cause for departmental intervention; or
- Providing, referring to, and coordinating services needed to achieve or maintain family safety, stability, independence and unity.

Financial resources may be used to procure community based intensive intervention and support services and case management for parents, legal guardians, relatives or fictive kin to include, but not be limited to:

- Securing and maintaining child care;
- Coordinating legal assistance for care of children involved;
- Medical and mental health screenings, evaluations or treatment;
- Substance abuse treatment referrals or counseling;
- Facilitating family visitations and reunification services;
- Providing food, clothing, transportation, and housing assistance;
- One-time only assistance with eviction prevention or utility turn-off notices;
- Tutoring or educational support not provided by public schools; or
- Counseling or life skill assistance.

Placement Change:
The FIM shall be convened prior to any planned placement change, including kinship care, foster home, group home and residential treatment placements. The FIM shall be convened within five (5) days if a child has more than one unplanned placement within the course of a thirty-day period. The supervisor or trained facilitator may participate in this meeting, but the supervisor shall for ensuring that the FIM occurs. If other placement issues arise, the caseworker and supervisor may schedule a non-FIM meeting, with relevant parties.

Recommendation for Permanency Plan Changes:
After a child has been in out-of-home placement for six months, an FIM shall be convened prior to the first permanency planning court hearing. For subsequent permanency review hearings whenever the local department plans to recommend a permanency plan change to the court, an FIM shall be convened three months before the scheduled permanency review hearing. The

supervisor or trained facilitator may participate in this meeting, but the supervisor shall ensure that the FIM occurs. If other permanency issues arise outside of the permanency review hearing schedule, the caseworker and supervisor may schedule a non-FIM meeting, with relevant parties.

Youth Transitional Plan:
Every youth 14 years of age or older shall have an FIM that includes transitional planning or independent living service. Meetings shall be held annually after the youth's 14th birthday until commitment is rescinded. An FIM must be held with the youth and the adults identified to support the youth's independence. The supervisor or trained facilitator may participate in this meeting, but the supervisor shall ensure that the FIM occurs.

Voluntary Placement Agreement:
Conducting an FIM prior to signing a Voluntary Placement Agreement is optional as long as an assessment meeting and Local Coordinating Council (LCC) review have occurred. However, an FIM should be scheduled with a family when the terms of the agreement are modified, placements are changed or prior to a voluntary court review hearing. If the court orders a voluntary placement, the local department is required to schedule an FIM. The supervisor or trained facilitator may participate in this meeting, but the supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the FIM occurs.

Composition of the Family Involvement Meeting

Families are considered an essential part of the decision making process. In addition to the parents or legal guardians, local department staff and the child, FIM teams may include extended family members, friends, resource families, other child welfare agencies, attorneys, and cultural or community resources, as well as specialist partners (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, schools, public health, etc.). The local departments are responsible for planning for a child when the parent or legal guardian is not able to attend the FIM. If there is no parent or legal guardian present, an FIM may be held with other relevant partners. In the absence of consent, the discussion shall not include any information on the parent or legal guardian.

Facilitating Family Involvement Meetings

Role of the Facilitator:
The facilitator is the local department of social services staff person who assists and encourages the team members to share pertinent information related to the safety, well-being and permanence of the child. A supervisor may facilitate an FIM. During the FIM, the team members assess the strengths and needs of the family and the child. At the conclusion of the FIM, the team members should have developed service recommendations. The service recommendations shall include completion timelines for the tasks assigned to caseworker, parents, legal guardians, child and other team members.

The facilitator shall manage time during the meeting. The meetings may last between 1-2 hours. The assigned caseworker and supervisor shall attend the FIM. The meeting locations and times shall be conducive to ensuring the participation of the parent or legal guardian and as many team members as possible. If key team members are unable to attend the FIM, the facilitator shall

solicit input from those team members and present absent team members' the comments at the meeting.

Emphasis should be placed on outreach to the parent or legal guardian and relatives to encourage attendance at the FIM. Once the meeting time is arranged, the facilitator shall confirm with all of team members. The facilitator is responsible for any special needs accommodations required during the FIM.

Safety Considerations:
The person assigned to facilitate the FIM shall assess whether any safety precautions need to be arranged. The facilitator shall have an emergency plan in the event that unforeseen threats to safety arise during the meeting.

Special consideration must be given to screen cases to minimize potential risk for further trauma to victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. When court orders restrict contact between members of the team, the parties must be prohibited from attending the actual meeting together.

Confidentiality:
All team members shall sign an agreement allowing discussion of confidential information. The service recommendations may be shared with the court, but the details of the conversations during the FIM shall not be revealed outside of the meeting and shall not be used against the family in court proceedings. However, the limitations on confidentiality shall be reviewed in the event that new allegations of abuse or neglect are disclosed. Team members shall advise that the local department is mandated to report any new allegations of abuse or neglect.

Administrative Review:
When team members are unable to reach a consensus, the facilitator must request an administrative review before the participants leave the meeting site. The local department must develop an administrative review process to examine cases referred. Any team member may request an administrative review if there is a question about the child's safety; the placement is not the least restrictive; or the plan violates DHR policy or legal statutes. The administrative review process shall include a procedure to notify all team members of the decision within five (5) business days after the date of the FIM.

Post-Meeting Considerations:
The caseworker and supervisor shall maintain the primary responsibility for establishing the service agreement based on the service recommendations during the FIM and monitoring the progress with the tasks outlined in the service plan recommendations. The service recommendations developed during the FIM shall be developed into the service plans and included in the case plan submitted to the court.

The caseworker shall enter FIM information into MD-CHESSIE. Monthly reports to track outcomes and review trends will be generated based on the FIM activity.

At the conclusion of the FIM, the facilitator shall invite the team members to complete a feedback survey. Local departments shall develop a procedure to compile FIM surveys.

Structure of the Family Involvement Meeting

Setting the Proper Atmosphere:
The facilitator shall prepare the set-up of the meeting room in advance, such as seating arrangements and forms. During the introduction phase of the meeting, the facilitator should inquire to make sure that parents or legal guardians are comfortable with all team members being present in the room. Parents or legal guardians have the right to request that attendees, other than the caseworker and supervisor, not participate in the meeting.

Order of Meeting:
All participants shall introduce themselves and state their relationship to the child and their role with the family. After introductions, the facilitator shall review "ground rules" to help all team members feel comfortable and safe contributing to the discussion. These "ground rules" shall include the rules regarding confidentiality. Although the goal is for the team to reach a consensus, the facilitator shall communicate that the local department is required to make recommendations to the court to ensure that the child's safety, well-being and permanency needs are met.

The team members shall be given an opportunity to ask any questions to clarify the process before beginning to discuss the case. The facilitator shall begin the discussion by identifying the situation that made it necessary to convene the FIM by allowing each team member to express his or her perspective. The discussion shall include an assessment of the threats to the child's safety, well-being and permanence. The current service provisions necessary to reduce the risk and ameliorate the situation shall be addressed. The strengths and supports of the family shall be highlighted as part of the discussion to develop service plan recommendations. The least restrictive option shall be considered first. The advantages and disadvantages of all potential options shall be systematically reviewed.

The plan recommendations shall clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of the parents or legal guardian, caseworkers and any other key parties. In closing the FIM, the facilitator shall summarize what transpired during the meeting. The facilitator shall review the service recommendations to ensure that each team member understands the obligations of his or her role in reducing the risk of harm to the child. Before finalizing the service recommendations, the facilitator shall clarify any outstanding questions or concerns.

The facilitator shall complete the service recommendations at the meeting. All service recommendations shall include a contingency safety plan for the child. The service recommendations shall ensure that safety and risk are appropriately assessed every time an FIM is held. Local departments shall comply with Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC) and the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) requirements if there are out-of-state relative resources or Native American children involved in the case. (Refer to ICPC & ICWA Sections in OHPS Manual).

The written service recommendations shall include the names of the team members in attendance during the FIM and identify tasks that need to be completed along with the participants responsible and timeframes for completing the tasks. The facilitator shall ensure that the child's attorney, parent and legal guardian and their attorneys are given a copy of the service recommendation prior to leaving the meeting. The original copy of the signed service recommendation shall be included in the case file. The caseworker shall complete the appropriate case notes to ensure that the activity is documented in MD-CHESSIE.

Role of Attorneys:
Attorneys shall not be restricted from attending the FIM, but their attendance is not mandatory. FIMs should be scheduled based on the availability of the parent or legal guardian and not for the convenience of the attorneys. The parents have the right to decide about inviting their attorneys. Attorneys for the child shall be notified about the FIM for triggers other than removal.

Role of Community Members:
Establishing collaborative relationships with community partners and service providers is one of the primary tenets of Family Centered Practice. Community members and service providers who are able to support the family and protect the safety, well-being and permanency needs of the child may be invited to attend the FIM. Community partners and service providers includes relatives, non-relatives or representatives from public or private organizations, such as housing, education, medical, mental health and substance abuse. As part of the pre-meeting planning, parents or legal guardians and the caseworker and supervisor shall be consulted for information about inviting community members and service providers. The goal is to strategize during the FIM to take advantage of community resources and service providers to develop supportive services and networks to meet the immediate needs of the family and the child, and to further assist the family with long term planning and skill building to support independence.