AN EVALUATION OF FAMILY TO FAMILY AS A MODEL OF OUTCOME–BASED CHILD WELFARE SERVICES FOR SONOMA COUNTY

Alfredo Perez

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), passed by the federal government, included a requirement that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services develop outcome measures for child welfare agencies. There had been ongoing concerns about the state of the foster care system, which seemed to continue to grow each decade with disproportionate levels of racial and ethnic minorities in care and reports of children aging out of foster homes and into homelessness. ASFA represented a clear legislative call for more accountability in how the state child welfare systems were operated.

Along the same line in the movement toward child welfare reform came the Family to Family Initiative. A privately funded effort from the Anne E. Casey Foundation / Casey Family Services, Family to Family offered a roadmap to reform. The initiative was a research-based and results-driven model that clearly defined the outcomes that could be delivered if the initiative was implemented. Family to Family focused on nine outcomes dealing with the safety, permanence and well-being of children, families and communities involved in the child welfare system. A core strategy of Family to Family is program self-evaluation. By devising a baseline evaluation, Family to Family is able to measure its performance across time and the impact of its interventions for populations and communities

that have been historically adversely affected under the typical child welfare model.

My proposal was to study the implementation of Family to Family in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. I took Family to Family as a model of how to implement change in a large child welfare organization. The findings would be important in guiding change in program management. It would also be consistent with the legislative emphasis on defined outcomes in child welfare services.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Family to Family provides a clear and consistent focus that can be likened to an agency mission statement. It provides a vision about the outcomes it has set out to achieve.
- The core strategy of self-evaluation measures agency strengths and weaknesses along one strategic path. This allows agency resources to become focused in the areas likely to have the most impact.
- Family to Family promotes the development of a learning organization. The learning organization is one that takes periodic readings of its performance, enhances its successes and adjusts to its failures in creative ways.
- Family to Family promotes a cultural shift in the nature of work in child welfare. The shift is one in which agency strategy and goals are incorporated into case practice.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR SONOMA COUNTY

With these lessons in mind, a set of five recommendations can be made:

1. Perform a baseline evaluation of each agency component. Use data developed along a longitudinal dimension, across populations and across communities in order to assess the current state of program services.

2. Assess the current state of reporting and reporting systems within the agency. Reports should be structured to ensure understanding and readability.

3. Investigate the purchase of a detailed reporting tool in order to promote outcome based management.

4. Foster the learning organization. Include self-evaluation as a core component in the agency mission along with the core concerns of people and service.

5. Facilitate the cultural shift to outcome-based management. The shift in focus to consideration of organizational strategy and goals within case planning could be a difficult transition. Provide opportunities for training and staff development.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last several years there has been an increasing emphasis on data reporting and outcome evaluation in child welfare services. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 included a requirement that the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services develop outcome measures and then assess the performance of state child welfare programs against those measures. As directed under ASFA, the Department of Health and Human Services developed the broad outcome domains of safety, permanency and well-being. These formed the basis for the state child welfare services reviews.

While there was little argument that these were laudable goals for all children, there was significant debate about how to define the outcome domains, or what would be the "operational definition" of each domain. In California, the Child Welfare Director's Association and the stakeholders group for Child Welfare Redesign have worked to redefine the outcome domains and clarify the issue of what outcomes are under the control of agency actions, so that agencies can be held accountable. Although there will be continuing debate about what to measure, there is nonetheless general consensus that government-funded service providers should be more accountable in service delivery.

Along the same lines came Family to Family, a private initiative developed in 1992 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It is an outcome-based service delivery system that sets out to reform the foster care system. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining and strengthening family and community ties in a child's life in order to achieve the goals of safety and permanency. One of the core strategies to obtaining these goals is program self-evaluation. Self-evaluation means the development of a system of measurement to ensure that stated outcomes are being achieved over time. This represents a fundamental shift from the typical child welfare model – from an individual, case-focused, point-in-time emphasis to one that identifies agency strategy as a whole, and emphasizes performance over time.

The project I chose for my interagency exchange was a study of Family to Family implementation in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. I looked at Family to Family as a model of how to change an organization into one focused on outcome-based practice. There were several questions that I was particularly interested in:

- How would existing resources and programs change when moving to an outcome-based practice?
- How did the results of the self-evaluation drive program development?
- How did they manage the cultural and organizational shift to family-focused, outcome-driven practice?
- What were the personnel issues?

THE FAMILY TO FAMILY INITIATIVE

Family to Family was developed in Cleveland in 1994 as a response to a crisis in the foster care system coming as a result of a drug epidemic that was devastating to the community. Large numbers of drug affected, African-American children were

being brought into protective custody and placed in congregate care where they lost family and community ties and subsequently floundered in foster care without permanency. Working with child welfare agencies, Casey Family Services challenged the decision-making process that leads to removal of children by encouraging the use of team decision-making (TDM). TDM allows the responsibility for important decisions in a child's life to rest less on just one person's shoulders and more on team members who are drawn from people important in a child's life. TDM involves people who can offer different perspectives or bring different resources to bear to support a child either at home or in the child's community with another family. Resource families were drawn from communities where children were at the highest risk of removal, thus building capacity for an affected community to maintain the safety and well-being of its children. Another key strategy was the development of self-evaluations that supported the program philosophy as an evidence-based practice rather than a practice based solely on opinion.

The Family to Family Core Strategies for Attaining Better Outcomes

- Recruitment, Training, Retention and Support for Resource Families
- Team Decision Making
- Self-Evaluation
- Community Partnership

By following the four core strategies listed above, Family to Family maintains that nine outcomes for children will result. The nine outcomes are: to reduce the number of children in care and the racial/ethnic disparities associated with children in care; to ensure that a child, if removed, was not placed in group care but instead was placed in his/her community; if placed in care they were placed with siblings; reduce the number of placement changes; increase reunification without increasing chances of returning to care. These outcomes form the basis for ongoing evaluation.

As part of its emphasis on evaluation, Casey Family Services and the Annie E. Casey Foundation began work on child welfare data archival systems. In California, the foundation worked with the Child Welfare Research Center (CWRC) at the University of California at Berkeley, to analyze the data from the statewide database for child welfare, CWS/CMS. The challenge was in taking the static case, point-in-time nature of the database and analyzing the information into more understandable data and reports. This was done by conceptualizing the data into reports that extend through time (longitudinal), through space (across counties and in counties across communities and neighborhoods), and across populations (age, gender, race and ethnicity). The impact of child welfare services could then be accurately measured as it affects the different people it serves across spans of time and in the communities in which they live.

SANTA CLARA'S IMPLEMENTATION

Santa Clara began its association with Annie E. Casey/Casey Family Services in January 2001. The foundation awarded a $750,000 three-year grant to Santa Clara to pay for individual and technical assistance. Other counties receiving similar grants were Los Angeles, San Francisco and Alameda. Santa Clara self-identified several areas in child welfare services that would benefit from Family to Family participation: a high proportion of racial/ethnic minority children in placement, a desire to build greater community resources

through partnerships, and a need for more resource families to provide care. Santa Clara also agreed that to come in line with Family to Family philosophy they would need to do several things. First, they agreed to end the practice of police removals and placement of children into an emergency shelter. They replaced this practice with a joint police and child welfare response model. They also agreed to initiate team decision-making to ensure quick placement decisions and to institute community supports to increase the safety of children needing protection.

The first-year planning grant produced a comprehensive implementation plan and a baseline, self-evaluation report, which appears to be drawn primarily from the data available from the CWRC. There was staff orientation and training on the principles of Family to Family. Staff was assigned to the first three core strategy teams as described above, while the community partnership core strategy was headed by five community action teams. Teams were drawn from Santa Clara's already well-established and well-funded neighborhood resource centers as well as racial/ethnic teams representative of the county population.

Second year implementation developed difficulties on several fronts. There was ongoing discussion on the issue of data accuracy and how this affected the validity of the outcomes being measured. There were problems staffing the joint response team with police, as social workers were not always immediately available at the time police were considering removal of children. Perhaps most problematic was a reorganization that was being put into place at the same time as the implementation and, of course, the statewide budget crisis. Staff was being re-positioned and some social worker positions went unfilled, which resulted in complaints of increased

workload from the remaining staff. This staffing situation would create ongoing discussions with the union on work impact.

There was competition among program staff for dwindling resources that eventually increased staff resistance to implementation of Family to Family. A case in point was Nuestra Casa, a resource center in the Mayfair District of San Jose. The staff developed needed Spanish language services, such as domestic violence groups, that could not be found in the surrounding community. This was a crucial resource but not a core child welfare service. Thus it was vulnerable to elimination by reorganization. However, cutting back this crucial service would effectively eliminate it from the community. This is an example of the difficult debates that arose during implementation of Family to Family.

Santa Clara's existing family resource centers and the highly respected Family Conference Institute, which coordinated family group conferences to give families greater say in establishing safety and placement plans for children, were closely aligned to two of the four Family to Family core strategies of community partnerships and team decision making. The presence and similarity of Family to Family to these long established, innovative practices would place them in competition with Family to Family in the eyes of staff.

Both of the above described difficulties focused on service delivery rather than on the end result or outcome of the service. One way to resolve this dilemma of resource competition would have been to continue to point out the outcomes for children that needed improvement and then to instill a common vision for improvement. However, since the data was still in question the premise for needing change was nullified and staff acceptance of Family

to Family became more difficult.

SAN MATEO'S IMPLEMENTATION

In January 2002, San Mateo County received a grant of $120,000 from the Stuart Foundation for Family to Family implementation. Other counties receiving similar grants were Contra Costa, Stanislaus, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara. San Mateo identified a need for more resource families and especially resource homes from the areas where children were being removed. Over half of their resource homes had been lost in the previous ten years and children were increasingly being placed out of the county and/or into group care.

The first year produced the four core strategy teams, a coordinating committee to make sure teams were working in synchronicity, and a steering committee to provide overall direction. Each team produced its own implementation plan while working with the coordinating committee to make sure the plans were consistent with each other. San Mateo had a major advantage in its first year development phase. It had the co-development in 2002 of the Data Warehouse, which included CWS/CMS and Case Data System (CDS) information.

The Data Warehouse developed plans for creating reports that were consistent with its service activities, objectives and reporting mandates. For the child welfare system it would create ninety-six CWS/CMS based reports and one hundred and twenty-four CDS reports. For Family to Family it was able to define the nine outcome measures and generated 24 reports, mostly from CWS/CMS. The Data Warehouse also had the expertise and knowledge to deal with the issues of reporting and data entry integrity, and there was a developed protocol for reviewing and processing the ad hoc report

requests from the core strategy teams. The co-development of the Data Warehouse proved to be invaluable since questions or concerns about data integrity, or requests and clarification of reports could be dealt with quickly and in the end supported the Family to Family core strategy of self-evaluation.

Another advantage that was closely related to a core Family to Family Strategy was the already existing cooperative relationship between law enforcement and the regionalized CWS offices. Cross reporting and requests for a joint response to a child abuse incident could come from either agency. The close communication ensured that child removals could be jointly assessed before action was taken by either agency.

Team decision making (TDM) began in 2003 with a plan to hold TDM's within 48 hours for all children that had been removed and had had a petition filed in juvenile court. Although there were still lingering questions and concerns by staff, the decision to proceed allowed many of these issues to be resolved as they came up. Issues of confidentiality, legal rights of the participants, and lawyers being present would arise and then would be resolved or protocols would be modified. Having the TDM's also moved the community partnership strategy along as TDM members were drawn from the community. This also afforded opportunities for foster care recruitment as the TDM community members realized there was a need for more neighborhood resource homes.

Some of the challenges will be the ongoing development of community resource homes in an area of high housing cost, which was one of the reasons that the supply of foster homes was diminishing. The other major challenge will be finding and maintaining active community members for the

TDM's. The lack of steady demand means that TDM community members and facility meeting sites must be "on-call" and ready to participate on short notice. As TDM use expands, the county will probably face what Santa Clara faced, which was the issue of uneven demand in its joint response efforts. This will inevitably bring up work hour issues that will require meet and confer sessions with the union.

LESSONS LEARNED

By the end of this year an additional four counties will plan for and implement Family to Family: Monterey, Ventura, Fresno and Orange. This will bring the number of Family to Family counties in California to thirteen. Also beginning this year, the California Department of Social Services will provide an office for technical assistance and training in a collaborative effort with Casey Family Services, the Stuart Foundation, CWRC and University of California at Davis.

Many counties are encountering the same problems in their child welfare programs. There are a diminishing number of resource homes, large disparities in racial/ethnic proportions of children in care, and increasing pressure to demonstrate better outcomes for children. This is providing an impetus toward the initiative. From this, Family to Family suggests several factors that are important in promoting change in the child welfare system:

1. Family to Family provides a consistent and clear focus on the outcomes that need to occur for children, families and communities. This is equivalent to the agency mission statement. The federal outcome domains of safety, permanence and well-being are too broad and provide no real vision or impetus to improve.

The self-evaluation emphasis will assist counties in achieving outcome mandates. There will be increasing agreement between the outcomes of Family to Family, the federal mandates and stakeholders. In California, the agreement is in large part due to technical limitations of the current data system, CWS/CMS. There are a limited number of reports that can be obtained from the current system.

2. The self-evaluation also forces an assessment of the organization's strengths and weaknesses along one strategic path. A baseline evaluation in San Mateo reported that 75% of children in care were reunified before one year. This outcome was seen as an acceptable starting point and allowed that agency to focus Family to Family implementation on the initial decision to remove children and on building community capacity to prevent children from coming or returning to care.

3. Family to Family promotes an organization that is open to change – what has been termed a "learning organization." A learning organization operates from a value system that is concerned with the people in the community that are being served, the services they are receiving, and assessment of the level of service effectiveness. Moore, Rapp and Roberts (2000) have described the learning organization as one that "takes periodic readings on its performance, reinforces its successes, makes adjustments to its failures, innovates, and continually adapts to achieve outcomes for clients to the fullest extend possible." This value emphasis on people, services and evaluation makes it an important component of any mission statement. It provides the ongoing justification for measurement and ties it to the core concerns of people and services.

4. Family to Family promotes a cultural shift in the nature of work in child welfare. The shift is one where agency strategies and goals become incorporated into case practice. Organizational culture can be defined as the values, attitudes, and beliefs that shape the behaviors in the organization through its reward system. That is, what is seen as important in an organization, "what matters," and "how rewards or esteem are handed out" (Moore, et al, 2000). For Family to Family, what matters are the family-related outcomes that will benefit the children involved in the child welfare system. The nature of the supervisor/social worker and the manager/supervisor relationships will change in the shift to outcome-based practice. There are potential problems in this area since the work relationships are also governed by worker / management collective agreements with the union.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SONOMA COUNTY

Family to Family provides a road map for developing an outcome-based child welfare system. It will assist counties in achieving outcome mandates since there is increasing convergence between the outcomes of Family to Family, the federal mandates, CWDA and stakeholders. Perhaps more important are the values espoused by Family to Family. The values and goals of Family to Family are laudable ones. They are difficult to argue against and provide motivation to create change.

At the same time, participating in Family to Family will be difficult for Sonoma County. The existence of the children's shelter would place the county at odds with a program that places priority on ending shelter care. There will also be staffing problems

due to a lack of steady demand. For moderate to small counties such as Sonoma, implementing immediate joint response with the police will be difficult. Even larger counties will have difficulty in implementing this part of the initiative.

Without preliminary baseline data it would be difficult to fully measure whether Family to Family would be beneficial in improving outcomes. What we do know is that Sonoma County has historically had low levels of child removals per 1,000 child population (presently fourth lowest in the state), and proportionally high levels of voluntary family maintenance, although budget problems place this program at risk to disappear here and elsewhere. Ethnic/racial disparities are not dramatically high at the front end but high in the permanency unit. A rise in group home placements or loss of foster homes will be signs that the same problems affecting the greater Bay Area are coming to Sonoma.

There is reason to believe that the long-time emphasis on providing voluntary family maintenance services has had and continues to have a positive impact on child and family outcomes in Sonoma County. Sadly, with rising retirement rates, the staff that holds the organizational memory of this prevention model will depart.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The increasing emphasis on outcome measures will demand organizational change and Family to Family can be a model for that change. The following recommendations are made in light of the lessons learned from this project:

1.) Perform a baseline evaluation of all program services.

Use the longitudinal data from the CWRC to provide an evaluation along dimensions of time, geographical area and race/ethnic population. This would lead to a self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses in service provision and allow an organizational look at trends. In particular, look at the outcomes associated with the voluntary family maintenance program.

2.) Assess the current state of reporting and reporting systems.

San Mateo uses a simple criterion for judging report utility. It asks, given this information what action will you take? Reports judged to be useful may need to be reformatted in order to assure that reports can and will be read. Reports should be provided in graphs, charts and tables. Numbers reporting should have a standard or comparison number to increase the significance to the reader. Comparisons to a federally mandated level, state average, baseline evaluation figures or from a comparable county can increase the readability of reports.

Current reporting functions may be limited by the nature of CWS/CMS and CAD. These reports are numeric and reflective of case counts. The information may need to be imported through analytic statistical programs such as SPSS. There would be a large investment of time up-front but reports could then be routinely generated, much as ad hoc reports are thereafter generated monthly as a clerical function.

With some effort, graphs can be developed to describe multiple outcomes across units, such as the following movement table.

Figure 1: Movement Table

	Closure	Home	Foster Home	Group	Institut	Totals
ER / Intake	1	2	8	0	0	11
Home	2	18	1	0	0	21
Foster Care	4	6	103	1	0	114
Group Res.	0	0	1	4	0	5
Institut	0	1	0	0	0	1
Totals	7	27	113	5	0	152

This graph would be given to all placement supervisors and could be customized for each unit to include a line graph showing prior months movement in the foster care system. In this particular table the right hand total is the number of children at the beginning of the counting period for each component and the gray diagonal indicates the number of children remaining in that component after children have moved.

3). Investigate the purchase of the CAD IQ, Safe Measures or similar reporting tool.

CAD IQ has the ability to analyze data down to the unit level. This will assist in incorporating agency strategy into case practice. This also has the ability to fundamentally change worker, supervisor and manager roles and expectations.

4). Foster the learning organization.

The Sonoma County Department of Human Services mission statement mentions a commitment to being a learning organization. Along the same lines, the Division of Family, Youth and Children's Services should continue to emphasize a commitment to ongoing evaluation. There should be a celebration

of its successes, a review of its failures and creative adaptation to changes as reflected in the outcomes of its clients. The commitment to self-evaluate should be on par in the mission statement with the other core values of providing services to our clients.

5). Facilitate the Cultural Shift.

The change to a learning organization will change the culture of the agency. Organizational cultural is defined as the shared values, attitudes, and behaviors of its members. Instituting reporting functions that can analyze to the caseload or unit level has the potential to upset present working relationships. Supportive relationships between supervisor and workers may be negatively affected. Handled poorly, the reports could be used for fault seeking. Some workers may feel that the reports are generated to "look over their shoulder" at their case management.

Facilitating the shift will require setting a priority for outcome-based evaluation training and outcome-based performance reviews. The Bay Area Academy, BASSC and CALSWEC should be approached about providing regular training or emphasis in all training components being offered.

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