

# The Role of the Child Welfare Professional

## Child Welfare Professionals:

- ♦ Should **NOT** serve as diagnosticians or therapists;
- ♦ Must determine what the impact of the mental health concerns will have on the child's safety and determine if there are threats to the child's safety;
- ♦ Should be able to recognize the behavioral indicators and symptoms of mental illness that may impede the ability of the caregivers to safely care for their children. It is important to pinpoint the behaviors that must be controlled and ultimately changed. Focusing on symptoms also provides important information that will be needed by mental health professionals to develop treatment plans;
- ♦ Need to recognize that mental illness does not exist in isolation. People who are mentally ill are prone to poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence, and social isolation. Child welfare professionals must also assess these factors and their contribution to maltreatment as well as the impact of the mental illness;
- ♦ Must be able to determine the impact of the mental health of adult caregivers on their children as this can often lead to social, emotional and physical development as well as parentification, normalization of abnormal behaviors, and truancy;
- ♦ Need to be able to help children learn to cope with their parents' mental illness and help those parents explain to their children what their diagnosis is in a developmentally appropriate way;
- ♦ Must recognize that a caregiver's ability to provide supervision and care for the child may be impacted as a result of a mental illness. Sometimes the symptoms of a mental health disorder, or even the treatment being provided, can result in the caregiver being less attentive to the child's needs;
- ♦ Must be able to accurately assess the protective capacity of other adults living in the home to intervene in unsafe situations and protect the child;

- ♦ Must recognize that one caregiver's mental illness may place additional stress on the other caregiver's in the home. Other caregivers may assume the responsibility not only for the caregiving of the child but also the caregiving of the adult with the mental illness. This responsibility can be a burden both emotionally, mentally, physically, and even financially;
- ♦ Need to work closely with caregivers with a mental illness to encourage and support their positive parenting to decrease the fear of losing custody of their children. For some, keeping their children is an incentive for staying in treatment. For others, staying in treatment raises fears that child welfare professionals will use the caregivers' illness against them to remove (and keep) their children;
- ♦ Should contact crisis or the police and not try to intervene with the adult if a caregiver is presenting a clear and present danger to themselves and recognize that in these instances there is often present danger to the safety of the child. Therefore, the child welfare professional must act to mitigate the safety threats;
- ♦ Must find an alternate living arrangement for the child to assure their safety if the caregiver is involuntarily committed and no other caregiver remains in the home;
- ♦ Need to understand that grief and loss issues may exacerbate the caregivers' mental health issues. The caregiver may even revert to self medicating their grief by using drugs or alcohol or misusing their prescribed medication.
- ♦ Must be able to distinguish between a caregiver who is able to safely parent with or without supports versus a caregiver is unwilling or unable to do so;
- ♦ Need to encourage a caregiver to continue treatment even when they are feeling better. Typically, patients enter treatment, begin to feel better and then believe treatment is no longer needed. Without an adequate system to support adherence to treatment regimens, mentally ill caregivers may not be able to consistently meet their own basic needs or those of their children;
- ♦ Need strategies for supporting caregiver treatment compliance by developing life-long support networks for families;