

## FACT SHEET

### Report on Independent Evaluations in the Birth to Age Three Early Intervention Program

**Background:** In November 1996, the LB&FC issued a report on the Commonwealth's early intervention program wherein we recommended that providers that evaluate a child and participate in developing the initial Individualized Family Service Plan be prohibited from delivering services to that child. We concluded that this was an inherent conflict of interest and that the existing controls to monitor service provision were largely ineffective. We recommended that DPW develop regulations to implement this change and that it allow exceptions in counties where too few service providers exist or where other offsetting controls have been established. In May 1998 DPW issued a policy requiring counties to develop independent multidisciplinary evaluations (MDEs). The policy allows counties to develop alternative processes to ensure impartiality, contingent on DPW approval. In March 1998 the LB&FC officers adopted a review of the appropriateness of this requirement, especially for children with low-incidence or severe disabilities.

**Issues and Concerns:** Although independent evaluations appear to be working effectively in several counties, including Allegheny, Lehigh, Lebanon, and York/Adams, many counties have yet to implement the requirement. County MH/MR offices and EI providers have raised legitimate concerns regarding both the concept and practicality of independent MDEs, including:

- **Availability of Qualified Providers.** Several counties report they have too few qualified providers to implement the independent evaluation requirement. They believe the requirement will result in additional costs to use an out-of-county provider; hire a developmental specialist; or use an agency that primarily provides services to adults and older children.
- **Evaluator Experience.** Several counties noted that new evaluation providers may not have been part of their ongoing service delivery system and may need extensive training on the county's philosophy and approach to early intervention services. Another county was concerned that it would lose the experienced evaluators that work for service providers.
- **Appropriateness of MDE Teams.** Several stakeholders expressed concern that counties will create independent evaluation teams comprised only of the service coordinator and one or two generalists. DPW has expressed similar concerns and has drafted guidelines stressing that evaluation teams must include professional disciplines appropriate to the child's needs. (Evaluation team composition was also an issue in 1996, and therefore does not relate solely to independent evaluations.)
- **Timeliness.** County MH/MR administrators expressed concerns that independent evaluations will make it more difficult for them to meet the federal requirement that evaluations be conducted and an IFSP meeting held within 45 days from referral. Three counties, however, reported that their timeliness has improved since adopting independent MDEs.
- **Cost and Complexity.** Increased travel time, new evaluation contracts, additional administrative effort, and "medical model" independent evaluators were all cited as factors adding costs and complexity to the system.
- **Family-Focused Services.** Some counties view independent evaluations as another hoop families must jump through and another set of professionals that intrude upon the family. Others noted that independent evaluations give families more time to consider MDE results and prevent provider needs from overshadowing family needs.
- **Continuity of Service and Trust.** Several providers commented that independent MDEs disrupt the continuity of service and imply a lack of trust that is harmful to their relationship with the county and the families they are trying to serve.
- **DPW Implementation of the Requirement.** Many stakeholders expressed concern regarding the language of the DPW requirement and the restrictive way it was implemented. DPW intends to issue guidelines in Oct. or Nov. 1998 to clarify at least some of these points.

**Recommendations:** The Department of Public Welfare should:

1. **Use the regulatory review process to develop the independent evaluation requirement.** Legislative and public input can help minimize the negative consequences of policy changes. DPW intends to propose such regulations in fall 1998.
2. **Interpret the independent evaluation requirement broadly, at least initially.** We recommend DPW consider allowing exceptions for counties that: comprise MDE teams from different agencies; use service providers to supplement their "core" evaluation teams; cannot find qualified EI providers; or clearly separate the MDE from the initial IFSP meeting.
3. **Issue written guidance to provide further details on the independent evaluation requirement and the exception process.** Such guidelines should seek to clarify: whether providers who evaluate a child can provide services to other children in that county; the general circumstances under which a county can be expected to be granted an exception and for how long; and the purpose and expected outcomes of independent MDEs.
4. **Monitor counties closely during initial implementation.** We recommend DPW consider conducting quarterly, rather than annual, compliance reviews to ensure that counties are implementing the independent evaluation requirement properly.
5. **Strengthen existing DPW and county management controls.** Experienced county service coordinators and accurate data on the services provided to families remain important, and DPW should continue its efforts to strengthen these controls.