

Title: Safe Families Coalition, the Community-Based Care Program Serving Sarasota, DeSoto, and Manatee Counties in Florida; Site Visit Report

Grantee: Sarasota Family YMCA, Inc.

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SUMMARY

To meet its goal of increasing leadership skills of mid-level managers in public and Tribal child welfare agencies, the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) provided leadership training in regional settings to mid-level managers from across the country, including four members of the management team of the Sarasota YMCA Safe Families Coalition (the Coalition), a Community-Based Care (CBC) program serving three Florida counties. As one of the State's 22 CBC Lead Agencies, the Coalition manages subcontracts for case management services with three private agencies. Coalition managers participated in the leadership training with two goals in mind:

- Building stronger relationships with their case management agencies in an effort to improve performance
- Improving community connections to reflect a true CBC model

At the time the leadership training began, the Coalition was undergoing downsizing and reorganization. A new management team had been put in place, and that team realized how the organization had moved away from the CBC model. The team members decided to pursue their goals of strengthening collaborative efforts and communication connections through a system change initiative that was aided by the NCWLI leadership training.

As part of the NCWLI program, the four managers participated in two offsite training events and two implementation phases to pursue their system change goals. As a result of the training, the managers were able to fine-tune the initial system change concept and to identify achievable measures for documenting progress and assessing effectiveness of the initiative. They employed a variety of implementation strategies, including peer reviews, in-service training, discussions of performance measures, consensus building, internal case reviews, tracking systems, monthly management reports, and benchmarks.

Collaboration with the case management agencies increased through the system change initiative. In addition, the monthly reports revealed that performance standards for child safety improved significantly as a result of the system change. Improvements were also seen in the percentage of children reunified within 12 months and in other areas. The likelihood of sustainability of these changes is high because of support from management in the YMCA and case management agencies, the improved performance measures, and the initiative's low cost.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Leadership Institute Training Improves Child Safety" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract (*adapted from information and materials provided by project staff*)

With the exception of child protective services (CPS) investigations, all child welfare services in Florida have been privatized. Investigations are conducted by State Department of Children and

Families (DCF) staff in some counties and by staff of the sheriff's departments in other counties. All other child welfare services are provided through contract with DCF by 22 Community-Based Care (CBC) organizations throughout the State of Florida, some serving one county and others serving multiple counties. The Sarasota YMCA Safe Children Coalition, serving Sarasota, Manatee, and DeSoto counties, is the Lead Agency of one of those CBCs. As the Lead Agency, it subcontracts case management services with three private providers, Manatee Glens, Youth and Family Alternatives, and Family Preservation Services.

It is because of the privatization of services in Florida and the Coalition's contractual relationship with DCF that four representatives from the Coalition had the opportunity to participate in the NCWLI training. Participants were Monique Myers, Director of Child Welfare Operations, and three Child Welfare Specialists: Lucia Branton, Alexander Kamberis, and Dara Palmieri. While each member of the team developed his/her individual system change initiative as a part of the NCWLI experience, each of those individual change initiatives was targeted toward the same overarching goals:

- Building strong relationships with the three case management agencies in an effort to improve performance
- Improving community connections to return to a true CBC model

These goals were to be accomplished through improved communication and collaboration between the Lead Agency and the case management agencies and through increased visibility, transparency, and accountability in the community. The individual initiatives were as follows:

- As Director of Child Welfare Operations, Ms. Myers's change initiative was to reestablish community ties from the management level and to make Child Welfare Specialists visible in the community to enhance credibility and accountability in their local CBC service model. Open communication and improved responsiveness to foster/adoptive parents, clients, providers, Coalition staff and community stakeholders were among the strategies.
- Ms. Branton's initiative was to improve the quality of case management services so that they focus on the individual needs of each family and its children. She wanted to see an end of "cookie-cutter" case plans and a renewed emphasis on building on family strengths.
- Mr. Kamberis's focus was on working cooperatively with the case management agencies, shifting to a collaborative rather than a top-down management model, thus fostering a problem-solving, solution-oriented approach both within the Coalition and with community partners.
- Ms. Palmieri's approach was to take on the responsibility for identifying and obtaining community resources, to get back to the community to find out what it has to offer, and to provide support and networking with the community to streamline access to services and resources for families and children served by the Coalition.

Goals of Project

Participation in NCWLI programs is intended to increase the leadership skills of mid-level managers in public and Tribal child welfare agencies and to build the human capital needed to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families in those systems. Trainees develop an understanding of the requirements for successful system change, which include accepting the need for change, understanding what and how to change, committing to and practicing change, and finally applying, monitoring, and institutionalizing the change. Trainees enhance their leadership skills to succeed in their current environment and to be prepared to lead their

agencies in the future as that environment changes. These enhanced skills encourage productive and effective relationships within the immediate work setting and within the broader child and family services system. Trainees also learn evidence-based management skills that are associated with personal and organizational success.

This report is of a site visit to the multicounty system change project implemented by Florida's participants in the NCWLI training:

Need for This Service (*adapted from information and materials provided by project staff*)

At the time the team went to the NCWLI training, the Safe Children Coalition was undergoing downsizing and reorganization, and a new management team had been put in place. The new management realized the extent to which the organization had moved away from the Community-Based Care model, both internally and externally. They recognized the lack of collaboration with their case management agencies and their partner agencies and organizations in the communities they serve, and they wanted to move back in the direction of "involving the community in raising its children."

As one of the team members described it, "We had become a privatized entity delivering services, not a community-driven, engaged partnership dedicated to the improvement of our service area."

They also recognized the top-down approach to management and the lack of a true partnership with their subcontracting case management agencies. Leadership in the case management agencies had not been brought into the mission of the CBC, nor had they been made aware of the performance measures they and the CBC contract were being evaluated on. The new management of the Coalition wanted to start sitting down with the case management agencies to solve problems rather than continuing to make decisions at the top level and hand down edicts to the frontline. Not only did they want to start helping those agencies understand *why* they were being asked to do something a certain way rather than just *telling* them to do it, they also wanted to involve them in looking for ways to do it better. They believed that improving relationships within the Coalition and with the community would result in improved outcomes for families and children.

The management team, therefore, had a system reform initiative in place when they went to the NCWLI training. They then used the skills they developed and the tools they gathered through that training to improve that initiative, making it broader and multifaceted, with multiple internal and external strategies for achieving the desired outcomes.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred on October 19 through October 22, 2009, and included meetings and events in both Sarasota and Manatee counties designed to highlight for the visitor the Coalition's emphasis on and strategies for improved communication and collaboration with case management agencies and the movement toward empowering those agencies:

- *Meetings with the NCWLI participants, individually and as a team:* During these meetings, the team members discussed the NCWLI training experience, the impact it has had on them individually and as a team, and the way the experience has influenced their system change initiative, an initiative that had already begun when they attended the training.

- *Observation of a Tri-County Continuous Quality Improvement Committee meeting in Sarasota:* This meeting was chaired by the Director of Quality Management and Training and was attended by management and representatives from the Lead Agency as well as from each of the case management agencies.
 - Members of the Quality Management and Training office reported on a peer review tool that is being developed. They are ready to provide training on the tool to supervisors. The Manatee Glens director shared how peer review is resulting in increased reunifications in their agency. The process forces a focus on reunification and results in more quality supervision.
 - The Director of Child Welfare Operations suggested looking for ways to tie quality improvement findings to staff development. "Let's not just ask case management agencies for corrective action plans but share findings and put supports such as in-service training in place first."
 - DCF's Contract Monitoring Tool/Performance Measures were distributed and discussed. (It is important to note that previously the case management agencies had not been apprised of the performance measures on which they were being evaluated.)
 - The Coalition's At-a-Glance Statistical Report for September was shared and reviewed. This is a very detailed monthly report that highlights statistical and programmatic trends for the Coalition as a whole and by case management agency on an ongoing basis.
 - The chairperson shared and reviewed the new DCF Quality Improvement Plan template with the group. This is a 60-page report that must be completed quarterly by the Quality Management and Training Office and submitted to DCF. She asked for ongoing assistance from the meeting attendees with this task.
 - A meeting participant from one of the case management agencies reported that, when given advance notice by the case manager, one of the State's prisons is now arranging access to a phone for incarcerated parents so they will be able to participate in case planning conferences.
- *Observation of Multidisciplinary Mental Health Team case reviews in Bradenton (Manatee County):* The purpose of these staffings is to determine whether the current level of care the child or youth is receiving continues to be the least restrictive and most appropriate level.
- *Observation of case review and permanency staffings in both Sarasota and Bradenton:* These staffings are attended by family members, agency attorneys, parents and their attorneys, the child or youth as age-appropriate, guardians *ad litem* (GALs), case managers and their supervisors, and community providers who may be involved with the families. The purpose is to review the child's permanency plan and to determine whether it continues to be appropriate.
- *Observation of Early Service Intervention (ESI) case transfer staffings in Sarasota:* Cases ready for transfer from the CPS investigator to the CBC for continuing services are reviewed in detail at these meetings, which are attended by the agency attorney, the Child Protective Investigator, the case manager who will receive the case and the supervisor, community providers, etc. Cases are reviewed, and the investigator briefs the new case manager on what they *need* to know and what will be *helpful* to know in working with the family.
- *Observation of a Tri-County Training Committee planning meeting in Sarasota:* The Training Committee includes staff representation from each of the case management agencies as well as from the Lead Agency. The meeting was facilitated by a representative from the Quality Management and Training Office, which is planning a

new and expanded training agenda for the upcoming year. Case managers who were present were asked for their ideas and input in this planning.

- *Observation of a 2-hour community meeting of the Tri-County Family Safety Alliance in Manatee County:* The Family Safety Alliance is legislatively mandated in Florida and is charged with identifying community needs and advocating for the resources to meet those needs, as well as with providing oversight of the CBCs. Membership includes representatives of the Board of Education, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Sheriff's Department Child Protective Investigation Units, GALs, county government, as well as community advocates, a previous Foster Care Association President, and an adoptive parent. There were 24 Alliance members at the table conducting business at this meeting, with 9 Coalition representatives and other community stakeholders, as well as the site visitor, on the sidelines observing. The Director of Child Welfare Operations and the Director of Quality Management and Training from the Lead Agency represent the Coalition on the Alliance. They shared and discussed the Coalition's monthly management report and the statistical and programmatic trends that it reveals for the Coalition as a whole and by case management agency. Shelter care data, multiple placement data, and the results of drug screens of parents were among the data sets highlighted. Alliance members asked if the absence of service interventions was contributing to multiple placements. If so, they will advocate for those services, indicating a significant level of support for the Coalition and its work. The second hour of the meeting was devoted to a presentation to the group on the GAL program. The presentation was made by the Circuit Director of the program.

Each of the observed staffings described above was facilitated by a Lead Agency Child Welfare Specialist who had access to a computer and was documenting the process as it occurred. The facilitators, each of whom is a seasoned child welfare professional, were also role modeling for and teaching and coaching the case management staff, as well as offering support and encouragement, throughout the staffing process.

LESSONS LEARNED

The NCWLI participants reported learning a number of personal lessons through the training experience:

- I learned of my own limitations and that I often did not follow through with promises I had made or plans I had developed. Since NCWLI, I follow through and am more organized.
- I learned about the importance of adaptive work in any change initiative. People need to understand what they are being asked to do and why they are being asked to do it. They must also be involved in examining how we can do it better as a system of care.
- I became more aware of the importance of how I use myself in my professional interactions. The way I look, the words I choose, and the way I communicate are a very important part of the change process.
- NCWLI provided me with the tools necessary to take the steps and look ahead at what the reactions would be and how to go about improving relationships with case management agencies. For example, one of the things I did when I returned from the training was to meet with the program managers and try to get buy-in on my goals. I learned that without their support and shared vision, we would not be able to move forward and initiate the change through the line staff.

Unique and Innovative Features

- The four members of the Sarasota YMCA Safe Families Coalition who participated in the NCWLI Training each developed their own system change initiative. Yet, each of those initiatives targets the same goal—improved relationships with the case management agencies—and they function very much as a team in implementing them.

Impact of NCWLI on Coalition's Change Initiative *(reported by NCWLI participants)*

- The NCWLI training helped to fine-tune the initial system change concept and identify achievable measures for documenting progress and assessing effectiveness of the initiative. We were able to break down, step-by-step, the process of making systemic changes to an already existing culture.
- We learned specific methods for implementing change, e.g., restructuring meetings so they are more discussion based rather than lecturing. NCWLI also provided valuable links to national resources, which enhanced participants' knowledge and reference points for system improvement and implementation efforts.
- While agency Internet security prevented viewing the NCWLI webinars in the office, some of the PowerPoint presentations shared have been incorporated in in-service training and program development within the project.
- The networking opportunities provided during the training have proven to be invaluable resources in our daily work.
- My change initiative evolved into a much broader initiative through the NCWLI process. Rather than focusing solely on case management agencies, I now focus on other community partners as well.
- NCWLI taught me how to look at things differently. The visual of the balcony (mentally standing on the balcony to observe from a distance and get a different perspective) has been very helpful to me.

Challenges *(reported by project staff)*

- The case management agencies were so used to being instructed on what to do that empowering them to make their own decisions has been a challenge.
- Coworkers who did not participate in NCWLI do not have the knowledge and understanding of what we are trying to do and the tools we are trying to employ. Consequently, some of them have not embraced the change, and there are times when we are not all on the same page.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success *(adapted from information and materials provided by project staff)*

- The Child Welfare Specialist staff positions were created as a part of the movement to improve relationships with the case management agencies and with the community at large. They are now assigned by county, enabling them to serve in a problem-solving capacity to case management agencies, with an emphasis on county-specific issues and resources, and to provide technical assistance and consultation as well as training and coaching, to case managers and supervisors.
- In addition to having a general knowledge of the entire child welfare system, Child Welfare Specialists now also have areas of specialization (Independent Living, adoption,

- etc.) so that case management agency staff and community members know who to go to for the information they need.
- The change initiative has focused on the adaptive processes of change, building consensus on the need for change, and involving those who will be affected in the planning, design, and implementation process.

OUTCOMES

Summary of Activities and Accomplishments

- Lead Agency management and mid-management now meet on a regular basis with the CEOs of the case management agencies to discuss performance, budget, and any key issues that may arise and to solve problems together—to keep the lines of communication open.
- In order to help build community cohesiveness, strengthen partnerships, and improve public perception, the CBC project was named the "Safe Children Coalition," and its connection with the Sarasota YMCA was de-emphasized.
- Ongoing internal case reviews are conducted by quality management staff on a regular basis, and the results are reviewed by the Continuous Quality Improvement Committee to monitor compliance with and effectiveness of existing policies and procedures.
- Tracking systems have been developed and benchmarks identified by Adoption Managers to provide technical assistance and help develop systems to better manage the timeliness of adoptions.
- A very comprehensive monthly management report, which includes extensive outcomes and performance data as well as analysis of statistical and programmatic trends by the Coalition as a whole and by individual case management agency, has been developed and is widely distributed throughout the Coalition, to the Safe Family Alliance, and to other community stakeholders.

Evaluation

- There were no resources available for a formal evaluation of this system change initiative. The team does know anecdotally, however, that they are building trust with the case management agencies and in the community at large. They see it every day in the greatly improved interaction between Coalition staff and case management agency staff. They now really talk *with* each other and solve problems together.
- In addition, the Coalition's management reports reveal that overall performance standards related to child safety have shown significant improvement since implementation of this system change initiative. Listed below are some areas where there have been significant improvements:
 - The percentage of children reunified within 12 months of latest removal
 - The percentage of children returning to out-of-home care within 12 months of reunification
 - The percentage of children with more than two placements within 12 months of removal
 - The percentage of children with finalized adoptions whose adoptions were finalized within 24 months of the latest removal

Sustainability

The following factors suggest that the initiative will sustain itself well into the future:

- The NCWLI participants who designed and implemented this change initiative represent mid-level and upper mid-level management within the Lead Agency of the Coalition, and they have the support of top management within the YMCA, case management agencies, and Family Safety Alliance.
- All management entities recognize the improved performance measures reflected in agency data.
- The initiative was implemented with no new funding or resources; in fact, it was implemented at a time of budget and staff reductions, so the end of the grant will not result in the loss of resources.