

Using Comprehensive Family Assessments
to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes
Ramsey County Community Human Services &
University of Minnesota School of Social Work
St. Paul, Minnesota

Comprehensive Family Assessment Case Management Pilot Fidelity Study Summary

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Submitted by

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Case Management Pilot Fidelity Study

Introduction

Ramsey County, in consultation with the University of Minnesota evaluation team and the Community Advisory Committee, began creating the new comprehensive family assessment model. This model was based upon findings of the Case Management Baseline Study. Several drafts of the model were created, and two Ramsey County child protection workers were trained to pilot the seventh draft of the new model. The two workers then used this process-oriented model on one new case opened in on-going case management in January 2009. In an effort to ensure that the workers were faithful to the model, a fidelity study was conducted six weeks after the initiation of this new tool.

The Pilot Fidelity Study consisted of two parts—worker interviews and a case record review. First, pilot workers were interviewed by a University of Minnesota researcher, with the aim of capturing the process the workers employed, as well as the content of their assessment using the new model. The interview instrument included qualitative questions designed to reflect the various aspects of the new model. The interviewer then rated responses, using a five-point Likert scale, to evaluate how the worker's process matched the new model. For the second part of the Fidelity Study, the same interviewer completed a case record reading of each worker's pilot case. The researcher reviewed the hard file and computer file of each case, rating how faithful the workers were to the new model using a similar Likert-scale instrument. The case record reading was also used to evaluate the thoroughness of worker documentation.

Results

Strengths

Overall, pilot workers did an excellent job engaging and assessing their families, remaining faithful to the new model in many aspects. Pilot workers utilized the new model's emphasis on engaging with the family as shown through a clear explanation to the family of the worker's role, involving the family members in case planning, and sharing information with the families on a continual basis. The pilot workers also adopted the model's new emphasis on utilizing specialized assessments where appropriate, particularly ensuring the assessment of all family members, including siblings of the target child. The workers visited each family member within the appropriate timeline of at least once per month, met with various stakeholders,

including guardian ad litem, kin, and service providers, and conducted on-going assessments during each visit with family members.

Areas of Needed Improvement

Though the pilot workers were generally true to the CFA model, there were several areas in which the workers could have improved their faithfulness to the new model. Ramsey County's CFA model calls for workers to capture the family's story (needs, strengths, safety, and support systems) in the initial assessment. The workers could have done more to assess for family and community strengths. Furthermore, these strengths could have been used more effectively in ongoing services, by using the strengths as part of the planning process. While one worker identified a few self-identified strengths, this area could have been further developed. Community strengths also needed to be assessed more thoroughly.

Assessing for family culture is another aspect of the new model that the workers could have strengthened. Neither worker fully assessed the cultural context of family issues in initial assessment. One worker noted that they "didn't talk about culture" with the family, and did not incorporate it into the case plan.

Neither worker was able to conduct a 30-day meeting - a new aspect of Ramsey County's CFA model that asks workers to bring stakeholders and the family together to assess and plan for service connection. One worker did not conduct a 30-day meeting due to a crisis with the family; the other worker attempted to conduct the meeting but the family did not comply.

Engaging with the father was also a piece of the model in which the pilot workers could have improved. In one case, the father was not present during the initial assessment or in many ongoing assessments. Mothers and children were more often involved in the case planning process. Due to this lack of initial engagement, fathers were less likely to be recipients of services. Overall, however, both workers did an excellent job engaging with the family throughout process, including sharing information as circumstances changed and using motivational interviewing techniques.

Increased supervision was a key difference between the new model and Ramsey County's current practice standards, and both workers struggled to complete all necessary consultation. Consultation required in the new CFA model includes meetings with supervisors before initial contact with the family, at the point of case plan development, and at least twice per month for the life of the case. One pilot worker did not meet with the supervisor before the initial contact

with the family, at the point of case plan development, or twice per month throughout the life of the case. The other worker also expressed an inability to meet with the supervisor twice per month throughout time the case was open.

Changing Practice

At the end of the interview, workers were asked to comment about how the new model was changing their case management practice in different family assessment areas. Both workers noted that supervision and specialized assessments were more highly emphasized in the new model. One worker said that the model highlights being “specific to individual needs, not just looking at compliance issues.” Another worker noted that documentation was also different, saying, “we’ve always done documentation and supervision, but it was not deliberate before. Now it’s deliberate.” Both pilot workers said that there is a greater focus on children; examples of key differences between Ramsey County’s current FCA (Family Centered Assessment) model and the new CFA model include attending to the children’s individual needs and well-being, and incorporating specialized assessments for each child. Another worker talked about how the new *Signs of Safety (SOS)* mirror mapping form strengthened the worker’s ability to assess the family, target needed services, and engage the family.

Worker Concerns

Both pilot workers expressed their concern about the amount of time it took to work with a family using the new model. Due to the increased assessment time with children, both felt the new model case took up a significant percentage of their time each week, much more than other cases. More frequent supervision was especially emphasized as a new requirement that increased the time spent on each case. Workers were also concerned that supervisors might not be familiar with the new model or the changing supervisory role.

Summary

Overall, pilot workers were faithful to Ramsey County’s new CFA model. Pilot workers effectively engaged with family members, thoroughly explained the worker role, and involved family members in the case planning process. Pilot workers also incorporated new specialized assessments for all children, visited family members within the appropriate monthly timeline, and conducted on-going assessments on a continual basis. There were several aspects of the new CFA model that pilot workers could have improved upon, including: assessing family culture,

incorporating family self-identified strengths into the case plan, focusing on community strength assessment, and engaging with the fathers. The increased supervision requirements were a concern for the pilot workers. Indeed, the pilot workers failed to meet all of the supervisory requirements, including meeting with a supervisor at least twice per month throughout the life of the case. Pilot workers, however, appreciated the model's emphasis on specialized assessments and each child's individual needs and well-being. Recommendations for on-going training on the new Ramsey County CFA model include informing supervisors about their new role, explaining the purpose of the new model as it relates to the Comprehensive Family Service Reviews (CFSRs), and providing workers with new documentation guidelines.