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Title: The Oregon Project: The Oregon Child Welfare Equity Project; Site Visit Report

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Contacts: Kory L. Murphy, Operations and Policy Analyst, kory.murphy@state.or.us

SUMMARY

In 2005, the Children's Bureau's National Resource Center for Adoption (NRCA) established the Minority Adoption Leadership Development Institute (MALDI) to enhance the leadership skills of minority adoption leaders from around the country. These leaders are selected from States, counties, Tribes, and/or State regions that have a high number of children of color awaiting adoption and/or high disproportionality rates. These emerging leaders are also provided mentors from their agency that work with them as they complete 12 months of job-related project assignments (Action Research Projects) which increase their technical expertise as well as their leadership capacities.

As a result of his participation in MALDI, Kory Murphy, an operations analyst for the Oregon Department of Human Services, developed the Oregon Child Welfare Equity Project in order to spread awareness of racial disparity and disproportionality, reduce the impact of bias on child welfare decision-making, and improve outcomes for Oregon's families and children. The project's goals include developing a data-based dialogue through which workers and managers can:

- Become aware of the extent of disproportionality in the State
- Uncover their own cultural biases and assumptions
- See the impact of bias on case planning
- Understand the importance of cultural considerations when working with families and children
- Safely reduce the number of children in foster care

Another crucial part of the MALDI focuses on community involvement. As part of this project, Oregon's Department of Human Services and Commission on Children and Families is working with Casey Family Programs to address disproportionality statewide. The Governor also has appointed a multiethnic, multidisciplinary Task Force on Child Welfare Racial Equity. The task force has assembled 80 community members and leaders in eight pilot counties to create community-based action plans and long-term strategies to address disproportionality. The local plans have six Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction Goals to be met by 2011.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

In 2007, when the announcement about the opportunity to nominate candidates for participation in the Minority Adoption Leadership Development Institute (MALDI) was extended by the NRC for Adoption and was considered by the Oregon Children, Adults, and Families Division of the Department of Human Services, the timing was ideal. The division was aware that there were disproportionality issues in the child welfare system and was working to address them. Mr. Murphy, who was at that time the Recruitment Relations Manager for the division and was charged with recruiting and retaining child welfare staff of color, was selected to participate in the MALDI training.

The first MALDI two and a half day onsite learning session that Mr. Murphy attended dealt with overrepresentation and used national data to analyze the degree of overrepresentation in the child welfare system. At that session, Judge Howze of the District of Columbia Family Court made a presentation about how analyzing the data allows us to see the impact of our personal and institutional biases on decision-making in child welfare. She highlighted the importance of collecting cultural information from families from their first contact with the child welfare system in order to understand those families in their cultural context and thus to reduce the impact of bias on decision-making as well as to improve outcomes for families and children.

This was the first time Mr. Murphy had seen data used in this way, and he decided that his Action Research Project would be to use Oregon's child welfare data to raise awareness and to spark statewide dialogue about the child welfare disproportionality and disparity issues that data revealed. He worked with the Portland State University School of Social Work to develop an analysis of the data in the State's child welfare information system. This analysis not only revealed significant disproportionality, it also uncovered an unusually high percentage of children in the system whose race was identified as "unknown," a fact that could actually be masking the full extent of the disproportionality issue. Mr. Murphy took that data analysis to all the regions in the State, presenting it to child welfare supervisors and workers, asking, "What does it mean?" and "What are we going to do about it?" The dialogue had started.

At the same time, the National Council of Family Court Judges wanted to sponsor a conference in Oregon on disproportionality. They had the money and Mr. Murphy had the idea, so they collaborated on a statewide conference held in May 2008. Conference planners brought in national experts on bias in general, child welfare bias in particular, and how individual biases impact the decisions we make and may, in fact, be contributing to overrepresentation in the child welfare system. As had been the case when Mr. Murphy attended the MALDI training, the conference emphasized the importance of child welfare staff understanding families in their cultural context. As he had visited the regions to discuss the data, Mr. Murphy had announced that this conference was coming up and had encouraged attendance. As a result, 250 participants from across the State attended the conference on *Disproportionate Representation: An Ethical Issue for Child Welfare*.

As a result of the ensuing statewide dialogue, the Director of the Department of Human Services asked Mr. Murphy to develop a pilot plan for reducing disproportionality and disparity beginning in Multnomah County (Portland), where disproportionality and disparity issues seemed most pronounced. The pilot later expanded to seven additional counties (Coos, Deschutes, Jackson, Malheur, Marion, Tillamook, and Washington), all selected because of the number of children in foster care, the county's readiness for change, and the likelihood that these counties would be able to deliver outcomes and

new processes that would be replicable statewide. In each county the pilot targeted a safe and equitable reduction in the foster care population. The plan included the following objectives:

- A Data “Clean-up” Project - Reducing the high percentage of families and children whose race/ethnicity was listed as “unknown” in the child welfare information system in order to be able to more accurately track the degree of disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system (the disproportionality index)
- A Workforce Development and Training - Ongoing dialogue with child welfare supervisors and workers regarding bias and its impact on decision-making
- A plan to put the Oregon Safety Model in context - Integrating cultural context into decision-making
- Subsidized Guardianship - Promoting other permanency outcomes
- Executive Leadership - Child welfare and political leadership committed to addressing the disparity issue through ongoing education and awareness, planning and implementation
- Community Outreach - Active outreach to the communities, especially the Native and African American communities, in order to enlist their understanding and support of the initiative and their input into the planning

In October 2008, the State entered into a formal agreement with Casey Family Programs. One of the components of that project was to address disproportionality statewide. Then, in December 2008, Mr. Murphy was appointed to direct the work in this area, first in the larger, eight county Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction pilot project and then statewide.

Together the Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Commission on Children and Families, and Casey Family Programs collaborated on this project and brought together over 80 community members and leaders in the eight pilot counties to create community-based action plans and long-term strategies for addressing disproportionality. The local plans have six goals to be met by 2011:

- Safely reduce children in foster care by 20 percent
- Increase relative placements by 50 percent
- Reduce children entering foster care by 10 percent
- Increase foster care exits by 20 percent
- Reduce the disproportionality index for Native and African American children (numerical goal to be determined at end of 2009 – was it determined?)
- Maintain or reduce the current child abuse/neglect recurrence rate of 7.5 percent

Work on disproportionality became a statewide issue with the same six statewide Safe and Equitable Foster Care Reduction goals to be met by 2011. In January 2009, the Governor signed an Executive Order creating a Task Force on Child Welfare Racial Equity, charged with submitting recommendations to an interim Committee of the Oregon Legislative Assembly no later than October 1, 2010, for consideration during the 2010 Legislative Session.

Goals of Project

Among the specified roles and responsibilities of the National Resource Center for Adoption is that of promoting professional leadership development of minorities in the

adoption field. MALDI aims to enhance the leadership and technical skills of its participants, who are selected from States with high disproportionality rates and with the greatest number of children of color awaiting adoption. Trainees participate in two onsite learning institutes of 2 and a half days duration over a 2 year period. Topics covered include *Preparing for Diversity: Challenges and Opportunities in Child Welfare*; *Executive Leadership*; and *Change From the Middle*. State Adoption Program Managers who are trained in effective mentoring and coaching work with the participants from their States as they complete 12 months of job-related project assignments (Action Research Projects focused on “problem solving by examining practices systematically and carefully”) to increase their technical expertise and hone their leadership skills.

This report is on the Oregon Child Welfare Equity Project developed by Mr. Kory Murphy, Oregon’s Department of Human Services, Children, Adults, and Families Division participant in the MALDI training. The project focuses on building statewide awareness of the racial disparity and disproportionality issues that exist in Oregon. The objectives are to examine the Oregon State and county child welfare system data to identify areas of disparity and disproportionality and to identify and address factors, challenges, and barriers to equity in the system. The goals are to:

- Develop a data-based dialogue through which workers and managers can become aware of the extent of disproportionality in Oregon and can discover their own cultural biases and assumptions and the impact of such biases on case planning
- Promote dialogue among workers and supervisors to increase their awareness of the importance of including cultural considerations when working with families and children
- Safely and equitably reduce the foster care population, thus reducing the levels of disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system

Need for This Service

AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System) data from 2007 revealed that there were approximately 496,000 children in foster care in the United States, 130,000 of whom were awaiting an adoptive family. That data also revealed that African American children and youth are consistently overrepresented in the child welfare population in care as compared to the general population as well as in the population of children and youth waiting to be adopted. Additionally, when they do achieve adoption, African American children tend to have waited longer in foster care for their permanent families than other groups of children.

An analysis of Oregon’s statewide and pilot county (Multnomah County, where Portland is located) child welfare data and of CFSR (Child and Family Services Review) results revealed that African American and Native American children are disproportionately represented in both the State and the county foster care population. A 2009 analysis of Oregon’s foster care data revealed that “African American children make up 2.3% of the State’s child population, but account for 7.3% of the foster care population. Native American children make up 1.3% of Oregon’s child population, but account for 10% of its foster care population. By comparison, white children comprise 71% of the child population but only 61% of the foster care population. National studies show that children of color are not abused at higher rates than their white counterparts, but when a child of color enters a foster care system, those children and their families are treated

differently.” The Decision Point Analysis of their foster care data found that to be the case in Oregon as well.

The Department of Human Services was well aware of this disparity and had committed itself to addressing the issue and reducing the degree of disproportionality at the time the MALDI training opportunity occurred.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The “visit” to this project did not actually include onsite meetings. The writer, instead, met with Mr. Murphy when he attended the Children’s Bureau Agencies and Courts Conference in Washington, DC on August 4 – 6, 2009, and attended a workshop on his project at the conference. In addition, Mr. Murphy provided extensive written materials on the Oregon Equity Project, including PowerPoint presentations and minutes and preliminary reports and recommendations of the Task Force on Child Welfare Racial Equity. The writer also spent considerable time reviewing the Task Force website at: <http://oregonfostercare.wordpress.com>. Information gleaned from those various sources is presented throughout this report.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

Community Collaboration - The pilot project was a community collaboration between Department of Human Services, the Tribal Communities, the Oregon Commission on Children and Families, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges in Multnomah County, Portland State University School of Social Work, Wraparound Oregon, Juvenile Justice/Oregon Youth Authority, and the Coalition of Communities of Color, which includes the Urban League, Self Enhancement Inc (SEI), Native American Youth Association (NAYA), Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA), Black United Fund, El Programma Hispanic, etc. This collaboration continued on a larger scale as the project expanded.

Impact of the Minority Adoption Leadership Development Institute (MALDI)

- Lessons on how to use data to tell the story of overrepresentation enabled Mr. Murphy to take the issue to the communities and to spark dialogue on a statewide level, thus lighting the fire that is leading to statewide reform.
- The MALDI onsite learning sessions encouraged the cross-system collaboration, which has been key to the success of this project.

Challenges

- The demographics of the child welfare workforce in Oregon, as in so many States across the country, do not match the demographics of the child welfare population, raising questions as to whether racial bias or cultural misunderstanding among decision makers may influence decisions about who enters foster care and the paths they take once they enter foster care.

- In Oregon, as is often the case throughout the country, people of color do not have the same access to quality services as do members of the majority population.
- Agencies have not traditionally reached out to form relationships with communities of color, so there is no practice model for this work.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

One of the first steps in implementing this project was to develop and publish the following working definitions of the key areas being examined so that everyone involved would be “speaking the same language:”

- *Disproportionality*: when a group makes up a proportion of those experiencing some event that is higher or lower than that group’s proportion of the population
- *Overrepresentation*: a particular racial/ethnic group of children are represented in foster care at a higher percentage than they are represented in the general child population
- *Disparity*: an illustrated lack of equality is present when a comparison of one group to another group is made (e.g. placement decisions, access to services, exit types, exit outcomes)

OUTCOMES

Summary of Activities and Accomplishments

- *Statewide conference on Disproportionate Representation: An Ethical Issue for Child Welfare – May 2008*: This conference, sponsored by the Department of Human Services, the Multnomah County National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, Multnomah County Court, and the Oregon Commission on Children and Families, provided the platform for the first statewide discussion about disproportionality in child welfare and resulted in the issue becoming a top priority throughout the system. Attended by 250 child welfare professionals, the conference increased awareness of the issue throughout the system to the point that State and county leadership committed to supporting a county pilot plan for reducing disproportionality in Multnomah County and to allocating personnel to develop and implement that plan. Child welfare staff also began to look at the impact of their biases on case planning and decision-making.
- *Task Force on Child Welfare Racial Equity*: Mandated by Executive Order and signed by the Governor in January 2009, the Multidisciplinary and Multiethnic Task Force on Child Welfare Racial Equity is charged with “studying the reasons for, and developing a plan to reduce, the disproportionality of minorities in the child welfare foster care system” and submitting a report and recommendations for achieving the statewide goals for equitably reducing the foster care caseload to an interim committee of the Oregon Legislative Assembly no later than October 1, 2009. The Executive Order also empowered the Task Force to:
 - Collect and analyze data
 - Set specific goals to reduce disproportionality in child welfare
 - Study, assess, and recommend strategies:

- To enhance recruitment and retention efforts to increase minority representation among child welfare staff
- Concerning staff and community partner training
- Prevention of future disparity and disproportionality

The work of the Task Force is detailed at:

<http://oregonfostercare.wordpress.com>.

- *Decision Point Analysis*: Conducted by the Portland State University School of Social Work in order to inform the work of the Task Force on Child Welfare Equity and the Safe Reduction of Foster Care Initiative, the Decision Point Research consisted of three parts:
 - A literature review on disproportionality and disparity designed to inform both research methods and action planning
 - An analysis of administrative data, Statewide and county-specific, that examines the existence and extent of disproportionality and disparity at each of nine key decision points in child welfare
 - Focus group discussions with those involved at each decision point to provide context to the data analyses

The Decision Point Analysis was designed to determine not only *whether* disproportionality exists in Oregon's foster care system, but also *where* it exists and whether or not it exists to a greater or lesser degree at different decision points. The analysis was designed to provide information on where in the child welfare system racial and ethnic groups' experiences vary, at which decision points interventions are needed, and where Oregon might most productively focus its systems improvement efforts. Data was analyzed at nine major decision points in the life of a child welfare case:

- Intake/Reports to Child Protective Services (CPS): Calls are made to CPS about the safety of child(ren) in families.
 - Screening: Is the report serious enough for an assessment or should the report be screened out?
 - Disposition: Upon assessment, was there reason to be concerned for the safety of the children in their home?
 - Removal/Hold: Is the situation serious enough to remove a child or keep the child from going home?
 - Foster Care: Are Native and African American children overrepresented in the foster care population as compared to their representation in the general population?
 - Type of Placement: In what type of foster home (relative or nonrelative) is the child placed?
 - Length of Stay in Foster Care: Does a child remain in foster care for an extended period of time or exit from foster care quickly?
 - Plan for Permanence: What are the identified permanency plans for children in the child welfare system?
 - Exit Pathways: By what pathway (permanency or other pathway) does a child exit foster care?
- *Findings of the Decision Point Analysis*: In its Executive Summary, the *Decision Point Analysis Quantitative Report* issued on December 31, 2009, states that:

“[T]he Oregon statewide administrative data analysis...shows patterns consistent with national statistics, suggesting that children of color are represented disproportionately and disparately in the state’s child welfare system. On aggregate, children of color have different pathways than their White counterparts as they move through Oregon’s child welfare continuum...”

Child Protective Services. American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black families had the greatest disproportionate representation in Oregon’s child welfare system. American Indian/Alaskan Native families were nearly 2 times more likely and Black families were nearly 2.5 times more likely to be represented among reports to Child Protective Services (CPS) than to be present in Oregon’s general population...

Foster Care. Disproportionality and disparity continued along the child welfare continuum with children in foster care. Children of color, in particular American Indian/Alaska Native children, were in foster care at higher rates and stayed longer than other children. At least 19.7% of all children in foster care during the study period were children of color, despite the fact that children of color make up only 10.7% of Oregon’s general child population. American Indian/Alaskan Native children were nearly 5.5 times more likely and Black children 2 times more likely to be represented in Oregon’s foster care population than to be represented in Oregon’s general population...

Length of Stay in Foster Care. Once in foster care, children of color stayed longer. Over half of the American Indian/Alaskan Native ICWA-eligible children had been in foster care two years or more. Close to half (46.5%) of Black children had been in care 2 years or more. A smaller percentage (38.5%) of White children experienced these long stays. A very small percentage of Hispanic children (under 25%) had stayed more than 2 years. Long-term foster care (considered the least permanent of all permanent plans) was the plan of record for more American Indian/Alaskan Native and Black children than White children.

Finding Permanence. In a surprising finding, American Indian/Alaskan Native children, including children who were ICWA eligible, were the most likely group to exit via adoption, with guardianship second. Black children and children of Hispanic origin were the most likely to exit by reunification (both more than White children).

Race/Ethnicity Unknown. At the time of this report, a significant number of children had a race/ethnic designation of “Unknown.” The significant number of families and children who were designated as “Unknown” was found throughout Oregon’s child welfare continuum.”

Evaluation

The Department of Human Services has set clear, measurable goals for the equitable reduction of the foster care caseload in Oregon. Through the Decision Point Analysis of data, they plan to establish a set of benchmarks so that the data will become the scoreboard through which they will monitor whether they are on track for meeting their caseload reduction goals.

Dissemination

Conferences, focus groups, and regional meetings have been used to highlight this work statewide, as has the Task Force website: <http://oregonfostercare.wordpress.com/>

Sustainability

The initial project has grown to a statewide effort with the support of Department of Human Services leadership, the legislature, the Governor, and the communities. It is unlikely to end in the near future.

Products

The Oregon Child Welfare Equity Project (slideshow)

<http://www.nrcadoption.org/maldi/Action%20Research%20Page/Action%20Research%20Powerpoints/2008/K%20Murphy%20Final.ppt#258,5,A> Look at Oregon