

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES TO CONSUMER SURVEYS: A CQI SUCCESS STORY

by *Bonnie Kerker*

Documenting program participants' perceptions of services is a central component of any Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) program, as consumers can be better served when their needs and preferences are understood. Recognizing this, the CQI committee at Casey Family Services initiated a recurrent agency-wide assessment of consumer satisfaction in 1998. The 2002-2003 survey focused on the agency's foster care programs, which exist in seven of Casey's eight divisions (consumer satisfaction surveys among the family-based programs are being implemented separately). The questionnaire asked respondents to rate their perceptions of gains and potential service barriers, as well as the services and cultural sensitivity of Casey staff, along several key quality dimensions.

Conducting the survey was a collaborative effort among division staff, research staff, CQI staff and management. The "survey team" that took the lead on conducting the survey was made up of CQI and research staff. As with any large project, the complexity of this survey brought with it many challenges. Building on past experience, however, this year's survey team overcame many obstacles and learned a great deal that may be of use to future agency projects.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Participants

A survey workgroup, consisting of at least one member of each division, suggested that all open-case adults in the foster care program should be included in the project. In addition, there was a consensus to continue surveying foster children over the age of 12.

Refined questionnaires for younger children and professional collaterals were postponed. Because Casey's foster care programs also serve many youth under the age of 12, the workgroup recommended including younger children in the survey as well. However, attaining reliable and meaningful results from questionnaires with young children is challenging. Surveying this population requires the use of specially designed tools by highly skilled professionals. Further, the workgroup indicated that past surveys of professional collaterals had been of limited value due to varying levels of investment among providers, and the need to tailor methods to collect the needed information.

Consequently, workgroup members recommended focusing on foster parents and adolescent youth at this time. Because there is much to be learned from professional collaterals, a separate project may be warranted to gather such information.

Design

In the past the surveys were conducted by telephone with youth and by mail with adults. Because telephone surveys generally elicit higher response rates than do mail-in surveys, both the previous and current workgroups encouraged the use of a telephone design with both populations. A low response rate is problematic for the appropriate interpretation of data. It is difficult to generalize to an entire population when few of the individuals contacted respond. This is because there could be systematic differences between those who choose to answer the survey and those who do not, making generalizations from these data somewhat inappropriate. In

Casey's 2000 survey, for example, those that took the time to respond to the last adult survey tended to have extreme views (both positive and negative) toward the organization's services.

From these data we cannot know whether all individuals fell into one of these two camps or if some fell in the middle. Consequently, the information gathered in the survey may not be very representative of the larger population. This year, only telephone surveys were conducted.

Random Sample

Even using telephone surveys, achievement of a high response rate can be difficult. When researchers attempt to contact an entire population, they are often spread too thin and are therefore unable to spend much time or energy contacting individuals. In contrast, using a sample indicates that a smaller pool is targeted, allowing for a more focused outreach, which may increase the participation rate among those called. Further, if the sample were *randomly drawn*, it would likely be representative of the total population, meaning the individuals surveyed would be comparable to the rest of the program participants.

Consequently, achieving a higher response rate in a random sample yields more valid data than achieving a lower rate among the entire population, even if the number of surveys completed were less in the sample.

When drawing a random sample, however, there is no guarantee that the sample will include enough individuals in every subgroup to be representative of participants in each Casey program or to compare responses between groups. To address this concern, an approach called *stratified random sampling* was used. This means that the entire population was first stratified by subgroup and then random samples were drawn from each group to ensure adequate representation in the final sample.

Procedure

Data were taken from the agency's monthly statistics to estimate the numbers of adults and youth in each Casey program or placement type. A statistical program was used to calculate the size of the samples that would adequately represent the cases in each group. Overall, 185 of 345 foster/adoptive parents and 154 of 312 foster/adopted children were included in this study.

The Case Information System (CIS) generated lists of foster youth, but not their phone numbers or addresses. To complete the lists, each Casey division provided data on their foster/adopted youth and parents (including address, phone number, program type and demographics if available). Division staff's willingness to engage in this "back and forth" discussion was essential to the accurate identification of the agency's consumers.

As with past surveys, both adult and youth participants received a letter (from their division director) prior to being called in the 2002-2003 survey. The letter described the study and how the results will be used, and asked for consent and participation.

Four private consultants implemented the surveys (two for the adult and two for the youth questionnaires). After the letters were mailed, a pilot was conducted in which each interviewer conducted three to five interviews. Appropriate modifications to the survey methodology and questions were then made. Once the interviews began, biweekly phone calls were held to discuss any new problems that arose. For

example, if a caller could not reach a participant at the phone number listed, survey staff would contact the appropriate division to ensure that the number was correct. When the interviewers called a home, they asked to speak with the caretaker who had the most contact with the Casey office. Before they began surveys, they reviewed the purpose of the study and the confidential nature of the interviews.

When foster youth could not be reached by phone, written surveys were mailed.

A Preview of Results and Dissemination

Among the 185 foster parents contacted, 159 completed surveys (86 percent). Of the 154 foster youth contacted, 106 completed surveys (68 percent). Among the 144 youth who were called, 103 (72 percent) completed a survey, and of the 11 youth who were mailed a questionnaire, three (27 percent) returned the survey to the Casey office. Separate reports are being prepared and will be disseminated to Casey staff, foster parents and youth.

Conclusion

Although conducting an agency-wide survey entails challenges, the survey team overcame numerous obstacles and successfully completed the project. This was only possible because of an intense level of collaboration between division and administrative staff. Further, although the previous surveys have been highly successful and have yielded useful information, a re-evaluation of the methods enabled the team to replicate the more effective procedures followed in the past, while implementing design changes that have hopefully resulted in even more accurate and useful findings.

For a copy of the complete report, please contact the Research Department, and look for a summary of results in an upcoming edition of *Voice*.

This article is from the Fall 2003 issue of Voice.