Yes, we CANS

As DHS has periodically illustrated, integrating services for children and their families is a continuous process of identifying, meeting and overcoming challenges. Developing a single assessment tool for children and their families is another of the major challenges to achieving integrated services that DHS is meeting head-on.

In fact, DHS is on the threshold of introducing an assessment tool that provides an effective measure of the strengths and needs of the evaluated individual across all service areas or domains.

This tool, the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) Comprehensive assessment tool, is slowly being incorporated into the business practice at the various DHS entry points as part of the Improving Outcomes for Children and Families in Allegheny County (Improving Outcomes) Initiative.

Developing the CANS Comprehensive

DHS staff from the DHS Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) System of Care Initiative (SOCI) are well aware of the concept of a broadly applied assessment tool. Beginning in 1999 and continuing through 2007, SOCI staff worked with the tool's original designer, Dr. John Lyons, to adapt his earlier version into ones that would be suitable for use by different subsets of the child population in Allegheny County.

In 2008, DHS committed to developing a tool to be used not only across all age brackets of youth receiving services through OBH, but one that would be applicable and effective across all child-serving systems.

Young adults, family members, system partners and community members joined with representatives from Allegheny County systems related to child and adolescent mental health, child welfare, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile justice and mental retardation/ developmental disabilities to contribute to the creation of an assessment tool that would bridge all these systems. By June 2008, the draft tool was ready to be tested and evaluated by DHS front-line staff.

Introducing the CANS Comprehensive

The introduction of the CANS Comprehensive moved forward with great care through four phases. First, system partners and providers were gathered in casual information sessions to hear an explanation and promotion of the new assessment tool.

Front-line staff, in particular those from the areas of behavioral health, mental retardation/developmental disabilities, child welfare, justice-related services and special education, were targeted in this phase.

Second, between July 2008 and July 2009, 148 staff in Allegheny County were trained on the use of CANS Comprehensive. The trainings were opportunities for two-way communication about the value of – and concerns about – the new tool.

In the third phase, as hands-on testing of CANS increased, surveys were conducted to evaluate its acceptability and perceived utility among staff in the behavioral health and child welfare systems.

The final phase, between June 2009 and August 2009, utilized all the feedback to create a final, more appropriate, CANS Comprehensive assessment tool.

Supporting the CANS in software

Following the completion and testing of the final version of the CANS Comprehensive tool, the DHS Office of Information Management (OIM) began to build the final software application to support it. This involved multiple layers of work as well.

Key OIM staff members were first introduced to the new business model and all of the feedback gathered during the introduction and testing process. By being more familiar with the business process, software developers were, and continue to be, better positioned to design the final CANS Informational Technology system to collect, retain and report out the required information.

Implementing the CANS

Putting the CANS Comprehensive tool to use across DHS poses its own challenges. Over time, each system will be encouraged to replace their current intake assessment tool with CANS comprehensive or some logical variation adapted to that particular system.

The implementation process is still in its early stages and will continue as part of the ongoing Improving Outcomes Initiative.