

CHAPTER 8

UTAH COUNTY, UTAH

The State of Utah developed a CPS practice model, which was designed to improve services and empower families. This model requires new practice skills as well as intensive and ongoing training of workers to empower families to resolve their problems that involve them with CPS. Utah County, Utah, was visited to discuss this model.

OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (CPS)

The Western Region of the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) provides adult and child protective services for residents of the two most populous cities in Utah County—Provo and Orem. Services include screening and intake, assessment and investigation, in-home and out-of-home services, services for families affected by domestic violence, and foster care support. (See Exhibit 8.1, Utah Department of Children and Family Services Organizational Structure.)

Prior to the introduction of the current Utah Practice Model, families had little input in decisionmaking during their involvement with the DCFS system. DCFS workers were expected to focus on “policing” and “looking for evidence” when working with families. In addition, DCFS workers were given minimal training and were expected to become familiar with their positions through on-the-job training. The emphasis was on processing cases in order to conform to timelines rather than on quality interactions between worker and client, which could result in more permanent changes. There was also a wide variation in the quality of DCFS staff work, from outstanding to less than adequate. Families tended to view DCFS as something to be feared, due to the agency’s ability to remove children from homes and its perceived low priority on supporting the family’s ability to keep their children safe and healthy.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CPS AGENCY

Because of Utah’s geographical diversity, DCFS has five regions for service delivery and administration. Geographic diversity is considered during budget allocation to ensure that each child and family has equal access to needed and appropriate services. The Western Region office also acts as the regional DCFS headquarters for five counties in western Utah, including Utah County where it is located. Each county houses between one and three local DCFS offices that provide adult and child protective services to residents. Three DCFS offices are located within Utah County, with two smaller offices in the north and south, in addition to the five regional offices.

REFORM EFFORTS

During the spring of 2000, the State of Utah DCFS began implementation of the Utah Practice Model. This initiative included a philosophical change from a law-based, compliance model to a social work, strengths-based model.

Background of Reform Efforts

The impetus behind the development of the Utah Practice Model was a class action lawsuit brought against the State during 1993 that alleged Federal constitutional and statutory violations in the operation of Utah's child welfare system. During 1994, a settlement agreement was reached that gave Utah 4 years to cure the violations, at which time the agreement would terminate.

During May 1999, Utah filed its Performance Milestone Plan in response to the settlement agreement. All DCFS regions, local communities, allied agency partners, and advisors from across the State were given an opportunity to submit recommendations through a series of community forums. The principles that were developed as a result of these meetings included the following:

- *Protection*: Children have the right to be safe from abuse, neglect, and unnecessary or needless dependency. Swift intervention is necessary when this right is violated;
- *Development*: Children and families need consistent nurturing in a healthy environment to achieve their developmental potential;
- *Permanency*: All children need and are entitled to enduring relationships that provide a sense of family, stability, and belonging;
- *Cultural Responsiveness*: Children and families have the right to be understood within the context of their own family rules, traditions, history and culture;
- *Family Foundation*: Children can be assured a better chance for healthy personal growth and development in a safe, permanent home with enduring relationships that provide them with a sense of family, stability and belonging;
- *Partnerships*: The entire community shares the responsibility to create an environment that helps families raise children to their fullest potential;
- *Organizational Competence*: Committed, qualified, trained and skilled staff, supported by an effectively structured organization, help ensure positive outcomes for children and families; and
- *Professional Competence*: Children and families need a relationship with an accepting, concerned, empathic worker who can confront difficult issues and effectively assist individuals during their process toward positive change.

This collaborative process for developing a new model of practice also resulted in the identification of necessary practice skills. These included the following abilities:

- *To engage*: Effectively establish a trusting relationship with children, parents, and others for the purpose of jointly accomplishing needed work;
- *To team*: Assemble a team around children and families, with a focus on the family's formal and informal supports, to assess and plan;
- *To assess*: Determine, with the family, the strengths and needs that must be addressed to resolve the issues that brought the family to the attention of CPS;
- *To plan*: With the child and family, use assessment information to create an individualized plan that addresses the family's strengths and needs and provides support for making changes, while evaluating the consequences of lack of improvement; and

- *To intervene:* Pursue actions that will decrease risk, provide safety for the child, promote permanence, and establish well-being.

Objectives

The overall objective of the reform effort is to enable DCFS staff members to ensure the safety and permanence of children and families through improved skills and greater family participation. It is believed that families will trust the DCFS system if they are able to provide input on the decisions that affect their lives, be supported with treatment plans, and be shown how to create ties with their communities that could help prevent further crises and DCFS intervention.

The Utah Practice Model seeks to improve services to clients through achievement of the following objectives:

- Strengthen DCFS staff members in their ability to provide reliable and effective services to children and families;
- Improve direct professional practice of front-line staff members and supervisors in DCFS through the design and implementation of a practice model that provides a consistent philosophy, reliable direction on day-to-day professional practice, and training for specific skills with proven effectiveness in child welfare;
- Create clear performance expectations; and
- Provide the allocation and management of resources required to develop and sustain the practice model.

Practice Components

The major components of the model are:

- Develop practice skills through training, observation, and testing of staff on engaging children and parents in the goals of providing safety, protection, and permanence for children;
- Use comprehensive family assessments of children and families to achieve decisive action earlier in DCFS involvement;
- Provide individualized service planning, matched to child and family needs, to overcome the underlying causes of the incidents or circumstances leading to the referral for services;
- Utilize family team conferences to support the child and family;
- Supply trained mentors to each new employee;
- Offer foster parent training to align key partners with the practice model;
- Build community resource development skills to advocate for children and families and to increase resources available to help resolve instances of child neglect, abuse, and dependency; and
- Improve information gathered through DCFS data and case reviews to modify the practice model as needed.

Results

Changes occurred in the areas of resource allocation, training, and practice.

Resource Allocation

Agency administrators stated that immediately following the lawsuit there was a significant increase in the State's budget for DCFS. Between 1993 and 2000 the Utah Legislature doubled the allocation from approximately \$60 million to \$120 million. Since then the budget has leveled off and decreased slightly.

Training

Implementation of the Utah Practice Model consisted primarily of providing intensive training to all DCFS staff. The initial training for DCFS workers began during spring 2000 and was completed during January 2002, and consisted of classroom training in each of five skills or "modules." The training consisted of interactive role playing exercises to foster greater understanding of what clients face when they enter the DCFS system.

The importance of training new staff members and updating experienced staff is reflected in the building of a new regional training center, which is staffed with full-time trainers. Ongoing training is mandatory and requires workers' commitment of 4 consecutive days, as well as maintaining their caseloads and taking on new cases while in training.

Changes in Practice

Slight changes have been made to practices and procedures to reflect the new model. For example, intake workers ask "solution-focused questions" of their referents. For example, they may request that the reporter describe the strengths of the family whom they are reporting. Investigation and assessment workers engage a family and focus on strengths while conducting their search for evidence that may result in a substantiated or unsubstantiated allegation of abuse. The requirements that are used to assist other workers on the case include: Functional assessments; written accounts detailing a family's story, including why they are involved with DCFS; and a description of the family's strengths. Case transitioning requires coordination between the two respective workers as a means of assuring continuity of service.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an important aspect of the Utah Practice Model. An important evaluation activity is the Quality Case Review, which is a yearly review of approximately 24 randomly selected cases within a region. This review is a joint effort between DCFS and a court-appointed monitor. Each region receives a score in two areas—child and family status and system performance. The scores provide regions with feedback for improving their practice and skills. Earning high scores on the Quality Case Review is an important step for regions exiting from court-ordered monitoring.

Additional evaluation activities that monitor system performance and facilitate quality improvement are listed below.

- *Reviews of the achievement of action steps identified in the Milestone Plan:* This is a bi-monthly report that is compiled by DCFS and is submitted to the court monitor. The report indicates progress on specific action steps and interventions that address barriers to satisfactory performance in protecting children from abuse and neglect, providing children with permanent homes, and supporting child well-being.

- *Review of outcome indicator trends:* This series of outcome indicators provides general information about system performance. The indicators are jointly selected by DCFS and the monitor and are used to inform them of changes or the lack thereof. Each division provides quarterly trend indicator reports to the monitor, which DCFS and the monitor regularly review to identify possible performance improvements or concerns.

Results for workers and families

Both workers and families appear to have benefited greatly as a result of the Utah Practice Model. Reciprocal relationships have been developed as workers share their power with families and families have been empowered to participate in solving their own problems. Agency workers and administrators stated that the Utah Practice Model benefits families in the following ways:

- Families are involved in the decisions that affect their lives;
- Families are more likely to trust DCFS workers and see them as allies;
- Families are better informed and more aware of what is happening because they understand the DCFS process;
- Families are more open to DCFS intervention; and
- Families respond more positively to intervention, if it happens.

Workers benefit from the Utah Practice Model in the following ways:

- Workers are able to do social work rather than policing;
- The model broadens the perspective of workers and help them to better understand the families;
- Workers are more realistic with what they expect from their clients;
- Workers are not solely responsible for the success or failure of a family;
- Workers are more committed because they feel they make an impact in the lives of their clients; and
- Workers' jobs are more pleasant and less stressful.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

DCFS workers and administrators identified other changes that are important for the continued positive impact of the Utah Practice Model.

Conditions that Sustain Reform

Conditions identified as important to sustaining reforms are discussed below.

Staff

The most commonly identified condition that must be met for reform to be supported and sustained is a decrease in the resistance of some staff, at all levels, to the changes required by the Utah Practice Model. This resistance is characterized primarily as pockets of established workers who are reluctant to change and prefer to continue with the status quo, or agency partners who prefer to continue using the more legalistic and punitive model. For example, some lawyers are concerned that their clients, in trusting their caseworker, may disclose information that could be a disadvantage in court.

The ongoing hiring and retention of trained and experienced staff must also continue during the implementation of the Utah Practice Model. The agency is finding it difficult to hire highly-trained workers who could fully understand and integrate the skills required for the Utah Practice Model. Many of the agency staff are recent graduates with a Bachelor of Social Work degree who do not have the training one would receive at the Master of Social Work level, which would be helpful to understand and utilize the skills to implement the model. Furthermore, the agency also experiences a high turnover rate because staff have little incentive to stay with the agency when other employment options offer higher pay, better benefits, and more opportunities. This is especially true for the workers who have a master's degree.

The agency is committed to overcoming these problems and maintaining experienced, trained staff. Creating an agency culture around the Model's principles and practices is considered essential to perpetuating the philosophy and to maintaining consistent and reliable working practices.

Training

The integration of training with other responsibilities also has been identified as a condition that is required for the continued implementation of the Utah Practice Model. Practice Model training is required for all DCFS workers. Workers select a block of 4 consecutive days when they are able to attend a training session. While training, workers are required to maintain their caseloads as well as to continue taking on new cases. However, maintaining contact with one's clients and the office through cell phones and pagers during a training session causes disruption to other trainees as well as the individuals who are attending to their clients. The agency has not yet determined how to provide the additional coverage needed while workers are in training.

Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest has emerged for investigation and assessment workers who must implement the new practice principles and skills while they are responsible for investigation. Workers experience a conflict when they are seeking to establish a trusting relationship with a family while they are gathering information necessary to make a determination. This is another issue that must be addressed in order for the implementation of the model to come to fruition.

Future Plans

Agency administrators stated that they felt they are making progress with the implementation of the Utah Practice Model, although it is going slower than expected. The practice model principles and practices are not reflected in every case handled by the agency, but for some instances the cases are reviewed with the appropriate staff member(s) to discuss how the practice model could be properly implemented. Agency administrators also stated that most of these instances occur with inexperienced staff. This internal monitoring will continue in the future.

Mentoring

Since the Practice Model has been in place for nearly 1 year, the agency also plans to work toward developing mentoring relationships between supervisors and their staff. Supervisors at the agency would receive ongoing training and would be expected to train and monitor staff members. The goal of the mentoring would be to provide a continuous learning environment to

support the ongoing understanding and implementation of the practice model principles and practices. This mentoring plan is also part of the statewide implementation of the model.

SUMMARY

The Western Region DCFS recently implemented the Utah Practice Model. This statewide initiative is a philosophical shift—from a legalistic, compliance model to a social work, strengths-based model—in how DCFS provides services to its clients. The goal of this effort is to empower families when making decisions that affect their lives.

The model is implemented primarily through intensive training for all staff members in the five practice areas. All workers receive training that enables them to effectively and realistically engage clients. Ongoing training and mentoring will be a permanent characteristic of the Utah Practice Model.

Agency administrators and staff are excited and committed to the practice model, and realize that they are still in the process of fully implementing its principles and practices. All agency staff agree that the practice model is good for families and staff because families feel more comfortable working with the agency and staff members are better able to assist families in accomplishing changes.

