

ILLINOIS CHILD ENDANGERMENT RISK  
ASSESSMENT PROTOCOL (CERAP):  
FY99 IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

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April 1999

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# Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol (CERAP): FY99 Implementation Evaluation

## Introduction and Background

In 1994, the Illinois Senate passed PA 88-614, which required the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to develop a standardized child endangerment risk assessment protocol and to implement its use by training staff and certifying their proficiency. This act also required DCFS to provide an annual evaluation report to the General Assembly regarding the reliability and validity of the protocol, known as the CERAP (Child Endangerment Risk Assessment Protocol).

Critical to any assessment of the effectiveness of the CERAP is an analysis of whether the instrument is being used to aid decisions, and if it is being used when and how it was designed. The CERAP was designed to evaluate the likelihood of immediate harm of a moderate to severe nature at several specific milestones throughout the life of a case. It consists of four sections: 1) safety assessment – workers must evaluate the presence or absence of 13 safety factors, describe them, and note any family strengths or mitigating circumstances; 2) safety decision – based on the safety assessment and other information known about the case, the worker judges the environment to be safe or unsafe; 3) safety protection plan – if the environment is unsafe, the worker must develop a safety plan that describes the specific actions to be taken to protect each child, the persons responsible for implementing and monitoring the plan.

As part of their ongoing evaluation of the CERAP, DCFS has conducted a series of studies examining issues related to the protocol's implementation by workers. Early in 1997, the Office of Quality Assurance (OQA) examined CERAP implementation among 100 child protection cases. Results of this review revealed that 83% of the CERAPs required within 24 hours after the investigator first sees the alleged victim were completed in their entirety (DCFS, 1997).

The following year, evaluation efforts examined CERAP implementation at each milestone in the life of a case (DCFS, 1998). Managers and supervisors reviewed 561 cases, both intact family and substitute care, and determined if the CERAP was completed a) at the appropriate milestones and b) according to directions. For all cases, completion rates were highest during the investigation (88%) and prior to closing a case (88%). Rates were moderately high following case assignment (65%) and at every six months (67% - for intact families only). Rates appeared to be relatively lower for milestones associated with substitute care cases, such as prior to unsupervised visits (48%) and prior to returning a child home (50%), although the findings regarding these two milestones may not be representative due to small sample sizes<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample sizes for these two milestones were smaller than others in this study for a number of reasons. These milestones typically occur only in substitute care cases, and many of the substitute care cases reviewed for the study had not yet reached these milestones. Thus, the results for these two milestones were based on a small number of cases, 25 and 8, respectively.

When a CERAP was present, reviewers checked each section for completeness. Completion rates for different sections ranged from approximately 95% for the safety decision, approximately 90% for the safety factor identification checklist, and approximately 90% for the safety plans (78% for substitute care cases).

This year, the evaluation focused on CERAP completion at several milestones at the most crucial safety decision points. These milestones, also reviewed in last year's evaluation, were: a) within 24 hours after the investigator first sees the alleged victim, b) within 5 days of case assignment, and c) immediately prior to closing a service case.

## **Method**

**Sample.** Previous studies examined CERAP completion at each milestone throughout the life of a single case. However, not all cases require a CERAP for each milestone (e.g., intact family cases do not require a CERAP for the milestones "immediately prior to unsupervised visits" or "immediately prior to returning a child home"). Therefore, to facilitate data collection, three separate samples were drawn to examine the CERAP milestones of interest.

- \* Group 1: to examine the milestone "within 24 hours after the investigator first sees the alleged victim," a sample of 80 cases was drawn from all investigations opened and indicated in 1998.
- \* Group 2: to examine the milestone "within 5 working days of case assignment," a sample of 80 cases was drawn from all cases opened in 1998.
- \* Group 3: to examine the milestone "immediately prior to closing a service case," a sample of 80 cases was drawn from all cases closed in 1998.

A power analysis was done to determine the sample size necessary to achieve an adequately representative sample. This analysis, along with logistic and time considerations, determined the size of the final sample drawn.

**Evaluation instrument.** Three similar evaluation forms were created to collect information about CERAP completion for each group of cases. Case information, such as family name, investigator/worker and supervisor names, case location (field office), and DCFS region, was recorded on a cover sheet. Each form then contained questions regarding the presence or absence of the specified CERAP form, as well as the completion of each of the CERAP's four sections (Safety Assessment, Safety Decision, Safety Plan, and Signatures/Dates).

**Case readers.** Retired DCFS case workers were hired to serve as case readers for this evaluation. Each reader was responsible for reviewing approximately 25 cases from a specific geographical region. Each case reader was provided training on use of the evaluation form.

## Results

**Sample characteristics.** A total of 181 evaluation forms were completed: 80/80 (100%) from group 1, 55/80 (69%) from group 2, and 46/80 (57.5%) from group 3. Files not included in the sample could not be located for review by necessary deadlines. The majority of the cases not reviewed were follow-up cases from the Cook County regions, which may diminish the representativeness of the findings (i.e., if Cook cases have completion rates significantly different from other regions, this would have changed the overall results). Thus, the current findings may be considered accurate for investigation cases and follow-up cases in downstate regions, but may not accurately reflect completion rates in Cook). The geographic representation of the sample cases is presented in Table 1.

<b>Region</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% of total sample</b>
Northern	39	21.5
Central	69	38.1
Southern	30	16.6
Cook North	23	12.7
Cook Central	9	5
Cook South	11	6.1
Total	181	100

**CERAP completion by milestone.** Table 2 displays the CERAP completion rates for each of the three milestones examined. CERAPs required during the investigation continue to show a very high level of completion (97.5%), while those required at later milestones show moderately high completion rates – 76.4% following case assignment and 74% prior to closing a service case.

**CERAP section completion.** Table 2 also displays completion rates for each section of the CERAP. Results of this analysis show that when a CERAP is completed, it tends to be completed in its entirety, with rates for each section 90% or more. Safety plans, required for CERAPs with “unsafe” safety decisions, were present in 100% of the cases requiring them. However, these safety plans varied in their quality; most described the specific actions to be taken, but fewer described who would monitor compliance with the plan.

<b>Milestone</b>	<b>within 24 after the investigator first sees the alleged victim</b>		<b>within 5 working days of case assignment</b>		<b>Immediately prior to closing a service case</b>	
	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
CERAP completed	97.5	80	76.4	55	74	46
Safety Factor Checklist	96.2	78	100	42	97	34
Safety Factor Description	96.2	78	90.5	42	88.2	34
Safety Decision	98.7	78	97.6	42	91.2	34
Safe	61.5	77	71.4	41	97	31
Unsafe	37.5	77	26.2	41	3	31
Safety Plan	100	29	100	11	100	1
Describes specific actions	93.1	29	100	11	0	1
Who will implement	75.9	29	72.7	11	0	1
Who will monitor compliance	69	29	54.5	11	0	1
Signatures/Dates	100	78	98	42	100	34

## Summary

As part of the ongoing evaluation of the CERAP implementation by workers, CERAP completion at several crucial milestones was examined. Compared with last year's results, CERAP completion rates have increased for two milestones, within 24 hours after the investigator first sees the alleged victim (from 88% to 97.5%) and within five working days of case assignment (from 65% to 76.4%). However, completion rate at another milestone, immediately prior to closing a service case, has fallen (from 88% to 74%).