

Structured Decision Making Safety Assessments

Members representing field Child Protection Workers (CPWs), Social Work Case Managers (SWCMs), Supervisors, Social Work Administrators (SWAs), Child Welfare Information System (CWIS) Help Desk, Service Help Desk, and Policy collaborated in January of 2019 for a LEAN Kaizen event to review Iowa's existing Safety Assessment and Safety Plan in effort to support consistent decisions about child safety statewide. After consideration of field survey feedback, research into four other states forms and practice around Safety Assessments and Safety Plans, and in-depth discussion of best practice, the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) tool had proven to be the most successful evidenced-based tool available. The SDM Safety Assessment is a validated tool to help assess, at a point in time, whether any child is likely to be in imminent danger of serious harm or maltreatment, which requires a safety intervention; and to determine what interventions should be initiated or maintained to provide appropriate protection.

In response, the Iowa Department of Human Services (Department) contracted with Evident Change, formerly the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, in February of 2020 to conduct research and provide technical assistance and direct support to the Department in the development of an SDM safety assessment tool and a safety planning practice guide specific to Iowa. Evident Change reviewed the Department's policy, held project planning meetings, provided a web-based survey and phone interviews with Department staff, external partners (including providers and representatives of Iowa's judicial system), and facilitated work with the aforementioned Department members four times between September 2020 and July of 2021 to construct the SDM Safety Assessment and guidance documents in accordance with the standards to maintain the fidelity of the evidenced-based decision-support system of SDM.

Following initial development of the tool and guidance documents, Evident Change completed the initial SDM Safety Assessment Analysis and will conduct another after implementation to compare and determine how well the new safety assessment is functioning and whether it is having the desired effects. Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR) testing was also completed to ensure the assessment design and item definitions yielded consistent ratings across workers. Evident Change then analyzed the IRR test data and recommended assessment items and definition revisions accordingly and worked with the Department on training and direct integration of SDM components into the Department's child welfare information system, certifying it as "SDM system compliant". Evident Change also provided the tool and guidance resources in Spanish.

In November and December of 2021, SW 714 Structured Decision Making® Safety Assessment training was required for all CPWs, SWCMs, and Supervisors. This training included an overview of the SDM system and how the tools would be used a part of the critical thinking required when making decision about child safety during the course of a child protective assessment or during ongoing services.

In January of 2022, SW 614 Structured Decision Making® Safety Assessment Supervisory Webinar was required for all Supervisors to aide in their role of supporting staff in implementation of the SDM tool.

Effective February 8, 2022, the SDM Safety Assessment tool was implemented for CPWs to utilize during the child protective assessment process and for SWCMs to utilize during ongoing services.

The efforts with Evident Change align with work completed in 2020 to update the Safety Plan in order to clarify the purpose of the safety plan and provide transparency to the parents and other participants about their roles and responsibilities around safety plans. A Next Steps document was also created during work on the Safety Plan to be utilized as a “refrigerator list” of next steps that are not directly related to the Safety Plan, but were helpful steps to guide the family on what they could be doing to work towards successful case closure. Both forms were implemented in September of 2020.

To revisit the use of Safety Plans and how the SDM Safety Assessment informs the Department’s safety planning, SW 717 Structured Decision Making® Safety Planning training was required for all CPWs, SWCMs, and Supervisors. The training reviewed when a Safety Plan needs to be completed, what needs to be in the plan to make it effective, and the process for developing the plan. Participants had the opportunity to practice applying techniques to effectively craft and monitor Safety Plans in collaboration with families.

All three of the trainings, on the SDM Safety Assessment, Supervisory Webinar, and Safety Planning were recorded and are available on the Department’s Learning Management System.