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Issue 23-18

Date: 11/08/23

## STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING (SDM) VERSION 3.5:

### WebSDM Implementation (1/02/2024),

### New and Revised Tools, Updated Definitions, and Revisions to Evident Change's SDM Policy & Procedures Manual

The Structured Decision Making (SDM) assessment tools are refined over time through continuous user feedback, changes in statutes and regulations, and periodic research and evaluation.

- ✦ This FYI outlines the upcoming updates to the California SDM assessments and the [Evident Change](#) SDM Policy and Procedures (P&P) manual included with SDM Version 3.5.
- ✦ On **1/02/2024**, the following updates will go live on [WebSDM](#):
  - The inclusion of a new tool, the **Congregate Care Safety Assessment**
  - Revised definitions
  - Revised P&P manual
  - Updates to two (2) of the existing tools (the [Hotline Tool](#) and [Safety Assessment](#)), and
  - P&P revisions related to the completion of the [Risk Assessment](#) and [Reunification Reassessment](#)

#### NEW SDM Congregate Care Safety Assessment

- When abuse or neglect is alleged while a child is in out-of-home care, including in congregate care settings, California child welfare agencies are required to evaluate whether an in-person child welfare response is needed.
- State policy directs that the child welfare agency investigates allegations of harm in care to ensure the immediate safety of children/youth in placement, regardless of whether an agency such as the Community Care Licensing Division is [investigating the same allegation](#) [see [All County Letter \(ACL\) 05-09](#) for more information].
- To support CSWs in making accurate, consistent, and equitable decisions about a youth's immediate safety, CDSS has partnered with Evident Change and California counties to design an expanded version of the SDM Safety Assessment to be used specifically during investigations of child abuse and neglect allegations in congregate care settings. Congregate care settings are licensed out-of-home care placements with highly structured environments for dependent children (many provide 24-hour supervision). For example:
  - Group homes, including enhanced behavioral support homes and minor-parent programs
  - Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs)
  - Residential treatment facilities
  - Transitional Housing Placement Programs (THPPs)



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- Transitional or temporary shelter care facilities

In contrast with the traditional SDM Safety Assessment and Substitute Care Provider (SCP) Safety Assessment, which are both completed on [households](#), the new Congregate Care Safety Assessment:

- Is child-specific (i.e., an assessment is completed on an individual child in a congregate care setting), and
- Includes “factors influencing child/youth vulnerability” (although child vulnerabilities are contained in the traditional Safety Assessment, they are not part of the SCP Safety Assessment)
- Includes new “facility factors that may affect child/youth vulnerability”

[Click here to review the pending draft definitions and Policy & Procedures](#) for this assessment.

The new SDM Congregate Care Safety Assessment and the other updates described below are scheduled to go live in WebSDM on **1/02/2024**.

## General WebSDM Updates

- The definition of “household” was updated with examples in which non-residents may qualify as household members in order to add clarity and examples to support accurate assessment of a child’s current household.
- A *Glossary of SDM Terms* was added to better define terms used throughout the suite of SDM assessments.
- A set of general SDM instructions called “practice foundations” was added to support consistency in the use of SDM assessments.

## SDM Hotline Tool Revisions

- **ICWA:** The header prompt regarding American Indian/Alaskan Native ancestry and collaborative assessment with tribe(s) was revised to prompt the screener to consider “reason to know” or “reason to believe” (that a child is an Indian child). The revisions also include definitions of “reason to know” and “reason to believe.” This change aligns with [Assembly Bill \(AB\) 3176](#) requirements to begin collaborative assessments for tribal children as early as possible. Corresponding definitions and policy guidance were also added, as well as instructions on how to locate tribal representatives from the [Bureau of Indian Affairs List of ICWA designees](#).
- The **Preliminary Screening** item “No child under age eighteen (18)” definition was updated to clarify that allegations of harm to nonminor dependents (NMDs) should not be evaluated out. This update aligns with [WIC 16504 \(c\)](#).
- The **Screener Criteria section/Physical abuse** checkbox for “Caregiver action that likely caused or will cause injury:” An example related to dangerous behavior in the immediate proximity of the child was added. The updates describe any household violence by one (1) or more adult household members occurring in ways that the child could be injured, instead of focusing exclusively on incidents related to intimate partner violence.
- The **Screener Criteria section/Emotional Abuse** checkbox for “Emotional harm related domestic violence:” The item stem has been changed from “exposure to



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domestic violence" to "emotional harm related to domestic violence." The updates to the item definition and threshold further clarify the intent for screener to assess any impact on the child/emotional harm.

- The **Screener Criteria section/Neglect/General Neglect** item: A note was added to support alignment with [AB 2085](#) that specifies "general neglect" does not include a parent's economic disadvantage. The definition for the "inadequate medical/mental health care" subitem was also revised to clarify the expected threshold, specifying that the lack of medical care is causing the child's condition to deteriorate.
- The **Screener Criteria section/Neglect/Failure to Protect** item was updated to specify that concerns related to domestic violence should be assessed under the emotional abuse and physical abuse items of the Hotline Tool.
- The **Screener Criteria section/Neglect/Threat of Neglect/Substance-Affected Infant** subitem stem and definition has been updated; "infant exposed to drug/alcohol" was changed to "substance-affected newborn." This aligns with amendments to the [Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act \(CARA\)](#) and the corresponding guidance set forth in [ACL 17-92](#) and [ACL 20-122](#) related to infants affected by substance use and Plans of Safe Care.
- The **Screener Criteria section/Sexual Abuse/Sexual Exploitation** subitem was revised to streamline the definition of trafficking in the failure-to-protect and in the sexual abuse/sexual exploitation items to assess the extent to which a caregiver has acted protectively or has the ability to protect.
- A new **"Tribal Agreement" section** was added to the assessment that tracks tribal agreement with the screening decision, when known.
- **Overrides/Override to In-Person Response:** The "Interview per local protocol" definition has been updated and expanded to include a tribal agency request.

Click [here](#) to review the pending draft revisions to the Hotline tool and corresponding draft revisions to the Evident SDM Change P&P Manual (these and all other pending revisions described below are highlighted).

## SDM Safety Assessment Revisions

- Evident Change's Safety Assessment completion policy will now include new clarification that a Safety Assessment is not appropriate for referrals assigned an in-person response when:
  - The in-person response is required for an incident involving only a third-party perpetrator of sexual exploitation, and there are no allegations regarding the caregiver.
  - A child fatality is suspected to be a result of abuse or neglect and there are no remaining children in the household.
- **Allegation Household:** Evident Change's SDM P&P has added clarification that Safety Assessments must be completed on allegation households. When responding "no" to the existing question "Were there allegations in this household?" an automated prompt



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in WebSDM will now link the worker to the Evident Change SDM policy stating that a Safety Assessment must also be completed on the allegation household.

- **ICWA:** The header prompt regarding American Indian/Alaskan Native ancestry and collaborative assessment with tribe(s) was revised to increase alignment with California policy and ICWA policy following the ancestry of the child (versus the caregiver). Additional prompts within this question were added to support CSWs in identifying "reason to know" or "reason to believe" to align with AB 3176 requirements.
- **Safety Threat 1 - Physical harm, serious harm:** The definition of "serious injury or abuse to the child other than accidental" was expanded to include "or would have required medical treatment had a serious injury occurred."
- **Safety Threat 1 - Physical harm, substance-affected infant:** The item stem has been updated from "drug/alcohol-exposed infant" to "substance-affected infant." Both the revised item stem and definition will now clarify that in order for the item to be selected, the threshold of imminent danger must be met, as opposed to past evidence of harm. In addition, In-home Protective Interventions #1 and #2 have been updated to include references to Plans of Safe Care.
- **Safety Threat 2 - Sexual Abuse:** Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are now two (2) separate subitems in Safety Threat #2 to support improved assessment and data collection.
- **Safety Threat 3 - Immediate Needs Not Met:** Statewide data indicates this safety threat continues to be the most prevalent safety threat in removal households for concerns that may largely be associated with lack of resources/poverty. Updates align with changes to the Penal Code implemented through AB 2085 specifying general neglect to not include a caregiver's economic disadvantage. Safety Threat #3 has also been updated to include the threshold of imminent danger of serious harm within the item stem; items are now broken out into categories ("supervision," "food or clothing/hygiene," "medical or dental care," and "mental health") to support improved data collection and closer examination of the way this safety threat is being selected. Definitional changes now reinforce the imminent danger threshold, and a new note clarifies that the item should not be selected based on poverty alone.
- **Safety Threat 5 - Severe psychological/emotional harm:** The safety threat item was reworded, and examples were added to better clarify what factors meet the threshold for severe emotional harm.
- **Safety Threat 6 – Failure to protect:** This threat was reworded to, "Caregiver does not protect the child from serious harm or threatened harm by others. This may include physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect." Clarification was added that this safety threat should not be selected regarding concerns of domestic violence; rather, these should be assessed under the new dedicated Safety Threat #9 (see below). To align with this change, an example related to domestic violence was removed.
- **NEW Safety Threat 9 - Domestic violence poses imminent danger:** This new Safety Threat (#9) has been added to support the correct use and application of concerns related to domestic violence; these concerns were previously embedded within Safety



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Threat #1 (physical harm) and Safety Threat #5 (emotional harm). Subitems were added to track physical harm versus emotional harm. The new definition aligns more closely with survivor-centered practice, the Integrated Core Practice Model (ICPM), and Safety Organized Practice (SOP), applying SDM definitions based on perpetrator behavior.

- **REMOVAL of previous Safety Threat 9 - Current circumstance combined with past history:** A review of data flagged this item as significantly over-selected for American Indian/Alaskan Native households in California, and Evident Change testing and review of definitions indicated similar concerns with this item across jurisdictions. This Safety Threat has been removed from California's assessment, and CSWs considering removal based on past harm and circumstances not already described in Safety Threats #1-9 should be captured under Safety Threat #10, which requires an explanation and supervisor approval.
- **Caregiver complicating behaviors:** These SDM definitions were updated to focus on the present tense in order to add consistency across all definitions.
- **In-Home Protective Interventions:** Small language changes were made to the interventions related to use of tribal resources and Plans of Safe Care, and to clarify that safety plans must also be monitored and supported by network members.
- **Placement Intervention 11 and a NEW Placement Intervention 12:** Protective intervention 11 has been changed from “child placed in protective custody because interventions 1-10 do not adequately ensure the child’s safety” to “a warrant or detention order will immediately be sought per local policy.” This update is for use when a household has been assessed as Unsafe and a removal warrant or removal order will be sought immediately per local policy. 5. Protective intervention 12 was added to indicate a “child placed in protective custody” (previously this was addressed in Intervention 11). These new revisions more closely align with California practice related to exigency and seeking warrants.
- **Tribal Agreement:** This is a new section of the assessment that tracks tribal agreement with the safety decision, when known.

Click [here](#) to review a draft of the pending changes to the Safety Assessment and corresponding draft revisions to the Evident Change SDM P&P Manual.

## SDM Risk Assessment P&P Revisions

All updates to California's SDM Risk Assessment in WebSDM Version 3.5 are focused on Evident Change's Risk Assessment P&P only. Changes to the actuarial risk items of the tool and weighting of the items would require an updated risk validation.

- **P&P/Background:** Updates were made to the description of SDM actuarial risk, clarifying what it measures and what it does and does not inform.
- **P&P/Which Cases:** Revisions clarify that Risk Assessments should not be completed for sexual exploitation referrals involving only third-party perpetrators, child fatalities with no other child(ren) in the home, or allegations in out-of-home care. The prior requirement to complete a new Risk Assessment for new referrals on open cases was **removed**, as



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this was not clearly connected to a decision point (Evident Change recommends that a Risk Reassessment should be completed instead).

- **P&P/Recommended Decision, Case Promotion Guidance, and Planned Intervention:** The Recommended Decision will now be displayed as a matrix showing the intersection of Safety and Risk. For families classified as High/Very High Risk and Safe, the Recommended Decision was updated to expand service intervention options that better align with the [Family First Prevention Services Act \(FFPSA\)](#) and its expanded prevention continuum (i.e., “refer to services or open”). Planned Actions will now include “close without intervention,” “refer to services as primary intervention,” or “open for child welfare services case.” Updated data fields will support tracking and evaluation of the planned intervention post-investigation, including referrals to community services.

Click [here](#) to review the pending draft revisions to the Evident Change SDM P&P Manual related to the Risk Assessment.

## SDM Reunification Reassessment P&P Revisions

- The purpose of this assessment has been expanded to add, “pursue permanency alternative.”
- **P&P/When:** The Evident Change Reunification Reassessment completion policy was simplified to require completion of the Reunification Reassessment (to assess a safe return home) at a minimum of every six (6) months from the point of removal [Evident Change recommends completion every ninety (90) days if adequate time has passed to demonstrate progress on the case plan]. This change de-links the completion of the assessment timeline in the Evident Change SDM P&P from court and case plan progress. The Reunification Reassessment itself was not revised.

Click [here](#) to review draft revisions of the Evident Change SDM P&P Manual related to the Reunification Reassessment.

Evident Change has provided recorded micro-learnings on the California [SDM Core Team and Practice Community Site](#) that include overviews of the Safety Assessment and Hotline Tool revisions and the new Congregate Care Safety Assessment. These micro-learnings are five (5) to ten (10) minutes long and staff should view these prior to using the tools for the first time.

On 12/01/2023, the full updated Evident Change SDM Policy and Procedures Manual will be distributed to SDM Core Team members and statewide trainers in advance of deployment on 1/02/2024.

By December 2023, CDSS is expected to issue two (2) ACLs regarding the SDM 3.5 updates and the Congregate Care Safety Assessment. This guidance, when issued, will be incorporated into future revisions of affected policies.

In early 2024, Evident Change’s annual SDM “Train the Trainer” (T4T) training will be launching for Training staff.

If you have any questions regarding this release, please email your question to:  
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