

Policy Training Subcommittee Final Report

Executive Summary of Findings: Seeking Best Ways to Train on Family Services Policy

BACKGROUND

In early FY 10, the VDSS Division of Family Services convened a Policy Subcommittee co-chaired by BJ Zarris of VDSS and Kevin Filbey of Fairfax County Dept. of Family Services. Members included: Rhonda Harrell – VCU-VISSTA; Flora Harris – VDSS Eastern RO; Erica Inge – VCU-VISSTA; Debbie Jackson – City of Richmond Dept. of Social Services; Tracey Jackson – VDSS; Joyce Martin – Charlottesville Dept. of Social Services; Paige McCleary – VDSS; Anne Mitchell – King William Dept. of Social Services; Mary Norris – VDSS Western Regional Office; Bill Parcell – VDSS Piedmont Regional Office; Janine Tondrowski – VCU-VISSTA; Lisa Tully – VDSS Central RO; Cheryl Williams – VA Beach DSS; Mary Wilson – VDSS; Keith Wong – Northern Area Training Center; Doug Brown – Alexandria DHS; and, Gary Cullen - VDSS.

The Subcommittee charge was to develop recommendations on how to structure policy training so that those implementing the policy could gain an in-depth understanding of the policy, stay abreast of changes to it, and continually enhance their expertise.

The following four essential principles guided the Subcommittee work:

- ✓ Training must be accomplishable within state, local and VISSTA resources;
- ✓ Training must integrate with and support guidance from supervisors;
- ✓ Training must have the needed system supports such as information technology and timely policy; and,
- ✓ Training must promote and measure transfer of learning.

The group thought broadly about all aspects of re-engineering policy training. The Subcommittee members examined local, state and national “best practices” and VDSS policy initiatives, and they secured local input on how policy knowledge is currently gained, maintained and refreshed.

INFORMATION FOUND

A. *Best Practices*

The Subcommittee spent time examining “best practices” in policy training and on strategies for transfer of learning. Using research and other methods, the following were found to be the current “best practices:”

- ✓ Instructor led classroom training;
- ✓ Facilitated eLearning (webinar/conference call);
- ✓ Self-Paced learning (online or printed);
- ✓ One on One Tutorials;
- ✓ Technology enabled eLearning e.g. podcasts/webcasts/videos;
- ✓ Frequently Asked Questions/FAQs;
- ✓ Action Learning;
- ✓ Mentoring/coaching; and,
- ✓ Transfer of Learning

B. *Local Input*

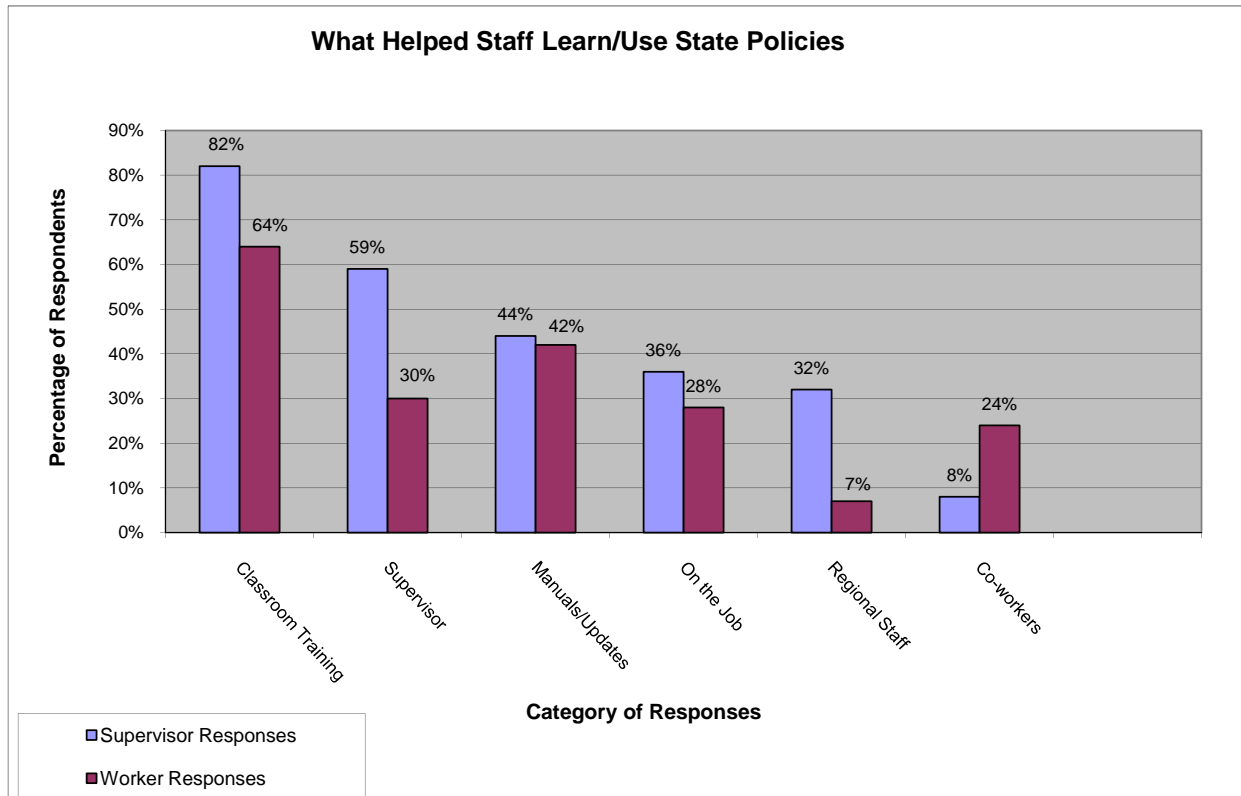
The most critical Subcommittee activity was seeking and analyzing information from local trainees and their supervisors, the people who must learn policy and keep current with changes. To solicit input, a policy training survey was developed which incorporated questions to analyze both current training methodologies and processes that respondents would find helpful in the future; respondents were given space to elaborate on the forced choice responses. Surveys were distributed during training sessions, local and regional meetings and through e-mail to some local staff. In one month, a total of 261 responses were received. Representative input was received from all size agencies, all Family Services programs, and all regions.

The survey responses tell us what helps staff learn policy:

- ✓ The supervisor and worker responses agreed that classroom training was the most helpful to learning and using state policies, but they differed in the second most helpful. Supervisors said they were second only to classroom training in helping staff learn policies, while workers said that manuals and updates were second in helpfulness.
- ✓ Supervisors thought the major barrier to learning and using state policies was the amount and/or timing of training, while workers rated this second. Workers found the biggest barrier to be difficulty and/or inconsistency of interpretation of policy. Supervisors thought the untimely communication around policy and policy changes was the second highest barrier.

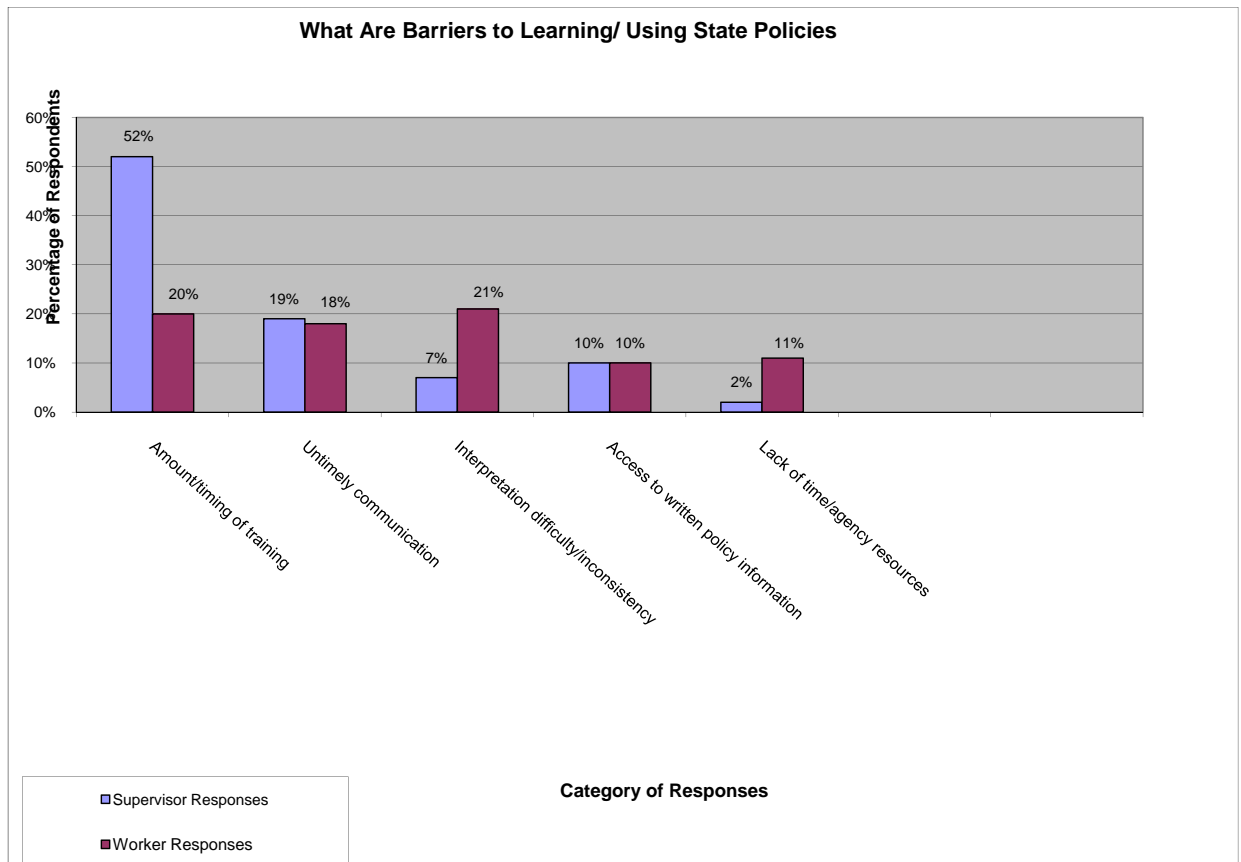
- ✓ Supervisors and workers agreed that the local agency helped them learn and use state policies first through encouraging training and second through the actions of the supervisors.

The following two charts show the survey questions asked, the general categories and percentages of responses based on the local input:



A few specific comments from responders and general observations regarding what helped them learn/use state policies follow:

- ✓ Classroom training gave me a foundation and helped me in learning and using policy;
- ✓ The supervisor sets the tone for an environment for learning and using policy;
- ✓ Reading the policy manual was universally mentioned;
- ✓ Regional specialists were mentioned as providing quick response and access to them was found to be helpful;
- ✓ “On the job” training was helpful in seeing policy in action and should include explanations of why policies are important and how to implement them; and,
- ✓ Co-workers were helpful to workers through discussions/consultation/training and watching experienced and knowledgeable co-workers.



Some of the specific comments from responders regarding the barriers to learning/using state policies are summarized as follows: Opinion was split on the amount/timing of policy training with some saying training lasted too long and some saying it was too short;

- ✓ A frequent comment was that courses are not offered frequently enough, especially refresher courses;
- ✓ It was also said that skills training is needed to support application of policies;
- ✓ Opinions differed on the timing of training—from immediate training to 3 months or 6 months after employment;
- ✓ Trainers need to be aware of and able to understand/present policies adequately;
- ✓ Some commented that online course are not effective as there are too many distractions in office and many do not learn well without interaction with an instructor;
- ✓ Budget has affected workers being able to take training;
- ✓ Frequent changes are too often communicated at the last minute, and staff learn of policy after its taken effect;

- ✓ Generic social workers struggle with number of program policies and frequency of changes....if they have time to learn it in the first place - unable to go to every training offered for each program
- ✓ Difficult to understand state broadcasts and how to administer new policy;
- ✓ Conflicting information is given sometimes even at training;
- ✓ Policy is open to interpretation which can be confusing;
- ✓ Discrepancies between manuals (adoption vs. foster care) laws/regs/ policy/ guidance often contradict each other;
- ✓ Some find the Online Access to the policy manuals helpful and some do not; and
- ✓ Inadequate time for training/learning on job, large complicated case load, inadequate number of staff in agency.

A SAMPLING OF LOCAL INPUT

The following comments are taken from the “open-ended” survey responses:

- ✓ We need practical “hands on” training and to practice off site what we learned.
- ✓ The supervisor sets the tone for an environment for learning and using policy— “I get the most help during supervision.”
- ✓ Reading the policy manual was universally mentioned as helpful in learning and using policy-opinions differed on the utility of the online manual.
- ✓ Supervisor pulls out the policy book and discusses case application with the worker.
- ✓ Smaller agencies/generic workers have special challenges, and find it especially difficult to keep up with varied policy and frequent changes to it.
- ✓ There are too many opportunities for misinterpretation, all policy training should be standardized.
- ✓ Differences regarding length of training – some said longer, some said shorter.
- ✓ Need refresher training for experienced workers, supervisors, and directors.
- ✓ Differences regarding timing of new worker training – some said immediate, some said start at six months, some said phase in over one year.
- ✓ Trainers need to have a good understanding of the policies they present – its helpful if they are actually working with/using the policy.
- ✓ Differences regarding online learning – too many distractions, lack of interaction with instructor – others want more especially for experienced workers and want to use more varied online tools – agreement that it must be user friendly.
- ✓ Policy changes are frequently in effect without guidelines for use/application – we have to implement policies without having full understanding of them.
- ✓ There are too many discrepancies in local agency practice that arise, and too often laws/policies/regulations/guidance contradicts each other.
- ✓ There is inadequate time for learning on the job.
- ✓ Provide training prior to policy implementation.

SUMMARY OF LOCAL INPUT

What follows are themes that emerged from the local input.

The top responses regarding more effective ways to learn/use state policies included:

- ✓ Classroom Training;
- ✓ Earlier Communication;
- ✓ Use of Internet/technology;
- ✓ On the Job Training; and,
- ✓ Help with Policy Questions.

Themes running throughout the varied responses included:

- ✓ Classroom training – timing, amount, length, and frequency;
- ✓ Role of line supervisors;
- ✓ Planned “on the job” training; and,
- ✓ Access to policy information/interpretation to include consistency, convenience, and timing.

SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

After analysis of local input, best practice findings, and VDSS policy initiatives, the subcommittee recommends the following:

- ✓ For new worker training, “pre-work” should be completed at the local office either through activities managed by the supervisor or through online training;
- ✓ Instructor led training should be available to help integrate the new worker training with practice, but only for those parts of policy that need an instructor led experience;
- ✓ Post instructor led new worker training should occur at the local office under supervision;
- ✓ New worker training modules should be developed in manageable increments and each should build on the other with prerequisites understood and adhered to;
- ✓ In addition to program modules, there should be some generic overview of the system, confidentiality, etc. available to all new workers;
- ✓ Additional input is needed to address the issue of whether new workers will be taught information systems as “standalone” or within program modules; and,
- ✓ Program policy refreshers should be available on a regular basis to experienced staff, supervisors and directors.

Summary Prepared November, 2010