Building Stronger Multidisciplinary Teams Starts with Stronger Supervision

When a child enters a Children's Advocacy Center (CAC), they step into a coordinated, collaborative, compassionate system designed to support the child and non-offending family through the investigative and healing processes. This system relies on a team of professionals from law enforcement, child protective services, prosecution, medical, mental health, and victim advocacy, working together through a multidisciplinary team (MDT) model.

Holding this team together is one of the most critical roles in the CAC structure: the MDT facilitator. Their job is to sustain and increase communication between team members, nurture and strengthen team relationships, and encourage engagement of all the agencies involved in the MDT to better respond to child abuse cases in their communities. Yet as the role becomes more essential, research shows that facilitators can only be as strong as the supervision that supports them.

The Rise of the Professional MDT Facilitator

Historically, MDT facilitation was rarely a standalone role. Instead, it was often folded into other responsibilities, without a formal title, structured training, or consistent support. While this remains true for many CACs, a shift began when the National Children's Alliance (NCA) formally defined the role in its 2023 accreditation standards, marking a turning point from informal convener to a recognized professional position.

The new standards brought clarity and accountability, but also new challenges. Many supervisors came up through the CAC model before the facilitator role had a common definition. Now, they're being asked to oversee a position they may never have held. A position that blends diplomacy, conflict management, and organizational psychology along with building relationships with and between partners.

According to the 2023 NCA Member Census, most accredited CACs now have someone assigned to MDT facilitation, though rarely as a full-time, dedicated position. The workload is substantial and often layered atop other duties. That makes good supervision not just helpful, but vital to keeping facilitators effective and focused on all that the role entails.

The Supervision Gap: Recognizing Value Isn't Enough

Data from a white paper developed by the Regional CACs in 2020 paints a stark picture of how supervision varies. When facilitators were asked how their supervisors supported them across five areas, 68.6% said their supervisor completely valued the role, but only 47.6% said their supervisor gave them enough time to perform it well. Just 35.1% said their supervisor kept them fully engaged in the work.

In other words, most supervisors believe in the facilitator role, but far fewer are investing in the conditions that make it sustainable. The difference between "we value this role" and "we are actively helping you succeed in it" can be the difference between a cohesive, high-functioning team or one that struggles under stress.

What Good Supervision Looks Like

MDT facilitators need supervision that does two things well: supports the person and develops the professional.

Here are two frameworks every supervisor should understand:

1. Supportive Supervision

   MDT facilitators, like all CAC staff, are repeatedly exposed to hearing explicit details of often horrible cases inherent in child abuse work. Supervisors must approach their support role with awareness of secondary traumatic stress (STS) not as a sign of weakness, but as an occupational hazard to be managed.

   One helpful tool may be the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) measure (Stamm, 2009) This resource allows individuals to measure where they are on the compassion fatigue and satisfaction spectrum and can be a good starting point for discussion.

2. Skill Coaching and Development of Facilitation Fundamentals

   Drawing from Roger Schwarz's The Skilled Facilitator (2017), there are three identified teachable domains where supervisors can directly coach facilitators:

- Structure: defining roles, team membership, and meeting norms.
- Process: improving how the team communicates, makes decisions, and handles conflict.
- Context: understanding the organizational and community systems shaping team operations.

These skills are observable and measurable, allowing supervision to become a shared learning process instead of a checklist.

Leadership Over Management

Supervision, at its best, is a form of leadership, not oversight. Author Kevin Kruse defines leadership as "a process of social influence that maximizes the efforts of others toward a goal." Sean Tannenbaum and Eduardo Salas (2021), in Teams That Work, echo this idea: team leadership is about functions, not titles.

Applied to CACs, that means supervisors have the power and responsibility to create conditions where facilitators can lead from within. That includes:

- Clarifying what belongs to the facilitator versus what falls to the director or program manager.
- Protecting dedicated time for facilitation duties rather than treating them as “when-you-can” tasks.
- Building deliberate learning pathways, with peer consultation, mentorship, and opportunities to practice, discuss and learn.
- Recognizing the emotional complexity of the role and modeling steady, reflective leadership.

When supervisors invest in these structural and emotional supports, the payoff is not just a happier employee it can mean a more cohesive MDT, smoother case coordination, and better outcomes for children and families.

Aligning Practice with the Standards

The 2023 NCA standards reflect what years of research have shown: multidisciplinary work only succeeds when collaboration itself is managed with care. Facilitators are the glue holding that collaboration together, but glue dries out when neglected.

Regular, reflective supervision sessions — ideally at least monthly — can help supervisors and facilitators track progress, troubleshoot recurring team issues, and stay connected to the “why” of the work. Organizations that normalize this rhythm tend to have lower turnover, stronger cross-agency trust, and higher quality service delivery.

The Takeaway: Invest in the People Who Hold It Together

If a CAC is only as strong as its team, then its team is only as strong as its facilitation and facilitation thrives with sustained, intentional supervision. Supervisors don’t just manage tasks; they help shape the environment where collaboration happens.

For directors and supervisors, that means giving facilitators:

- Clear role boundaries
- Real time to do the work
- Training and reflection opportunities
- Emotional and professional support

These investments pay dividends in resilience, retention, and ultimately, in the hope and justice families find when they walk through a CAC’s doors.

As part of our work to empower MDT facilitators, Western Regional Children's Advocacy Center partnered with Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center to develop a custom training for those who supervise MDT facilitators. In this training, Empowering MDT Facilitators- The Supervisor's Role, where we not only talk more about the importance of structured supervision, but also how there may be opportunities to create better role clarity for MDT facilitators and directors. We hope to make this training available online soon. Please check our website for more information on this and other training opportunities- Training - WRCAC and don't forget to sign up for our listserv to get direct notices about this and other training opportunities.

References

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