

Partners with Families and Children & Children's Administration
 "The Learning Laboratory"
 Lessons Learned
 July 2010

Background:

The "Learning Laboratory" was an idea conceived by DSHS Secretary Susan Dreyfus in late 2009 to serve as an opportunity to inform the work of the Children's Administration preparing to implement SSHB 2106 – Part I – Performance Based Contracting.

The questions for the project posed by the Secretary included:

- What should a case rate be?
- How to build community capacity to provide services? In rural areas?
- What should core service packages include?
- How should outcomes be measured?

Through a unique, limited public/private funding partnership combining state dollars administered through the Children's Administration and private funds administered through the Gates Foundation, the needed project funds were obtained to support the Learning Laboratory for a six month period, December 15th 2009 – June 30th 2010, and were administered through a formal client service contract. The project served a cohort of forty-five families involved with the Division of Children and Family Services, Spokane Office, Region I, at various stages in their case, representing all types of child maltreatment. Of the referred cases approximately half represented 'in home' or non placement family cases with the balance representing placement family cases.

Reasons for referral: (all that apply)

Neglect	35
Physical Abuse	10
Sex Abuse	2
Parental substance abuse	13 (combined with child neglect)
Other	
Mental health/child	6
Domestic violence	4
Fragile infant/young parents	1

Prior Referrals

First –time	9	20%	
2-5	8	17%	
Over 5	28	62%	range= 6-38

These families had lengthy involvements with child welfare:

10 families, 22% since 1985-1995
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Services provided directly by Partners' staff 12/15/09-6/30/2010

<i>Mental Health Services</i>	359.6 hours
<i>Family Team Coordination Services</i>	1236.3 hours
<i>Chemical Dependency Treatment Services</i>	514.5 hours
Total time: all services	2152.4 hours

Extensive data on safety, permanence and child well-being was tracked every 90 days using the North Carolina Family Assessment Scales (G + R) for the 45 families, (81 caregivers and 89 children)

Learning and Recommendations:

Partners with Families and Children Perspective:

- 1) “We were brash: we jumped right in.”
 - a. A clear plan would have been preferable. Time was of the essence and we felt our long-standing partnership would enable us to work through the inevitable glitches.
 - b. The most problematic was not having clear expectations about roles/ responsibilities between CA social workers and Partners Family Team Coordinators, so division of responsibilities had to be negotiated with each family.
 - c. There was no specified conflict resolution process; consequently, we were unable to resolve some issues that arose.
 - d. Partners did not have sub-contracts, e.g. for visitation, in place, which added to the stress of the initial start-up and did not inspire the confidence of the CA social workers or families.

- 2) The fact that the CA social workers did not choose to refer their families to Partners and that the parents did not have a choice of Partners changed the entire dynamic and compromised both the public agency’s and Partners’ ability to engage the families in a positive manner with system-of-care values.

- 3) Identification of the target population
 - a. 20 dependent and 24 voluntary (6 became dependent). There was a strong desire for Partners to experience the full range of families experienced by CA Intake. We appreciated the opportunity and concluded that there are some families we can be extremely, even uniquely, helpful with and others that formulating a family team decision-making, wraparound process is **not** the primary need.

- 4) *The relationship between DCFS and Partners* staff in weekly consultation was **extremely** important in the family-by-family provision of services and trouble-shooting, as was the relationship between the Region’s Deputy and Agency Executive Director for overall contract management. Honest and forthright exchanges were valuable.

- 5) All of the dependencies (*Dependent families*) referred for the Learning Lab came with full service plans, almost all identical with the same array of services--- This adds up to unnecessary expense. and does not always match the pressing needs of the families in the areas that brought them to the attention of child welfare. Especially when this is not the first dependency for the family, the decision-making process on the service plan needs to be organized around how this time will be different. The family is more likely to follow an individualized plan that they help to create. Partners frequently felt hamstrung in applying this family team decision-making model because of the lack of shared expectations about roles.

- 6) Bundling services
 - a. Subcontracted expenses mounted each month and would have become untenable had we continued for a longer period.

- b. We certainly “felt your pain” with visitation arrangements, that are fraught with crises and are enormously time-consuming. This is such a significant part of the child welfare mission and is the best single predictor of potential for reunification. Designing and supporting an efficient system, one that promotes healthy family relationships, is a central building block for a well-functioning child welfare system.

Recommendations:

1. Clear expectations of role responsibilities on both sides
2. Specification of a conflict resolution process that emphasizes prompt face-to-face-to-face communication.
3. Joint training on system-of-care values and solution –based casework between state social workers and private providers.

Division of Children and Family Services Perspective:

- 1) Response to the initiation of services was slow. Initial contact with the family occurred within 24 hours nearly every time.
- 2) Family engagement efforts were viewed by DCFS social workers as minimal. It should be noted that Partners was not trained in Solution Based Casework which provides the framework and expectations regarding family engagement efforts.
- 3) The needed flexibility (family need versus what the agency was able to provide) of services and case coordinator support (nights, weekends, 24/7 emergent response) was a challenge.
- 4) Service provider initial reports and ongoing reports of progress were not received in a consistent or timely manner.
- 5) It was evident the depth role of the public child welfare agency was not fully known/understood by the provider...this represented very new and challenging work versus what has been done before.
- 6) Lack of preparation and understanding by both DCFS and Partners regarding clear roles and responsibilities. Lack of clarity in the contract about who does what and when.
- 7) The Court continued to order specific programs, providers and services which interfered with Partner’s ability to assess/identify and deliver services.
- 8) The resource and coordination demands (child and family visits occur very frequently through the life of a case and are often challenging to schedule and reschedule around family needs, no shows etc...) of parent child visits needs to be fully understood and planned for prior to the start of services.
- 9) We hurried into the agreement...more time spent planning and understanding expectations and building provider capacity to provide services would have been beneficial.

Recommendations:

- 1) Prior to the start of services by provider agencies develop and implement for joint training opportunities in the understanding of:
 - a. Child Abuse and Neglect
 - b. Threats to child safety and assessing for safety

- c. Dependency process
 - d. In home versus out of home case needs
 - e. Solution Based Casework
- 2) Clear roles and responsibilities between the social worker and master contractor
 - 3) Adequate time for the master contractor to build service delivery capacity and develop sub contractor relationships and a full array of services
 - 4) Clear understanding of provider service provision responsibilities
 - 5) Work with the Court and judicial officers to assure a full understanding of Performance Based Contracting.