

Optima's Importance to the Children We Serve

It has been a little over a year since Louisiana CASA Programs were mandated to use Optima. Some of our "seasoned" advocates have actually said that they miss our old Tracking Forms. Some of our "seasoned" supervisors have even said the same thing. It has been a long road for supervisors and advocates to learn the system. We are finally at a good point to see why Optima is important to the children we serve. We would like to share some of the benefits to "data driven outcomes" and provide some tips on how we can all do a better job in using Optima in a way that positively impacts our cases.

Accurate Information: When advocates and supervisors enter their Contact Logs on the same day (or a day or two after), the information is more detailed. The box to the side and the blanks at the bottom right hand side of the page captures everyone that is present during visits and/or exactly who we correspond with. Accurate details of what we talked about and who we talked to are very important in writing court reports and helps us to advocate more effectively for our children. Below are some tips to help you in recording accurate information in your logs.

- Complete the log on the same day of the contact when possible. If you can't complete it on the same day, do it within a day or two of the contact. A lot of information is lost when we don't record it timely. You never know how the smallest detail can impact a child's life.
- Take the time to list everyone that you talk to for each visit. If it is someone that you will talk to on a recurring basis, talk to your supervisor about getting that person entered into the contact box.
- Record the contact so that anyone reading the log has a detailed picture of each and every visit. This increases your supervisor's knowledge of the case and helps us give you better support.

Advocacy Planning: When notes are recorded into Optima, it is easy to review what you did last month or even the month before to help you plan for the next month. Your supervisor also enters detailed logs regarding their conversations with you and when the case is staffed with other supervisors, DCFS, counselors, etc. Those entries can be incredibly helpful to you in knowing what information is already gathered and what information needs to be obtained. Below are some tips to help you utilize Contact Logs when you are planning your CASA work for the upcoming month.

- Log in to Optima regularly to see if your supervisor has documented any contacts. You should have had a conversation with your supervisor about the information already, but this will refresh your memory. It is also a good idea to review the logs just to make sure that you and your supervisor had the same understanding of the information.
- Review all of the case contacts for the month at the end of each month. (You can go to the Contact Log Tab and select the Search Option from the top right hand side of the page. You can select the date range of the Contact Logs that you want to review.) Look at notes from court hearings, Family Team Meetings, etc. to plan your action steps for the upcoming month. For example, if you and your supervisor attended a Family Team Meeting and the parents were supposed to start parenting classes, this will prompt you to check in with that provider or DCFS for updates.

Access to Documents: Optima allows us to review any case documents every time we log in. Court judgements are scanned and uploaded as soon as they are received so you

can review the court's orders and monitor compliance. We often forget important case details that are documented in the legal documents that get our cases started (the Instanter, Affidavit in Support of the Instanter, and the Petition). Optima allows for an easy look at those at any time. DCFS Case Plans are also uploaded into Optima. These documents should be reviewed regularly to ensure that the children are receiving all of the services available to them. A review of the Case Plan document is also necessary in evaluating parental progress towards reunification. The information below will assist you in better utilizing the Documents Tab in Optima.

- Check Optima regularly for newly uploaded documents. There is a "New Docs" tab to the right of your "Training Logs" tab on your Dashboard. Click on this tab each time you log in and any document that has recently been uploaded will be on your Dashboard.
- Regularly review the most recent DCFS Case Plan. This can be accessed by choosing the "Documents" Tab and selecting that document type. Every advocate should be familiar with the parents' case plan and regularly assess the parents' progress.
- Refresh your memory about why the children entered care by reviewing the legal documents in the case. These can be accessed from the Documents Tab and by selecting "Court Orders and Pleadings".
- All of our documents are named according to the type of document and the date of the event.

Great Court Reports and Outstanding Testimony: All case information and documents are now accessible to you at any time. If you have utilized all of the above features and are documenting child focused contact logs, your court reports are super easy. In fact, you may even be able to copy and paste some of the information in your logs into the "Current Information" section of your court report. You can easily look at what you observed, were told, and read regarding your case. It is easy to review the data to see why DCFS became involved in the child's life, what the parents were expected to do to reunify with the child, what the parents have done or are doing to comply with their case plan, how the child is functioning in their present environment, if the child has any needs that are not being met, if the child's caretaker is willing or able to be a permanent placement for the child, etc. Everything we need to know is at our fingertips and if we've used Optima to plan our monthly advocacy steps, we have gathered the information every month and are not scrambling to find out information that is necessary to effectively advocate for the children we are serving.

Regularly reviewing your Contact Logs and your supervisor's Contact Logs will help us in making sure that we are doing everything possible for our kids. This will in turn help you write stronger court reports and increase your confidence in testifying.

We appreciate how hard this transition has been for many of you that have been serving kids for a while. We also understand how learning to use Optima is challenging to our new advocates while taking on your first case. We are always available for one-on-one sessions and ongoing in-services regarding Optima best practices. The Advocate Supervisor Team has come to rely on the information that Optima provides and we are using that information to help you advocate for the children that you serve. Our hope is that you will utilize this information and start using the data contained in your Optima case file to guide you in being a powerful voice for the children that you are assigned to.