Module 1: CONNECTIONS Fundamentals

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Introduction and Rationale

CONNECTIONS is the primary system used to record information, assessments, and case plans for families and children receiving child welfare services in New York State.

This module provides a review of the basic CONNECTIONS infrastructure and features (stages, shared case record, case roles, and collaboration in child welfare) that are essential for understanding a worker's roles and responsibilities in CONNECTIONS.

This guide focuses primarily on content within CONNECTIONS. It is assumed that workers have had (or will have) a more comprehensive introduction to CONNECTIONS, including how it is organized and how to navigate through the system.

CONNECTIONS Stages

The CONNECTIONS database is organized into a series of stages; each stage represents a key casework function. Some stages can remain open simultaneously, while others operate in a linear fashion (one after another). The specific path of any given case through CONNECTIONS will depend upon the way in which a family enters the child welfare system.

The following are the CONNECTIONS stages. (See *Appendix 1A: CONNECTIONS Stages* for a flowchart illustrating how these stages interrelate.)

- CPS (Child Protective Services) Intake (INT)
- CPS Investigation (INV)
- Family Services Intake (FSI)
- Family Services Stage (FSS)
- Child Case Record (CCR)
- Foster/Adoptive Development (FAD)

Once a family's case has progressed through INT and INV and/or through FSI, the family's case is stage progressed to FSS for documentation of ongoing services to the family. When a child is freed for adoption, a separate CCR is created; case plans and services to that child continue to be documented in the CCR separate from the FSS.

This guide will focus primarily on effective use of the FASP within the FSS and CCR stages.

Types of Family Services Stages (FSS)

An FSS can be one of the following types:

- *Child Welfare Services (CWS)*
  This is the most common type of FSS. It provides a place to document assessments, decisions, plans, and services provided as part of an ongoing services case. Child welfare case documentation is linked via CONNECTIONS. This allows for enhanced sharing and connectivity among workers/agencies serving the family, and easier access to records over time and across locales. Progress notes and FASPs, both current and past, can be viewed electronically by supervisors, administrators, and others with a role in the case. If a family moves from district to district or has a case reopened within the same district, prior records can be accessed via CONNECTIONS.

- *Out-of-Town Inquiry (OTI)*
  There are two types of OTIs—out-of-state and county-to-county. An out-of-state OTI is a written request for assistance on a specific matter that usually involves a family now residing in NYS. A county-to-county OTI is a request made by one local district to another local district for assistance or follow-up on a specific matter that involves a family residing outside the requesting district. The request usually requires an action that cannot be completed by the requesting district. Certain documentation within the FASP is required for these cases; CONNECTIONS will customize the FASP for OTI based upon identification of this FSS type when the stage is opened.

- *Court Ordered Investigation (COI)*
  This type of FSS is used for documentation of a services case that was initiated by a court ordered investigation, rather than by a CPS investigation. Certain documentation within the FASP is required for these cases; CONNECTIONS will customize the FASP for COI based upon identification of this FSS type when the stage is opened.

- *Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC)*
  This type of FSS is used for cases where the local district or voluntary agency is receiving a child from another state. The FASP generated by CONNECTIONS will be customized based on the needs of the specific child. (All children who were in foster care in NYS and are being placed in another state via ICPC will already have an open FSS/CWS in CONNECTIONS and will continue to be tracked in that stage. The FASP generated by CONNECTIONS for these cases will remain the same based on key case parameters.)

- *Advocates Preventive Only (ADVPO)*
  The ADVPO type of FSS is used exclusively for cases in New York City receiving *only* preventive services; these families do not have current CPS involvement or a child in foster care. A contract agency is directly providing services, and Administration for Children's Services (ACS) is the Case Manager. While progress notes and FASPs are still required for these cases, they are recorded in template format on the voluntary agency's local network, not in CONNECTIONS. This provides families a degree of privacy in accordance with the conditions of the Advocates Preventive lawsuit settlement. Documentation of such cases can be viewed onsite at the provider agency by ACS or OCFS, but is neither stored nor viewable within CONNECTIONS. The questions within the FASP templates are identical to preventive services FASPs in CONNECTIONS, but information does not carry forward from FASP to FASP and must be reentered at each FASP cycle.

Child Case Record (CCR)

Once a child is legally freed (i.e., the parents are deceased, they have surrendered their parental rights, or their rights have been terminated), a separate CCR is created for the child. The Child Assessment and Service Plans (CASPs) within the CCR are similar to FASPs within the FSS; CONNECTIONS will customize the CASPs with only the sections relevant to the child's Permanency Planning Goal (PPG) and planning needs. Siblings freed in the same family will have their own CCR stage and distinct CASPs. Caseworkers involved in cases with multiple freed siblings must take care to coordinate among the children's plans for consistency and continuity.

Shared Case Record

Effective child welfare practice requires coordinated efforts among professionals and other providers in local districts and voluntary/contract agencies; timely access to information and shared decision making are key elements of effective coordination. CONNECTIONS is a shared case record into which all workers involved in a case can access information as needed and can contribute to the record as defined by their role in the case. Multiple providers in both local district and voluntary agencies, serving a family at the same time, can access and document their work in the same electronic case record while maintaining their distinct roles and responsibilities.

With all child welfare professionals working from the same electronic case record, an ongoing, comprehensive, and coordinated view of key observations is possible. This leads to a unified assessment and finally, a comprehensive plan for the family.

Case Roles in CONNECTIONS

The caseworker's planning and documentation responsibilities and access to information within CONNECTIONS is defined by the CONNECTIONS role*. One's CONNECTIONS role may vary from case to case or within the same case over time. Each caseworker with a role in a case is responsible for documenting his/her assessment observations and his/her work with or on behalf of a family accurately and completely in his/her progress notes and the FASP.

This guide provides information for documentation responsibilities associated with each of the assigned roles in CONNECTIONS.

** CONNECTIONS Role vs. Job Title vs. Functional Role*

Note that a worker's assigned CONNECTIONS role may be called something different from their job title, which in turn may be something different from their functional role in a case. The duties associated with a caseworker's job title or functional role may vary from the responsibilities defined by their CONNECTIONS role in a case.

A job title is specific to a worker's agency; it delineates specific types of services rendered, or a set of duties or responsibilities within the agency, and may or may not reflect a level of authority or oversight within the agency (e.g., caseworker, supervisor, quality assurance specialist, foster parent, clinician, child care worker).

A functional role is what each individual does with or on behalf of a family/child (e.g., case management, counseling, advocacy, referral, life skills training, parenting a child, respite, supervising visitation).

A caseworker's CONNECTIONS role may be Case Planner, but his/her job title within the agency may be caseworker, social worker, or some other title assigned by the agency. Whatever the job title, the functional role with a family may be to provide counseling, to supervise visits, or to teach budgeting skills. All these efforts on behalf of a family, no matter what CONNECTIONS role or job title, will need to be recorded in the family's case record.

Definitions of Connections Roles

CONNECTIONS is designed to support the corresponding and interrelated responsibilities for coordinating, developing, and documenting a family's case plan. The following descriptions apply to planning and documentation roles within CONNECTIONS:

- *Case Manager*
  There is only one Case Manager per case and this person must be local district staff. The Case Manager is the FASP approver and is ultimately responsible for the timely, accurate, and thorough completion of the FASP. He/she is expected to review the content of a submitted FASP and request changes or clarification from the Case Planner or Case Workers, as needed, before approving a FASP. The Case Manager is also responsible for maintaining up-to-date progress notes reflecting his/her own contact with or on behalf of a family. Because the Case Manager cannot enter information directly into a FASP, he/she should make sure that any key actions taken by or delegated to him/her are accurately reflected in the FASP. The Case Manager may also act as the Case Planner if he/she is the only caseworker assigned to the case (i.e., there is no outside contract agency with the Case Planner role). If the Case Manager is also acting as the Case Planner, the Case Manager's supervisor must approve the FASP.

- *Case Planner*
  The Case Planner is the primary author of the FASP and is responsible for completing and submitting the FASP in a timely fashion. Only the Case Planner or the Case Manager (if a Case Planner has not been assigned a role) can submit a FASP for approval.

  The Case Planner provides services directly to the family. When there are multiple service providers, he/she coordinates work with the family among the other providers. The Case Planner is responsible for maintaining up-to-date progress notes of his/her own work with a family. As the primary author of the FASP, the Case Planner is responsible for ensuring that the FASP reflects a clear, coherent, coordinated, and complete account of the work of all service providers associated with the case. This may include reviewing and editing the drafts entered

into the FASP by other contributors; ensuring their accuracy, clarity, and consistency; requesting additional information or clarification as needed; and, ultimately, integrating the drafts into one unified FASP narrative. The Case Planner's role may also involve soliciting input from other team members who do not have the ability to input information directly into a FASP (e.g., Case Manager, foster parents, life skills specialists, clinicians, visit supervisors) and ensuring that the key observations, services provided, and actions taken by them are reflected in the family's FASP.

There can only be one Case Planner per case, and this person may be a local district employee or employed by one of the district's contract agency providers. If no Case Planner is assigned, the Case Manager assumes the duties of the Case Planner and is responsible for the completion and submission of the FASP.

- *Case Worker*
  One or more additional caseworkers (who can be either local district or contract agency staff) may be assigned to a case and have a role in the FASP. The Case Worker is a FASP contributor and provides a record of his/her work with a family, including contacts, observations, plans, and decisions via CONNECTIONS. Case Workers are also responsible for maintaining up-to-date progress notes and for completing certain sections of the FASP depending on their functional role in the case.

  A Case Worker can also be "associated" to a specific child or multiple children in a case. A Case Worker who has been associated to a specific child should complete the Child Scales on the Child Strengths, Risks and Needs window, as well as complete the Foster Care Issues section for that child; no one else can complete these sections for that specific child. An associated Case Worker may also be expected to contribute and record relevant information for the Analysis and Service Plan related to the child's progress and needs. Specific expectations of the Case Worker will be determined in conjunction with the Case Manager and Case Planner on a case-by-case basis. Associating a Case Worker to a specific child does not prevent other workers from working with that child or completing other parts of the FASP that may relate to that child in the Service Plan.

- *CPS Worker/Monitor*
  A role of CPS Worker/Monitor may be assigned when a case was opened from an Indicated CPS Investigation; the CPS Worker is no longer the primary service provider for the case; and there are ongoing, or new, safety concerns. Depending on local protocols, there may or may not be a separately designated CPS Worker/Monitor, as this functional role may be delegated to another person already assigned to the case. The CPS Worker/Monitor must always be local district staff.

  The CPS Worker/Monitor acts as part of the team to ensure the accuracy, timeliness, and thoroughness of the Safety Assessment, and that any Safety Plans in place are sufficient to protect the children based upon current circumstances of the case. The CPS Worker/Monitor helps to determine when safety controls must be continued, strengthened, or when they are no longer needed. The CPS Worker Monitor must document his/her findings on the Progress Notes tab and approve any safety-related documentation in the FASP. The CPS Worker/Monitor may be assigned specific work within the FASP, such as the Safety Assessment or the Risk Assessment Profile (RAP).

- *FASP Approver*
  While not a separately assigned CONNECTIONS role, approval of FASPs is delegated to Case Managers, supervisors, and sometimes to senior workers. The role of FASP Approver is essentially one of quality control. FASP Approvers are responsible for reviewing the content of a submitted FASP, evaluating the recorded information in accordance with best case practice standards, and either approving the FASP or rejecting it. Included in this role is providing feedback to the Case Planner on additions or modifications necessary for the FASP to meet acceptable standards. Approvers cannot make or change entries directly, but must work through the Case Planner to see that appropriate changes are made in order for the FASP to meet expected standards and be approved. Depending upon agency protocol and the assignment of the Case Planner, there may be more than one FASP Approver. A FASP is not considered complete until all required Approvers have approved the FASP. (Specific protocols and navigational steps for submitting a FASP, adding an approver, and approving/rejecting a FASP can be found in the *CONNECTIONS Step-by-Step Guide*.)

Team Collaboration and Communication

Ongoing communication and coordination among service providers has long been standard casework practice. CONNECTIONS continues to support this practice by providing ongoing and timely access to information for caseworkers working with a family.

A key feature of the shared case record in CONNECTIONS is the enhanced access to information and the increased ability for written communication and collaboration among team members. However, documenting casework activities in CONNECTIONS does *not* replace the need for the workers assigned to a case to communicate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis.

Since the approved FASP, along with the progress notes, must reflect a clear, coherent, coordinated, and complete account of the effort of all service providers working with a family, it is imperative that there be regular and ongoing communication and coordination of casework efforts among all service providers. The documentation of the work being done by each service provider must reflect consistency and coordination of effort.

May I or Can I View or Enter Information? What's the Difference?

When asking a question about one's role, responsibilities, or access within CONNECTIONS, it is important to differentiate between:

- What the Case Worker *can* do (i.e., what the CONNECTIONS system will allow the Case Worker to do)
- What the Case Worker *may* do (i.e., what the Case Worker is expected or permitted to do based upon the agency's or district's expectations, procedures, or protocols)

For example, CONNECTIONS will allow anyone with a role in a case to make entries or changes on the Person List window. However, in some locales, only the Case Manager is permitted to make such entries or changes (i.e., the Case Worker *can* make certain entries, but the Case Worker *may not* be allowed to do so based upon agency/district protocol).

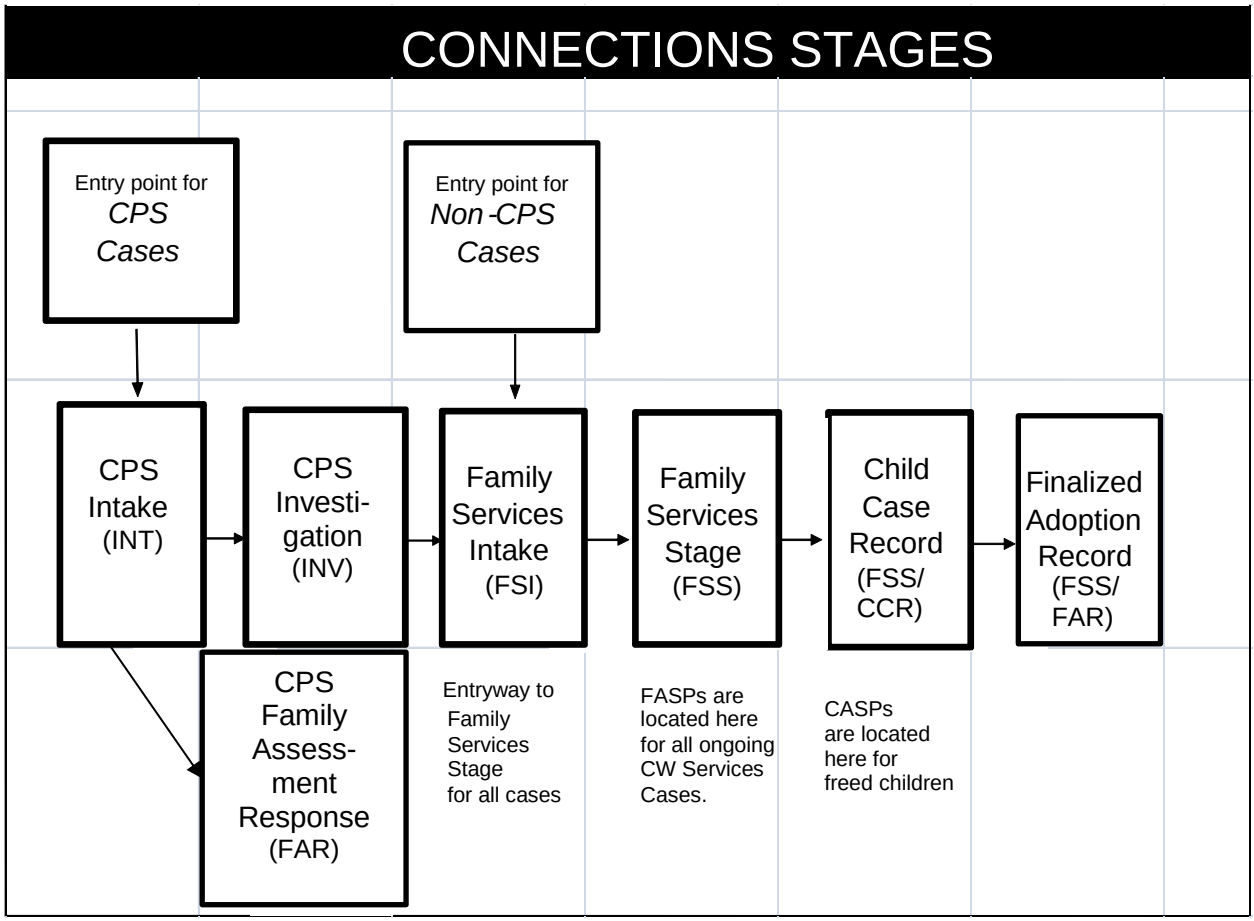
It is also important to differentiate:

- What the Case Worker can view or read
- Which sections the Case Worker can add information to

Any person with a role in a case can view all entries in the electronic record of that case. Some individuals without a direct role in a case have view access by virtue of their role in the unit or through the chain of supervision (e.g., supervisor, quality assurance, agency administrator, or OCFS staff).

All persons with a CONNECTIONS role in a case can enter progress notes, but only those with a role of Case Planner or Case Worker can enter information into a FASP. For a list of questions within the FASP that one can enter information into based upon the case role, see *Appendix 1-B: CONNECTIONS Roles and Responsibilities*. The Case Worker will need to speak to a supervisor or read the agency's/district's written policy governing what one may do or is expected to do. Those employed by voluntary agencies will need to be familiar with both their agency procedures as well as that of the local district responsible for a particular case.

1A: CONNECTIONS Stages



1B: CONNECTIONS Roles and Responsibilities

Stage/Associated Tabs	*Case Manager*	*Case Planner*	*Case Worker*	*CPS Worker/Monitor*
INT (CPS Intake)	Intake is not modifiable by any local staff.			
INV (CPS Investigation)	Investigation is not modifiable by anyone with a role in the FSS, unless that worker also has a specified role, either as primary or secondary worker in the INV stage.			
FSI (Family Services Intake)			Only one worker can be assigned at a time. Each narrative entry is frozen upon saving the data. Once the Intake is closed, it cannot be modified.	
FSS (Family Services Stage)				
Demographics	X	X	X	X
Relationship Matrix	X	X	X	X
Caretaker	X	X	X	X
Finalize Adoption	X			
Progress Notes	Anyone with access to the Progress Notes tab may enter a note. Only the "entered by" (a person with the business function "enter progress notes" ENT PROG NO) or author of the note may update the note. Notes freeze at day 21.			
Tracked Children Detail	X	X	X	X
Launch a FASP (Family Assessment and Service Plan)		X	X	
CPS Safety Assessment within the FASP		X		X
Non-CPS Safety Assessment		X	X	
Family Update		X	X	

Stage/Associated Tabs	*Case Manager*	*Case Planner*	*Case Worker*	*CPS Worker/Monitor*
Family Scales		X	X	
Parent Scales		X	X	
Child Scales		X	X*	
RAP within the FASP		X		X
Non-CPS Risk Assessment		X	X	
Assessment Analysis		X	X	
Service Plan		X	X	
FCI (Foster Care Issues)		X	X**	
SPR (Service Plan Review)	Anyone with a role in the stage, or any worker with the business function of "access service plan review," may access and update this module.			

Note: If there is no Case Planner assigned, the Case Manager functions as both the Case Manager and Case Planner.
* Individual narrative entries made by persons with a role of Case Worker are identified with the worker's name, until consolidated by the Case Planner, in areas where Case Planner Summary functionality exists. The Case Planner reviews and consolidates information and submits to the Case Manager for approval. Once approved, the FASP is frozen, and is not modifiable.
** If a worker is associated to a child, *only* that worker and the Case Planner can update the Child Scales on the Child Strengths, Risks and Needs window, as well as update the Foster Care Issues section.
A Case Planner may initiate the stage closing action. Only a local district Case Manager or their supervisor may close a stage.

Case Manager

- Must always be LDSS staff (one per stage, required)
- Functions as an approver (If no other person is assigned as a Case Planner, the Case Manager takes on all the responsibilities of the Case Planner.)
- Submits work to his/her unit approver
- Updates demographics
- Writes progress notes

Case Planner

- LDSS or Voluntary Agency staff (one per stage, optional)
- Responsible for consolidating the FASP
- Responsible for submitting the FASP/Plan Amendment to the Case Manager
- Updates demographics
- Writes progress notes
- Documents the SPR

Case Worker

- LDSS or Voluntary Agency staff (multiples per stage allowed)
- Responsible for portions of the FASP
- Updates demographics
- Writes progress notes
- Documents the SPR

CPS Worker/Monitor

- Always LDSS staff (multiples per stage allowed)
- Contributes to certain portions of the FASP
- Updates demographics
- Writes progress notes

Specialty Functions

- "ENTER PROG NOTE" (Enter progress notes): allows the user with this business function to enter notes by accessing the Progress Notes tab only, via case or person search
- "ACC SEALED ADOP" (Access sealed adoption): allows the user to access a CCR within their district or agency when it has been finalized for adoption
- "ACC SERPLAN REV" (Access SPR): allows the user to access any SPR within their district or agency