

Site Visit Report: Bridge to the Future

Award #: 90CO1033

Cluster: Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System Discretionary Grant Cluster

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SUMMARY

In 2007, a survey of Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) child welfare staff indicated significant concerns regarding the agency's ability to effectively meet the needs of children in out-of-home care. The most critical of these concerns was recruiting and retaining a sufficient number of qualified foster and adoptive parents. To resolve these issues, OKDHS, in collaboration with the University of Oklahoma's Center for Public Management (OUCPM), initiated the Bridge to the Future project. The project was funded as one of the Children's Bureau's eight 5-year grants in its Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System grant cluster.

The Bridge was defined as a component of the OKDHS practice model that seeks to view "practice through the eyes of the child and seeks to ensure that children in care maintain connections to their kin, culture, and community while in out of home care." There was a need for current and future Bridge Resource Families (BRFs) to be trained in the Bridge philosophy and practice to ensure a focus on permanency from the first day a child enters the child welfare system. With this in mind, improving customer service and ultimately the satisfaction of BRFs with the recruitment, approval, and ongoing support process was a primary goal of the project. Survey data indicated several issues impacting BRF satisfaction including the following:

- Many BRFs found the approval process overwhelming.
- Parent inquiries that came in through the Internet or the 1-800 number rarely resulted in application submission and included high withdrawal rates.
- Families needed access to information and training in multiple formats.
- BRFs had a low acceptance of children with medical issues, disabilities, or significantly traumatic backgrounds, including sexual or physical abuse and drug or alcohol exposure.
- Once BRFs understood what Bridge meant for the child and for them, they were willing to participate.

To address these issues, the Bridge to the Future project focused on the following activities:

- *Bridge Resource Support Center (BRSC)*. The center employs two full-time staff who have child welfare experience and are prepared to respond to Internet and phone inquiries from prospective and current BRFs from across the State. Since implementation, the BRSC has responded to more than 9,500 contacts from families, acting as an additional support to families during the approval process by conducting follow-up calls at 10 days, 30 days, and as requested. In response to these calls, over 3,000 inquiry packets have been sent to families desiring to know more about the Bridge program.



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- *Bridge Resource Family Website (BRFW)*. The website provides general information about what BRFs do, FAQs about the Bridge Family philosophy, supportive resources, forms, and news and events from around the State. Additionally, the website includes more than 20 training videos. As of December 2012, more than 2,055 trainings were registered as completed. Importantly, the website also includes the telephone number for the BRSC.
- *Training for OKDHS Staff*. Data and conversations with BRFs and staff indicated there was a significant problem with staff perception of the level of support needed for prospective and current BRFs. A 1-hour online training for all staff, *Valuing Our Resource Families*, was designed and delivered. The training plan includes pre- and posttest survey instruments, future performance appraisal surveys at 3, 6, 12, and 18 months for supervisors, interviews with supervisors assessing behavioral change, and focus groups with staff. The impact of training is currently being evaluated utilizing the Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation.

In 2009 and 2012, customer service surveys were administered to prospective BRFs. In 2009, there was only an 8 percent response rate, but in 2012 the response rate increased to 18 percent. Results indicated that there was an overall 23 percent improved customer satisfaction rate among prospective BRFs. Other responses from the surveys indicated that negative perceptions of OKDHS decreased by 7 percent, and there was a 9 percent decrease in the reported lack of knowledge of the application process or system.

Since 2011, an annual customer service satisfaction survey of current BRFs has been administered and asks questions related to how they feel about the support they are receiving from a variety of sources including the BRSC, the BRFW, and their caseworker. In 2011, the response rate was low, approximately 20 percent. By 2013, the response rate had increased to over 35 percent. In May 2013, the Bridge to the Future project received the Oklahoma Governor's Commendation of Excellence for enhancing foster and adoptive family recruitment and retention through innovative, effective, and efficient programming.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Oklahoma's Bridge to the Future" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov/>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

In 2008, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS), in collaboration with the University of Oklahoma's Center for Public Management (OUCPM), initiated the Bridge to the Future project. It was funded as one of the Children's Bureau's eight 5-year grants in its Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System grant cluster. Project efforts targeted improved outcomes for children statewide by designing, implementing, and evaluating innovative recruitment and retention strategies for foster/adoptive parents. To support these efforts, partnerships were established with the OKDHS, Office of Volunteerism, Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, Project 1-1-1, and the Oklahoma Tribal community. The OKDHS Office of Planning, Research and Statistics served as the project evaluator.

In May 2013, the Bridge to the Future project received the Oklahoma Governor's Commendation of Excellence for enhancing foster and adoptive family recruitment and retention through innovative, effective, and efficient programming.

Need for This Service

In 2007, a survey of OKDHS child welfare staff indicated significant concerns regarding the agency's ability to effectively meet the needs of children in out-of-home care. These concerns

included a shortage of foster care placements, particularly those within a reasonable proximity to the child's family and community, and the ability to match children with foster/adoptive parents who could meet children's specific needs. Additionally, based on information in the OKDHS Bridge to the Future proposal, the Bridge was defined as a component of the OKDHS practice model that seeks to view "practice through the eyes of the child and seeks to ensure that children in care maintain connections to their kin, culture, and community while in out of home care." There was a need for current and future resource parents to be trained in the Bridge philosophy and practice to ensure a focus on permanency from the first day a child enters the child welfare system.

In an effort to support ongoing recruitment of enough Bridge Resource Families (BRFs) who are able and willing to meet the needs of children entering foster care in Oklahoma, the Bridge to the Future project worked toward five goals:

- Implement customer service interventions with staff
- Increase core skills and capabilities of resource families, community partners, and child welfare staff through training
- Implement systematic process improvements to increase program recruitment and retention and expedite the completion of the approval process
- Collaborate and continue to develop public/private partnerships
- Integrate grant initiatives with other existing grants, projects, and recruitment activities throughout the State to insure system change and sustainability¹

In grant Year 1, the Bridge to the Future project conducted intensive data collection and analyses in order to more comprehensively understand the characteristics of children in care, the current pool of available BRFs, and the types of resources families needed based on current case trends. Data gathering was done via surveys and focus groups and used to inform an assessment of system strengths and barriers impacting recruitment and retention of resource families. Additionally, data was analyzed to explore how a customer services model may be used to enhance collaboration and respond more effectively to the needs of current and prospective resource families. Finally, data was used to inform development of training materials for both staff and foster/resource parents.

Grant Years 2–5 focused on the implementation of a series of systemic interventions driven by the belief that satisfied resource families are the agency's best recruiters and should be supported and empowered to recruit new BRFs on behalf of foster children who need permanency. These interventions included:

- Developing a rapid response center called the Bridge Resource Support Center (BRSC)
- Enhancing the Bridge Family Website (BRFW)
- Designing and delivering new trainings for staff and families
- Contracting for translation services
- Conducting intense process improvement focused on understanding barriers to effective recruitment and retention

Bridge to the Future project activities are described around three primary areas:

Process Improvements

The most critical issue identified in the Bridge to the Future grant proposal was recruiting and retaining a sufficient number of qualified foster/adoptive parents. In order to understand and quickly improve BRF recruitment and retention, OKDHS undertook a process improvement effort

¹ Rios, S. & Poteet, K. (2013, June). Bridge to the Future. Workshop presentation at the National Foster care Association Conference.

using LEAN/Six Sigma methodology. LEAN/Six Sigma are methodologies for eliminating waste and errors from processes in an effort to gain efficiencies and improve customer service.

Tulsa County was identified as a pilot site and data related to BRF experiences navigating the approval process was gathered via focus groups and surveys with staff and families. Problem areas that were identified included issues with communication and support for families as they moved through the approval process. Rapid Improvement Events (RIE) were held first in Tulsa County and later in rural counties in the southwest region of the State with the goal of making the application and referral process easier and friendlier for families interested in becoming BRFs (preresource families).

A Resource Approval Process Team (RAPT) was formed and conducted root cause analysis² and value stream mapping³ of the approval process, customer service, and communication tools, using data from KIDS⁴. The RAPT found that there were 87–226 days of non-value added time in the BRF approval process, and 61 percent of prospective BRFs were dissatisfied with the process. Of the families that dropped out of the approval process, 18 percent did so because of frustration due to inconsistent communication, a lack of knowledge and understanding of the system, and feeling overwhelmed by the process.

In response to this data, changes were made to the approval process. In order to enhance communication, the following products were developed to be used with prospective BRFs:

- The Oklahoma *Answering the Call* packet that contains a letter from the OKDHS Child Welfare Director
- *A Top 10 Things You Can Do for a Foster Child*
- *A Steps in the Process* list
- *A Resource Parent Application Checklist* (identifies names OKDHS forms)

To enhance satisfaction with the approval process, both timeliness and support for BRFs were improved. The home study process was identified as a key opportunity to build a positive relationship between the agency and prospective BRFs. This process was revised to include more thorough communication upfront between workers and foster/adoptive parents. Additional improvements included reviewing and managing the flow of application materials—including deadlines for resolving missing information—and assisting with costs of medical exams was made available. In terms of timeliness, shifts in the application process were made in several areas as follows:

- Decreasing response time to families with a high level of readiness
- Revising the approval process to manage some steps concurrently or in an accelerated fashion
- Setting criteria for rapid approval of certain prospective BRF
- Offering an expedited training process
- Developing an electronic application

In response to the RIEs and RAPTs, Tulsa County restructured resource staffing units responsible for foster/adoptive parent recruitment and implemented a series of improvements, including the following:

² Root Cause Analysis is a Lean Six Sigma methodology used for problem solving that helps to identify the root causes of issues or problems.

³ Value Stream Mapping is a Lean Six Sigma technique used to assist in analysis and design of workflow required to provide services to a customer.

⁴ KIDS is Oklahoma's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System.

- Created the Productivity, Accountability, Customer Service, Efficiency, and Safety (PACES) program management reports that establish actions, goals, and desired outcomes for the recruitment and retention of BRFs
- Established accountability mechanisms to monitor progress, which included conducting random customer service quality checks and providing caseworker and supervisors' contact information on inquiry packets

Customer Service

A core belief of the Bridge to the Future project is that "satisfied resource families are often the best recruiters." With this in mind, improving customer service and ultimately the satisfaction of BRFs with the recruitment, approval, and ongoing support process was targeted. Survey data indicated several issues impacting BRF satisfaction that were under the control of the agency to improve, including the following:

- Many BRFs found the approval process overwhelming.
- Parent inquiries that came in through the Internet or the 1-800 number rarely resulted in application submission and included high withdrawal rates.
- Families needed access to information and training in multiple formats.
- BRFs had a low acceptance of children with medical issues, disabilities, or significantly traumatic backgrounds, including sexual or physical abuse and drug or alcohol exposure.
- Once BRFs understood what Bridge meant for the child and for them, they were willing to participate.

With these issues in mind, the Bridge to the Future project focused the following activities:

- Establishing the Bridge Resource Support Center
- Developing a comprehensive Bridge Resource Family website
- Developing, delivering, and evaluating training for staff and BRFs

Bridge Resource Support Center (BRSC). In partnership with the University of Oklahoma, Center for Public Management (OUCPM), OKDHS established the BRSC in February 2010. The BRSC has two full-time staff with previous child welfare experience who are prepared to respond to Internet and phone inquiries from prospective and current BRFs from across the State. The BRSC is available Monday–Friday from 8:00 a. m. to 5:00 p.m. Since implementation, the BRSC has responded to more than 9,500 contacts from families, acting as an additional support to families during the approval process by conducting follow-up calls at 10 days, 30 days, and as requested. Bridge Resource Center staff enter information related to inquiries directly into KIDS, supporting improved communication between the agency, OKDHS staff, and BRFs. Phone calls received from BRFs typically focus on inquiries about becoming a BRF, payments, and policies. In response to these calls, over 3,000 inquiry packets have been sent to families desiring to know more about the Bridge program.

Bridge Resource Family Website (BRFW). As part of the Bridge to the Future project, the existing web portal for foster/adoptive parents was enhanced based on data gathered during the Year 1 planning process and RIEs. The updated site, www.okbridgefamilies.com, was launched in 2011 and provides general information about what BRFs do, FAQs about the Bridge Family philosophy, supportive resources, forms, and news and events from around the State. Additionally, the website includes more than 20 training topics and videos, including the following:

- *Bridge Family Orientation*
- *Intentional Visitation*
- *Psychotropic Medications*

- *Legal Processes*
- *Handbook/Contract*
- *Trauma Informed Care*
- *Journey to Adoption*
- *Sibling Connections*

Training and videos also are available on DVD and kept up to date in terms of State laws, policies, and best practices. As of December 2012, more than 2,055 trainings were registered as completed. Importantly, the website also includes the telephone number for the BRSC.

Training for OKDHS Staff. Data and conversations with BRFs and staff indicated there was a significant problem with staff perceptions of the level of support needed for prospective and current BRFs. Through REIs and RAPT's, a comprehensive strategy for developing a customer service philosophy among OKDHS child welfare staff emerged. A 1-hour online training for all staff, *Valuing Our Resource Families*, was designed and delivered and included a set of clearly defined objectives:

- Understanding that excellent customer services is important to OKDHS families
- Developing an understanding of why BRFs are hard to retain
- Improving knowledge about who BRFs are and how to help them
- Sharing results of research, surveys, and focus groups that describe the needs and perceptions of BRFs
- Overcoming common misconceptions about families revealed from the research
- Discussing 11 "How To" tips to provide first-rate customer service
- Exploring examples of great customer service

The impact of training is currently being evaluated utilizing the Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation⁵. The training plan includes pre- and posttest survey instruments, future performance appraisal surveys at 3, 6, 12, and 18 months for supervisors, interviews with supervisors assessing behavioral change, and focus groups with staff. It is anticipated that training evaluation results will be included in the project's final report.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruiting and retaining enough BRFs who are able and willing to meet the needs of Oklahoma's children was the primary goal of the Bridge to the Future project. With support of key partners, OKDHS undertook a multipronged approach to expanding the number of BRFs. This included:

- Strengthening partnerships with faith-based organizations
- Assessing and expanding the use of social media for recruitment
- Engaging in a market segmentation analysis to target recruitment

Faith-Based Partnerships. With support from the OKDHS Office of Volunteerism, Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, several faith-based partners, such as Christian Services, Angels Foster Care, Anna's House, the Spero Project, and church leadership from various congregations worked to expand BRF recruitment statewide. The [1-1-1 Project](#) (1 Church, 1 Family, 1 Purpose), which has a chapter in Oklahoma, played a key role in using innovative approaches to recruiting foster/adoptive parents to become Bridge Resource Families. For example, Oklahoma and Tulsa are the two counties that have the most removals of children statewide. In collaboration with OKDHS, the 1-1-1 Project committed to recruit, train, and support foster families in both counties and engage leaders of places of worship to address the need for resource homes in impactful

⁵ The Kirkpatrick Model of Evaluation is an approach to evaluating training program effectiveness and includes four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results.

and lasting ways. Multiple events and conferences were sponsored, including a May 2012 bus tour with more than a dozen pastors and their wives that generated positive media attention, increased public awareness, and provided participants with information they could take back to their faith communities. Conferences were also held by the 1-1-1 Project in Norman and Tulsa, which generated commitments from 80 churches across the State to recruit BRFs from their congregations. A data-sharing agreement was also established between the 1-1-1 Project and OKDHS that has allowed the collection of information from potential resource families in order to support better communication about and identify potential challenges with the BRF approval process and retention practices.

Market Segmentation. With assistance from a market research firm and the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, consumer marketing and KIDS data was collected and analyzed to inform and develop a plan for targeting BRF recruitment efforts. Definitions of "successful families" and "removals" were created and used to frame the exploration of the location of BRFs, including the density of where they reside and corresponding service availability.

Social Media. Oklahoma requested and received technical assistance from the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment and AdoptUSKids regarding the use of social media for targeted recruitment. The primary focus was on strategies for using Facebook and Twitter to expand the reach of the BRF message.

Recruitment Tools. Developing Oklahoma's *Answering the Call* family pocket guide was a major effort intended to improve BRF customer satisfaction by improving information about the approval process. Other tools developed in both English and Spanish to enhance recruitment of BRFs included the following:

- *Bridge Resource Families: Strengthening Families*
- *Bridge Resource Families: Helping Children Stay Connected*
- *Nurturing a Sibling Connection: For Tribal Children*
- *Nurturing a Sibling Connection: For Oklahoma Teens*
- *OKDHS Guiding Principles*
- *A Day in the Life of a Child Welfare Worker*
- *We Built Our own Extended Family (a letter from the child's birth family)*
- *A Day in the Life of a Bridge Family*
- *How Bridge Resource Families help the Child Welfare Worker*
- *A Letter from a Child in the Foster Care System (explaining more about the Bridge program)*

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred on April 4, 2013. The agenda for the day included attendance at the Bridge to the Future monthly leadership meeting in Norman, OK, and a visit to the Bridge Resource Support Center at the Center for Public Management on the University of Oklahoma campus.

The monthly Bridge Leadership Team meeting was led by the project manager and attended by statewide project partners, representatives from the Children's Bureau (CB), and members from CB's Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Network (see below). During the meeting, the project manager and project evaluator gave a PowerPoint presentation regarding project activities to date and data collected. The project evaluator facilitated a conversation focused on assessment of project activities, challenges, and successes to inform the development of the Year 5 Project Final Report to the Children's Bureau. The site visitor met with the following people:

- Karen Poteet, Project Manager, Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS)

- Shannon J. Rios, Ph.D., Programs Administrator, Office of Planning, Research and Statistics, OKDHS, Project Evaluator
- Dana Huckabee, Child Welfare Program Specialist, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Region 6
- Rita Hart, Oklahoma DHS Child Welfare State Tribal Liaison
- Vince Deberry, University of Oklahoma, Center for Public Management
- Representatives from the National Resource Center for Youth Services (NRCYS)
- Attendees at the Bridge Leadership Team meeting included representatives from the OKDHS:
 - Therapeutic Foster Unit
 - Foster Care Unit
 - Adoption Unit
 - Regional staff from across the State from both:
 - Child Protection
 - Permanency Planning
- Continuous Quality Improvement Unit
- Office of Communications, Design Services
- Office of Community Engagement

The site visitor conducted three interviews with the project manager via telephone between February 11, 2013, and June 13, 2013. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and included the following topics:

- Impetus to the development of the project
- Project successes
- Project challenges
- Project sustainability
- Site visit planning

The site visitor also reviewed, the project's annual and semiannual reports for the reporting periods of:

- October 1, 2008– March 31, 2009 (Performance Progress Report)
- October 1, 2008– September 30, 2009 (Performance Narrative)
- October 1, 2009–March 31, 2010 (Year 2, QTR 1 Evaluation Activities narrative)
- October 1, 2009–September 30, 2010 (Program Narrative)
- Reporting Period End Date September 30, 2010 (Performance Progress Report)
- April 1, 2011–September 30, 2011 (Performance Narrative)

In addition, information was obtained from PowerPoints used by project staff when presenting to various audiences:

- Presentation at the 2008 Children's Bureau Grantee Kick-Off meeting (November 20 and 21, 2008)
- Presentation to the Oklahoma House of Representatives (September 28, 2010)
- Presentation to the Bridge Project Leadership Committee (April 4, 2013)
- Presentation at the National Foster Care Conference (June 7, 2013)

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

The Bridge to the Future project included several innovative features including:

- **Bridge Resource Support Center (BRSC):** An early achievement of the Bridge to the Future project was establishing a statewide centralized support center for prospective and current Bridge Resources Families (BRFs). Recognizing the need for a strong customer service capacity to enhance recruitment and retention, Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) partnered with University of Oklahoma, Center for Public Management (OUCPM) to create and staff the BRSC. The role of BRSC staff is to respond to informational and support needs of prospective and current foster/adoptive parents in a thorough and timely manner via telephone, Internet, or mail. BRSC staff conduct outreach to families during the approval process at planned periodic intervals (10 days and 30 days) and also provide follow-up support as often as needed. All contacts with families are recorded in KIDS, supporting consistency in communication between OKDHS staff and families. This proactive approach has strengthened messaging of the Bridge philosophy and improved customer satisfaction among both new and current BRFs.
- **Bridge Resource Family Website (BRFW):** In 2011, the existing web portal was significantly expanded to more comprehensively respond to BRF's informational and support needs. The [BRFW](#) now contains extensive resources for BRFs and families considering becoming foster or adoptive parents. These include news and events from across the State, online training available 24/7, informational videos, FAQs about the Bridge philosophy, and required forms. In 2012, the BRFW received 52,837 hits, a 600 percent increase from 2010 to 2012. A 2012 evaluation found that 75 percent of respondents found the website easy to navigate and over 90 percent found information on the BRFW easy to understand. Sections on family basics, training, support, and resources were found to be most helpful and all respondents stated that they would use the BRFW again.
- **Evaluation Partnership:** Formative and summative evaluations are becoming routine activities within human service organizations and Federal projects. A primary goal of evaluation is to maintain objectivity while providing useful formative data gathering and analysis to promote effective implementation. To accomplish evaluation activities, child welfare jurisdictions often partner with external evaluators both because agency staff lack necessary evaluation skills and experience, and to maintain objectivity. When working with external partners, challenges to evaluation efforts can include timely data sharing, sufficient budgets, and mixing organizational cultures. An innovative feature of the Bridge to the Future project is the evaluation partnership between the OKDHS and the Office of Planning, Research, and Statistics (OPRS), which eliminated these challenges and promoted enhanced usage of data to drive decision-making throughout child welfare. OPRS staff have extensive experience conducting both formative and summative evaluation in human services. Because the OPRS functions within the umbrella of the State human service agency, the evaluation team has ready access to and experience with child welfare data including KIDS, but is able to maintain objectivity as they operate outside of the child welfare services operational and reporting structure. OPRS staff also understands the culture of the child welfare agency and have established relationships that helped fast-track data collection and process improvement. Finally, having evaluation capacity within OKDHS reduces costs and allows resources to be dedicated to other project activities.
- **Process Improvement:** Through their partnership with OKDHS, OPRS, the Bridge to the Future project engaged in an intense process improvement effort using the LEAN/Six Sigma methodology. Specific process improvement activities included:
 - Data gathered from KIDS and surveys and focus groups with staff, families, and stakeholders across the State were analyzed.

- Rapid Improvement Events (RIEs) that involved root cause analysis and value mapping addressing issues such as communication between OKDHS staff and between OKDHS and BRFs.
- Resource Approval Process Teams (RAPTs) focused on understanding barriers in the approval process and issues in customer service and making recommendations about potential solutions.

As a result, substantive changes were made in communication materials for prospective and current BRFs, the process and timeliness for home studies, application completion and approval, and expanded and expedited trainings. A larger success of process improvement activities was significant growth in OKDHS staffs' and partners' understanding and appreciation of data-driven decision-making. Through the use of LEAN/Six Sigma in the Bridge to the Future project, a culture change at OKDHS has occurred in terms of expectations for transparency, accountability, and data-driven analysis of challenges and solution building. Further, process improvement was integrated throughout the OKDHS Pinnacle Plan⁶ as a key strategy for driving and monitoring progress.

Challenges

- **Project staff hiring and turnover:** In the first 2 years of the grant period, the Bridge to the Future project had challenges establishing and maintaining sufficient project staffing. Initially, hiring for key staff positions such as the first project manager and data analyst was delayed several months. Staffing issues were resolved in years 3 and 4 with the hiring of a project director with extensive agency knowledge and experience in successfully managing multiyear Federal grants. After the Bridge Resource Support Center was established, there were challenges recruiting and maintaining qualified staff. The OUCPM eventually hired and retained BRSC staff that brought child welfare experience and OKDHS system knowledge to their roles.
- **Establishing and maintaining project leadership:** A steering committee for the Bridge to the Future project was initially formed with members of an agency practice model group responsible for developing the Bridge philosophy. As project activities moved forward, this steering committee was expanded to include project staff and leaders from partner organizations and was renamed the Bridge Leadership Team. The team struggled to maintain consistent communication in the first 2 years because members were not colocated. To address the issue, a new group was formed to attend to project communication. A collaborative web-based program was set up to facilitate sharing of project materials among all committee members simultaneously, and monthly Bridge Leadership Team meetings were held for the duration of the project.
- **State agency reorganization:** During the project period, OKDHS underwent numerous organizational changes driven by State budget constraints and settlement of class action litigation. The settlement included development and implementation of the Oklahoma Pinnacle Plan. In 2012, as part of this plan, an agency restructuring of field and program operations began at both the State and county levels. OKDHS staffing units directly involved with BRF recruitment and retention were reorganized and a shift to privatizing foster care recruitment was initiated.

Other Lessons Learned

- Establish a project leadership team early and attend to maintenance of key project relationships and communication throughout the life of the project.

⁶ The Oklahoma Pinnacle Plan is a 5-year plan for improving child welfare services in Oklahoma developed as a result of a class action, civil rights lawsuit against the State's foster care system.

- LEAN/Six Sigma is an effective methodology for planning and implementing change in child welfare organizations and can promote a culture of data-driven decision-making, transparency, and accountability.
- Data from Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) systems can be useful for analyzing administrative and organizational processes, developing solutions, and tracking progress.
- Compared to an external evaluation partner, an evaluator who operates within an organization that is jurisdictionally related to the child welfare agency can greatly enhance timely and robust use of data and an expanded ability for both formative and summative evaluation, while maintaining objectivity and keeping costs down.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation/Outcomes

Through an interdepartmental partnership, evaluation activities for the Bridge to the Future project are carried out by staff from the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS), Office of Planning, Research, and Statistics (OPRS). A project Data/Evaluation Team meets monthly to plan and discuss data collection, evaluation, and dissemination issues. Throughout the project, data has been collected via surveys, focus groups, and interviews with staff, families, and stakeholders, as well as mining of the OKDHS KIDS⁷ system. Efforts have included establishing a baseline of data on which to assess progress and gathering and analyzing data on a continuous basis to inform project activities and implementation.

Some major data collection activities have included:

- Mining of OKDHS KIDS to extract preresource family approval data (n=1,357) from Tulsa County to understand potential reasons for families withdrawing from the application process
- Conducting a Communication Assessment with OKDHS staff (n=1,098) to understand systemic communication strengths and challenges
- Conducting 11 focus groups with families and staff to understand perceptions of customer service and need for staff training
- Developing a phone script for BRSC to use to collect data about parents who withdraw from the approval process
- Implementing a statewide Child Welfare Supervisor survey to understand the extent to which their county implements the various components of Bridge in their daily work (n=74)
- Conducting a survey of Child Welfare County Directors (n=35) to understand their plan for targeted recruitment and retention of foster parents
- Administering a brief event evaluation survey, developed in partnership with AdoptUSKids and the National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, to determine the success of a county-level recruitment planning event

Outcomes

A core belief of OKDHS generated through the Bridge to the Future project is that satisfied BRFs are the best recruiters for new foster and adoptive parents. Therefore, a key area of evaluative activities has been assessing changes in the reported customer satisfaction of prospective and current BRFs.

⁷ KIDS is Oklahoma's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System.

In 2009 and 2012, customer service surveys were administered to prospective BRFs who were listed as preresource families in the KIDS database within the preceding 12 months. In 2009, there was only an 8 percent response rate, but in 2012 the response rate increased to 18 percent. Results indicated that there was an overall 23 percent improved customer satisfaction rate among prospective BRFs. Other responses from the surveys indicated that negative perceptions of OKDHS decreased by 7 percent, and there was a 9 percent decrease in the reported lack of knowledge of the application process or system.

Additionally, there was improved timeliness and reduced frustration with the approval process including the following:

- A 14 percent increase in initial follow-ups within less than 1 week
- A 9 percent decrease in the number of individuals who inquired and were still waiting to hear back from OKDHS
- A 24 percent increase in the number of individuals perceiving no obstacles to becoming a foster parent
- A 13 percent increase in the number of individuals perceiving no weaknesses in the OKDHS resources family approval process

Since 2011, an annual customer service satisfaction survey of current BRFs has been administered and asks questions related to how they feel about the support they are receiving from a variety of sources including the BRSC, the BRFW, and their caseworker. In 2011, the response rate was low, approximately 20 percent. By 2013, the response rate had increased to over 35 percent.

The following results from the 2013 survey indicated that of those who interacted with the BRSC:

- Just over 79 percent of respondents stated their questions were answered to their satisfaction.
- About 78 percent felt BRC specialists had the knowledge to answer questions.
- More than 79 percent said they would contact BRSC in the future.

There was an 11 percent increase in the number of families using the BRFW, and there was broad improvement in current BRF satisfaction related to interactions with their worker. This included a 6 percent increase in the number of BRFs stating they consistently felt respected by their assigned workers and a 10 percent increase in BRFs stating their relationship with their resource worker was consistently positive. There was also a 6 percent increase in those stating they felt they regularly functioned as a team with their assigned workers.

In general, the number of BRFs responding that their overall customer service experience is excellent/good increased by 7 percent from 2011 to 2013.

Permanency outcomes for youth have not yet been evaluated. Due to the significant OKDHS organizational changes during the project period, it may be difficult to draw specific connections between changes in permanency outcomes and activities of the Bridge to the Future project.

Sustainability

Sustainability is often the greatest concern when designing and implementing innovative strategies. During the Bridge to the Future grant period, class action litigation against OKDHS was settled and the result was the State's Pinnacle Plan, which fully incorporates all of the major elements of the Bridge to the Future project including:

- Bridge Resource Support Center

- Enhanced website to support BRFs
- Expanded trainings for staff and families
- Data-driven process improvement

The Bridge philosophy and expanded strategies to recruit and retain BRFs that are able and willing to meet the individual needs of Oklahoma's children have become formally integrated into OKDHS policy, procedures, and practice.

ATTACHMENTS

- [Rios, S. & Poteet, K. \(2013, June\). Bridge to the Future. Workshop presentation at the National Foster Care Association Conference.](#)