The Benefits of Work First/Child Welfare Collaboration

Note: nationally, the federal program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families is commonly known by its acronym, TANF; in North Carolina TANF is known as Work First.

Webster’s defines collaboration as “working together.” Although technically this is accurate, the people we consulted helped us understand that collaboration in a DSS context also means:

Walking Your Talk. Especially in child welfare, we expect families to develop strong support networks and to be an active part of the team. Yet, as one person asked: “How can we ever expect families to develop strong support networks if we don’t have these internally? If we can’t play together on the same team, what right do we have to ask this of them?”

Being Open. When someone questions our intentions, we should be open to the possibility that the stereotypes and assumptions we have about each other might be wrong.

Collaboration requires some degree of personal risk. It also takes guts and perseverance. But, given the potential benefits it offers, we owe it to our clients—and ourselves—to try.

Benefits for Families

The Right Service at the Right Time. Nationally, Work First and child welfare serve many of the same families. The substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health concerns, low levels of education, and other issues “dual-system” families struggle with often are barriers to securing employment and to effective parenting. By working together, Work First and child welfare can do a better job getting families the support they need, when they need it, thereby enhancing child safety and economic self-sufficiency.

Fewer Conflicting Demands. Anecdotal evidence suggests dual-system families are often overwhelmed by multiple, sometimes mutually exclusive, requirements. For example, Work First work requirements often conflict with services mandated by child welfare, such as attending court hearings or visiting children.
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in foster care. Thus, it is not surprising that some dual-system families have
difficulty meeting reunification case plans.

When workers from different programs communicate with each other and
understand each others’ roles and mandates, they can be sure all their efforts
make it easier—not harder—for families to become safer and stronger.

Feeling Heard. If professionals manage to coordinate intake procedures,
families may even be asked to tell their stories fewer times, to fewer people.

Better Experiences with DSS. When workers are on the same page, fami-
lies’ interactions with the agency are less confusing. They get a clear and
consistent idea of what is expected of them.

The cumulative effect of collaboration is the message: we see your family
as a unit and we care about its success. When this message is expressed
through effective support, families begin to see even involuntary services as
valuable, and the agency as an important ally.

Benefits for Workers

Better Assessments. When information about families is shared across
program lines, workers may get a more accurate understanding of a family’s
strengths and needs.

Better Use of Time. Timely and coordinated provision of services helps
families avoid protracted involvement with the agency. This saves families
time and frees up workers to serve other clients. Collaborative strategies,
such as including people from other programs in child and family team meet-
ing, also give workers the opportunity to develop plans simultaneously, and
to ensure their plans are not in conflict.

Better Support. When workers understand each others’ needs and man-
dates, they are better equipped to help and support each other.

Better Solutions. Workers from Work First and child welfare sometimes
see problems in very different ways. Strong collaborative relationships en-
able them to use this difference to develop better solutions with families.

Benefits for Agencies

Improved Relationships. When people understand each other and work
together across program lines, there is a greater sense of community among
agency employees.

Better Use of Resources. Collaboration can translate into cost savings.
For example, sharing information and coordinating efforts across program
lines can help agencies eliminate duplication, thereby reducing person-hours.
Also, if programs can help families meet urgent material needs that might
otherwise lead to their children coming into foster care, agencies may avoid
the higher costs of out-of-home placement.

Reprinted from Children’s Services Practice Notes. For a discussion of how collaboration
between Work First and child welfare produces these benefits, see Practice Notes vol. 9,
no. 3 (www.practicenotes.org).
Child Welfare Involvement among TANF Applicants

A recent study of Wisconsin applicants for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) found that almost two-thirds were also involved with the child welfare system. The study also examined the characteristics associated with Child Protective Services (CPS) involvement.

Researchers interviewed 1,075 Milwaukee County families who applied to receive TANF during six months in 1999; most were re-interviewed twice during the following two years. Administrative data from Wisconsin’s Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) indicated whether these families had been investigated by CPS and whether children had been placed in out-of-home care at any time through July 2005.

Results show that almost 64 percent of families had experienced child welfare involvement, and those families had been investigated an average of 5.35 times each. The best predictor of experiencing CPS involvement after the baseline interview was having CPS involvement before the baseline interview. Other characteristics associated with CPS involvement included:

- Parents identifying themselves as having a drug or alcohol problem
- Higher levels of parental stress
- More material hardships during the previous year
- More minor children
- Having at least one minor child living somewhere else

The TANF families in this study were much more likely to have CPS involvement than previous studies of TANF families have indicated. The authors speculate about this jump, suggesting that the state’s unprecedented reductions in cash assistance may have made some families more vulnerable to child maltreatment and neglect. They suggest that greater coordination between child welfare and TANF agencies could help parents who might have conflicting demands from the different agencies; in addition, high-quality childcare and parenting assistance could be targeted for parents who have previous CPS involvement. To obtain the full study, Findings from the Milwaukee TANF Applicant Study, by Courtney and Dworsky, go to <www.chapinhall.org>.

Family Resilience

Child welfare workers will find a practical guide to helping families build their resilience in Froma Walsh’s new edition of Strengthening Family Resilience. The book covers key family processes in resilience and practice applications for workers. Case illustrations show how diverse families handle loss, trauma, disaster, and other crises. The author highlights ways to help family members rebuild relationships and draw on cultural, spiritual, and community resources for support. Strengthening Family Resilience is published by the Guilford Press <www.guilford.com>.

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**MRS Year in Review: 2006**  
by R. Patrick Betancourt

Wow! What a tremendous year 2006 was for MRS in North Carolina. Kicking off the year, in January we took MRS statewide to the remaining 48 counties. In the depths of the summer, the 2006 MRS Learning Institute was held in beautiful New Bern. And in the fall North Carolina had tremendous representation at the National Differential Response conference in San Diego, where our state was recognized as a leader in child welfare.

As the brand new coordinator for MRS in North Carolina, one of my personal highlights this past year was being a part of the staff that helped bring the MRS Learning Institute together. This year’s event was attended by over 380 people from 60 different counties. This included 324 participants and 62 community partners, Division staff, and presenters. My favorite moments from the 2006 Learning Institute include the following:

- The dramatic flair of keynote speaker Dr. James Manseau-Sauceda, who taught us that multicultural learning is about respecting the equal human worth of distinct groups of people, and who inspired us with his vision of culturally proficient child welfare practice.
- Hearing about the personal tragedy and triumphs of Mikki Williams, our other keynote speaker—what an emotional roller coaster!
- The intense competitiveness I observed during ice cream social and game night.
- The chills I got when the 82nd Airborne Chorus trooped into the ballroom and lifted our spirits in song.

Despite some flooding, brief power loss, and fire drills, this event offered participants more than 30 workshops designed to enhance their implementation of MRS’s seven strategies and family-centered practice in general. I was truly moved by the commitment to North Carolina families shown by everyone who attended.

To continue the commitment the Division has made to Family Support and Child Welfare in North Carolina, planning for this year’s MRS Learning Institute began last fall. Please keep your calendars open and be ready to head to Asheville in August for the 2007 MRS Learning Institute!
MRS Evaluation Update
Spring promises to be a busy time for the MRS evaluation. The researchers at Duke University are currently making preparations for the facilitation of 30 focus groups designed to collect information from three distinct groups including social workers, supervisors and collaborative partners. Each of the 10 pilot counties will host three focus groups slated to be held during the months of January, February, and March. Some of the areas to be probed through the focus groups include:

- Collaboration/interface between CPS and Work First
- Implementation of the new finding “services provided, no longer needed”
- Child and Family Teams—quality and impact
- Redesign of in-home services
- Shared Parenting, and
- Practice variations in social worker assignment—whether they keep or transfer cases after case decision is reached.

In late April, Duke will begin the process of conducting family phone interviews to assess the quality of MRS implementation as it relates to family satisfaction. During the month of April, each of the 10 pilot counties will collect consent forms from all families with whom they have contact during the month. A sample of 300 families will be selected and interviewed by phone. Families that complete the phone interviews will receive a $10 gift card as an incentive to participate in the survey.

We are looking forward to gaining new insight from multiple perspectives with regard to how effectively MRS is being implemented at the county level. Further, this information will help inform our work around MRS and foster continuous improvement as we move forward.

In consultation with the 10 pilot counties, Duke is also in the process of developing a report template that will utilize administrative data to provide county “fact sheets.” These fact sheets will highlight county-specific data as it relates to MRS implementation. This is a newly added component of the evaluation this year and we feel that it will be very useful for counties in monitoring their progress on MRS related issues. We plan to make these reports available to all 100 counties in subsequent years of the evaluation.

We will continue to keep you informed as the evaluation progresses, but if you should have any questions, please feel free to contact Nicole Lawrence of Duke University’s Center for Child and Family Policy at (919) 668-3282.

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