

Title: Engaging Families Project in Fairfax County (Virginia); Site Visit Report

Grantee: Children, Youth and Families Division, Fairfax County (Virginia) Department of Family Services

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SUMMARY

An effort is underway in Fairfax County, VA, to make organizational changes within the Department of Family Services to improve engagement with families involved in the child welfare system. The effort is an outgrowth of one professional's experiences with the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) training program, which was designed to build leadership skills in mid-level managers in public and Tribal child welfare agencies. Sponsored by the Children's Bureau, NCWLI prepares managers to develop and implement changes in their communities through two sessions totaling up to 8 days of training, as well as ongoing technical assistance.

In May 2008, the Quality Assurance Manager for Fairfax County's Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Division began her training with the NCWLI program. Training sessions focused on the stages of change and applying evidence-based management skills and data-driven decision-making to systems change efforts. The Fairfax County manager leveraged these new skills and knowledge to launch a two-phased family engagement project.

The first phase of the project brought together a voluntary workgroup of 30 supervisors and frontline staff to determine what broad changes were needed to improve CYF efforts to engage families. The Division had previously initiated several practices focused on family engagement, such as the development of a strengths-based model of practice and Family Group Conferencing, but the workgroup's initial assessment identified a number of ways the Division's structure did not support family engagement. These structural issues included the assignment of different caseworkers as families moved through the system, multiple family assessments, "siloed" services, and lengthy investigations. Differing practices among in-home services social workers and inadequate resource allocation also contributed to the lack of systemic support for family engagement. The workgroup developed the following short- and long-term goals for making organizational changes to promote a more fluid, family-focused system:

- Establish a centralized process for families entering the system
- Use common assessment tools
- Maintain worker continuity throughout the case
- Open lines of communication across programs to increase trust among workers

Phase two of the county's effort convened a smaller workgroup to develop a model for implementing these goals. The workgroup assessed how to engage families at each stage of the child welfare process and what skills staff would need to accomplish more meaningful engagement. The CYF management team was also tasked with developing a management plan and revising leadership job descriptions in accordance with the proposed changes.

Although the Family Engagement project is still in the planning stages, the project's leaders feel that participation in the NCWLI has contributed to their efforts by helping them to see the big picture regarding systems change and to apply effective leadership principles to their initiative.

Two other systems change initiatives are also occurring in Fairfax County and across Virginia that may support the Family Engagement project. The first involves a department-wide Lines of Service review of protocol and practice to identify gaps and inefficiencies and develop action plans to address them. The second is the Children's Services System Transformation (<http://vafamilyconnections.com/>), a statewide effort to follow a new practice model to enact systems change in a number of areas, including family engagement and enhanced communication among partners.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Changing Systems to Improve Family Engagement" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI)

Ms. Lowry, the Quality Assurance Manager for Fairfax County's Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Division, began NCWLI in May 2008. She noted several components of the training that were particularly valuable:

- The NCWLI staff were adept at integrating personal stories and experiences (both of the participants and the trainers) into the curriculum, which helped provide a better connection to their agency work.
- The presentations on the change process were particularly well done.
- NCWLI also provided participants with the opportunity to apply leadership concepts to their agency work, which allowed them to assess their agencies and themselves and helped keep the information they received relevant to their work.
- Her initial week-long NCWLI session was held in a relatively isolated location, which helped facilitate networking amongst the participants.
- The NCWLI staff provided a very helpful session on working with and responding to the media during which they conducted mock interviews with the media based on a given scenario.
- Ms. Lowry is still in contact with several of the other participants; they are a good support network for each other.

Ms. Lowry also offered some suggestions for ways in which to improve the NCWLI experience:

- The online community could be structured in a more user-friendly way.
- The initial week-long session was a good length, but the follow-up session of 3 days could be longer. Similarly, it would be helpful to see the other participants more so they can bounce ideas off each other, discuss common issues, etc.

Overall, Ms. Lowry greatly enjoyed the NCWLI experience and believes that it has helped her greatly in the Engaging Families Project. She has been able to apply the information she gained throughout the change process, including recognizing the challenges in enacting changes, looking at the big picture and process issues, and understanding that systems change may take 3–5 years to implement, if not more.

Upon receiving training from NCWLI, Ms. Lowry began an initiative to improve CYF's engagement of families in the child welfare system.

Engaging Families Project

CYF staff had discussed a shift toward additional family engagement even before Ms. Lowry attended NCWLI, but by her selecting this as her NCWLI project, it helped move the process along. Although CYF staff already include elements of family engagement in their practice, the current agency structure, which tends to be more agency-focused than family-focused, sometimes hinders these efforts. For example, in the current structure, four different program areas operate independently and often conduct assessments on families who were just assessed by a social worker in another program. Ms. Lowry's plan was to make organizational structure changes within the agency in order to remove those barriers and facilitate a more fluid and family-focused system.

Phase 1. In summer 2008, Ms. Lowry and Lura Bovee, her co-lead and a CYF Regional Manager, embarked on Phase 1 of the initiative: determining what broad changes CYF staff would like to see in order to strengthen family engagement within the agency. They established a workgroup (hereafter referred to as the Phase 1 Workgroup) to help guide this process. To staff the Phase 1 workgroup, they requested that CYF managers seek volunteers, both supervisors and frontline staff, from their teams. This workgroup had 30 members (15 line staff and 15 supervisors). The co-leads also engaged a consultant, who did not attend the workgroup meetings, to help them with the change process. The Phase 1 Workgroup met to discuss what types of changes they would like to see. The members were divided into three groups, each of which was assigned a degree of change (conservative, moderate, and far-reaching) to structure its discussion. This was done to help gather a wider range of options that might not have been brought up otherwise, but after reviewing the groups' ideas, each group had very similar recommendations. Some of the problems that the groups discussed included having too many reassessments as the families moved through the various stages, the length of time needed for investigations, the lack of trust among workers and programs, and how resource allocation has not kept up with the shifts in work (e.g., there are fewer cases in foster care, but the amount of resources allocated to that service has remained relatively constant). The Phase 1 Workgroup also sought the opinions of youth who were in the foster care system. It conducted a focus group with nine youth (aged 12–15) and asked them about their experiences in the child welfare system and what recommendations they had for ways to further engage families. The Phase 1 Workgroup presented its recommendations in December 2008. These recommendations included:

- Establishing a one-door approach (i.e., a central way to enter the system)
- Using common assessment tools
- Increasing trust between worker groups
- Reducing handoffs between caseworkers
- Reducing silos (i.e., open communication and integration of services and case planning)

In February 2009, the Phase 1 Workgroup met again to analyze the process flow of the Fairfax child welfare system (i.e., how a family would move through the system). They determined that it was difficult to find a pattern that most families followed and that the process flow was dependent on the family's circumstances.

Phase 2. After presenting its recommendations and analyzing the process flow, the Phase 1 Workgroup determined that it was time to develop a model that could put their ideas and

recommendations into practice and restructure the Division. For this next step, a new group (hereafter referred to as the Phase 2 Workgroup) was established in May 2009, to allow additional staff to join and to give current members the opportunity to continue or leave. Similarly to the Phase 1 Workgroup, this new group included the voluntary participation of both supervisors and frontline staff. The Phase 2 Workgroup had 15 members (in addition to the co-leads), including six members who also were part of the Phase 1 Workgroup. The Phase 2 Workgroup was tasked with assessing what should happen at each stage in the child welfare process and how the agency can best engage families at each stage, as well as determining what skills staff will need to accomplish this.

The Phase 2 Workgroup also conducted a benchmark study to determine if there were any existing models or elements of existing models they could use, but most of what they found was about changing a particular area of practice rather than restructuring an agency to focus on family engagement. They found one model, Points of Engagement, that was used in Los Angeles County to reorganize the system to make it more amenable to family engagement. (For more information about the Points of Engagement model, refer to http://www.chhs.ca.gov/initiatives/CACChildWelfareCouncil/Documents/SHIELDS%20Compton%20Project%20POE%20rev_Final1.doc.)

The Phase 2 Workgroup met several times in the summer and fall 2009, to discuss how to operationalize the recommendations and ideas put forth by the Phase 1 Workgroup. During a meeting in September 2009, which the author attended, the group broke into two groups to discuss their responses and thoughts about what would be needed to institute the proposed changes along the agency's work flow (intake, assessment, service delivery, service completion).

During the September meeting, the two groups separately discussed each member's thoughts, and then each group presented its recommendations to the whole team. During the discussion, there was a lot of strong, but respectful, back-and-forth among the groups, and even members within the groups. The members appeared to be very invested in the process and about the changes they were discussing. After making their presentations, the two teams noted that their plans sounded very similar to each other. Both groups assessed different ways of teaming within the agency and how best to pass cases from one worker or team to the next. They also discussed job descriptions and how to determine which worker might be able to best serve the child and family. The group was not trying to come to a resolution at this meeting about what structural changes it was going to propose; rather, the goal was to get additional ideas on the table to be further refined at future meetings.

After additional discussion and refinement of the recommendations, the consultant suggested that the next step should be developing a management plan, including leadership job descriptions. He also recommended that the CYF Management Team, which was receiving weekly Workgroup updates from the co-leads, would be the most appropriate group to take the lead on this because that would avoid having the Phase 2 Workgroup members from having to develop job descriptions for their managers. The co-leads presented this to the Phase 2 Workgroup, and the members agreed that this was the best way to proceed and seemed relieved to have the CYF Management Team take on this piece of the work.

In December 2009, the co-leads and the Management Team had a retreat to develop the management plan. This plan and the Phase 2 Workgroup's systems change recommendations were given to the Department of Family Services (DFS) director for review. After her review, the DFS director suggested that this process be merged with the Lines of Service (LOS) change

effort. The director recommended that members from the Engaging Families workgroup, the LOS teams, and additional staff work together to further refine the recommendations and address the issues identified.

Additional Systems Change Facilitators

As is the case with many other systems change efforts, there are additional facilitators bringing about change. In May 2009, the agency began its LOS process, which examined key services and identified opportunities to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness. While the process involved assessment of individual service areas (child protective services, foster care, adoption, prevention, and family preservation services), each LOS team identified cross-cutting issues for the CYF Division. Many of these issues were similar to those identified by the Engaging Families workgroup.

There also is a systems change process occurring at the State level. In December 2007, the Virginia Department of Social Services implemented the Children's Services System Transformation. The practice model for this statewide systems change effort includes some of the components being looked at in Fairfax, including family engagement and enhanced communication among partners. (For more information about the Children's Services System Transformation, see <http://vafamilyconnections.com/>.)

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred over the course of the following three meetings at Fairfax Children, Youth and Families Division (CYF) offices:

- August 27, 2009 – Meeting with Allison Lowry
- September 22, 2009 – Meeting with Ms. Lowry and Ms. Bovee
- September 24, 2009 – Attended a Phase 2 Workgroup meeting that included Ms. Lowry, Ms. Bovee, and 13 additional CYF staff

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons Learned

- Change leaders should ensure that staff values and attitudes are aligned with the proposed changes before the structural changes are implemented.
- It would have been helpful to have brought together a family focus group earlier in the process.
- Part of the reason staff got "cold feet" about the changes was that they were having difficulty accepting that their roles in the child welfare process may change.
- A big component of a systems change effort is to communicate with the community and other stakeholders about the changes to be implemented, including timelines.
- As the workgroups met for several meetings, the members dropped assumptions about other members and the group as a whole and realized that they all wanted to make changes to improve outcomes for children and families.
- In instances where new leadership has come onboard, it is important to engage them early in the systems change process and obtain their buy-in.
- Supervisors are critical to the success of any change effort.

Recommendations

- Be prepared for the change process to take longer than expected.
- Anticipate staff developing concerns about the changes, even if things appear to be going smoothly at first.
- Don't establish predetermined goals and expected outcomes or make abrupt changes without first obtaining input and feedback from staff at various levels (e.g., supervisors, line workers).
- Be judicious of families' time when asking them to participate in agency workgroups. Some meetings get mired down in internal agency issues, which might not be an appropriate use of family members' time.
- Ensure that the agency director and other leadership support the systems change process.

Challenges

- The staff had a mixed reaction to family engagement. They agreed with it in theory, but did not always see its application in practice.
- Staff continue to have anxiety around any major change.
- Staff concerns with the proposed changes tend to be staff- or agency-oriented rather than about how the changes will affect families.
- The Fairfax County Department of Family Services hired a new director in September 2008, which meant that the Engaging Families Project members needed to realign its process with the priorities of the new director.
- There are two systems change processes occurring at the same time: the Engaging Families Project and the Lines of Service analysis. As a result, the timing and alignment in merging these two change processes has sometimes been a challenge.
- During the benchmarking process, it was difficult to find other systems change models that focus on family engagement.
- The changes that they will probably propose are large-scale. Each component of the change (e.g., new assessments, family group conferencing) could be a project unto itself. As the workgroup moves forward, it will need to determine if the changes should be made as a whole or in a piecemeal manner.
- Tight county budgets may adversely affect the change process.
- The Children, Youth and Families Division is currently in the midst of several initiatives, and each of those may facilitate or hinder the change process.

Successful Strategies

- The co-leads encouraged staff to discuss their concerns about the system change process during their meetings, which helped alleviate the concerns and allow for increased openness about the process.
- Workgroup members were volunteers and could leave the group at any time. This helped ensure that people attended because they were invested in the changes and the process. It also helps prevent burnout.
- The co-leads tried to have an outcome or product (e.g., a set of recommendations) at the end of each meeting. This helps prevent "never-ending" meetings.
- The co-leads have encouraged the workgroup members to talk about the change process with staff outside of the group and be ambassadors for the effort.

- The co-leads did not define “family engagement” with the workgroups in order to keep the process more open (i.e., not confine the thought process of the members) and so they would not spend too much time discussing semantics.

OUTCOMES

As of April 2010, the Engaging Families Project has been merged in with the Department's Lines of Service process. Two new teams have been formed to address issues raised in Lines of Service and to merge the work started in the Engaging Families Project. These teams include members of Lines of Service, the Engaging Families Phase 1 and Phase 2 Workgroups, and additional staff from across all program areas in CYF who had not been part of either effort. One team is tasked with recommending a comprehensive assessment instrument to facilitate service planning and delivery to be used across the continuum for CYF families. The other team is charged with recommending a seamless service delivery model for CYF, including its process and organizational structure. The teams will report their recommendations to agency leadership in September 2010.