

ANOTHER ROAD TO SAFETY: FAMILY-FOCUSED, STRENGTHS-BASED SERVICES IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Child welfare services traditionally intervene and assist families who are struggling with the dynamics of child abuse and neglect, and court-ordered intervention is often needed to assure the safety of the children in the home. Another Road to Safety (ARS) moves the focus of services, which are community-based, towards looking at preventing child abuse and neglect in an arena that is inclusive, supportive and educational to families. Another Road to Safety is a system that promotes family well-being, and self-sufficiency to create healthy, safe families and communities.

In 1998 an analysis was completed to ascertain how the Alameda Department of Children and Families Services was responding to families referred for alleged child abuse and neglect. It was apparent that there was a lack of resources for early intervention and prevention services at the front end of the child welfare system. As a result of this information, Alameda County Social Services, in partnership with Alameda County Children and Families Commission (Every Child Counts) and two community-based collaboratives, developed the ARS program.

KEY ELEMENTS

ARS is intended to reduce child abuse and neglect by targeting the low to moderate risk families who are currently screened out of services from CPS.

There is now another road to provide services to these families—diversion to the community-based, intensive family support service delivery program that is provided by ARS.

Families that reside in two targeted communities—East Oakland and South Hayward—receive ARS services. These communities include diverse populations and represent the largest numbers of referrals into the CPS Child Abuse Hotline. The purpose of the intervention is to provide in-home services for up to nine months that would include parent support, education services, child health and developmental screening, and coordinated services for families using outside agencies. The goal of ARS is to stabilize and strengthen families by linking them to community resources in the hope that they will not enter the CPS system.

The CPS hotline screener utilizes the Structure Decision Making (SDM) tool to determine the response priority. After the screener determines that there is no need for investigation, the referral is screened out. If the screener then determines this referral meets the ARS eligibility criteria, it is referred to ARS by the Emergency Response Supervisor, who is the Agency liaison with staff from a community-based organization.

The CBO, at the first home visit, conducts a thorough family assessment that reflects risk factors and family strengths, and develops with the family a service plan that supports the strengths and needs

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of the family. Family Advocates provide weekly ongoing services for a period of nine months.

ARS primary outcomes include:

- Safety of child(ren) is ensured
- Family is stabilized and preserved
- Repeat referrals reduced
- Family does not enter into CPS system
- Family's connection to the community is strengthened
- Health and well-being of families and their community are promoted
- Program planning is directly tied to measurable outcomes and indicators

RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of preventing child abuse and neglect will most effectively be met if there is a concerted effort by San Mateo County Human Services Agency and community-based organizations to assist and intervene with families who are at risk. These collaborative efforts will, in turn, promote children living safely at home and prevent the trend of increased child welfare caseloads. Therefore, it is recommended that San Mateo County embark on a program similar to Another Road to Safety (ARS).

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Another Road to Safety (ARS) is a program designed to identify and work with a target group of families who would not traditionally receive services available within the child welfare system. ARS is focused on promoting child and family well-being and preventing child abuse.

The Child Welfare League of America and the Alameda County Department of Children and Family Services completed an analysis of how the department was responding to families referred to child welfare services. It was identified that there was a lack of early intervention and prevention services offered at the initial referral screening process. It found that only 20% of the families received services. In an effort to develop and plan a process to review best practices to serve this unmet need, a collaboration between the Alameda County Social Services Agency, Every Child Counts (Children and Families Commission) and Health Care Services was formed. The collaboration created an alternative response program that replaced the formal child welfare services provided by the Children's Protective Services (CPS).

PROGRAM AND SERVICES

Alameda County's Alternative Response System—now called “Another Road to Safety”—provides intensive prevention and early intervention service to families who had been referred to CPS, but were screened out because there was not an immediate safety issue and there was not an immediate risk of serious harm to children.

ARS currently serves moderate to high risk families who are diverted from CPS to a community-based, intensive family support service delivery program. Family-focused, strength-based services are provided through contracts with local community-based organizations (CBO's). Family Support Services of the Bay Area, serving East Oakland, and LaFamilia Counseling Services, serving the South Hayward, are the contracted CBO's. The communities identified to receive services included a diverse population and represent the largest number of referrals into the CPS Child Abuse Hotline.

Contracted CBO's

The contracted CBO's, as a part of the Memorandum of Understanding between Alameda County Social Services Agency and Every Child Counts (ECC), entered into an agreement, in April 2002, with the ECC to provide community-based outreach services within the two designated communities.

The goals of ECC are to:

- Support optimal parenting, and social and emotional self-sufficiency of families;
- Improve the development and school readiness of young children from birth to age five;
- Improve the overall physical and mental health of children; and
- Create an integrated, coordinated system of care that maximizes existing resources and minimizes duplication of services.

Alameda County received a waiver from the State of California Department of Social Services (CDSS)

which allows the community-based organizations to provide case management services and bill under Title IV-E. As of April 2003, a waiver was granted that amended the Child Welfare Services manual of Policies and Procedures, Division 31 regulations: Section 31.301.21. This waiver allows Alameda County to contract case management services. As a part of the multidisciplinary case management team information is shared without breaching confidentiality.

Each of the CBO's has a clinical supervisor, a program coordinator, and four family advocates, each carrying a caseload of 13. Families receiving ARS services have been overwhelmingly receptive to their in-home service model. Through the family centered, strength-based approach, families have been able to identify their needs and, with the assistance of the Family Advocate, they are able to call upon their own resources and to utilize community-based services.

To assure accountability, ECC implemented the ECChange, which is a web-based, cross-agency secure information system that tracks and measures the impact of ECC's family support services. The ECChange is a mobile system that allows the user to enter data while in their office or in the field and be used in a connected or disconnected mode.

The benefits of ECChange are that it:

- Simplifies the enrollment process;
- Enables data sharing across participating agencies for integrated case management;
- Enables primary data collection in the field;
- Eliminates need for paper forms and redundant data collection;
- Facilitates integrated outcomes reporting and quality assurance monitoring; and

- Respects the privacy and confidentiality rights of children and families (i.e. HIPPA compliant)

ARS Funding

ARS funding is met by combining funding resources from Proposition 10 through Every Child Counts and a grant obtained by the Alameda County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services.

Proposition 10 funds through Every Child Counts:

- \$40K for an extensive planning process 9/01/02
- \$500K for FY 2001-2002 to execute contracts and start-up budget approved 4/02
- \$1M budgeted for FY 2002-2003

The Alameda County Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services grant from the Administration on Children, Youth and Families under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act:

- \$440K for FY 2002-2003

ARS Guiding Principles

ARS guiding principles include child safety as a priority; standardized and uniform decision making; family enrollment when child safety is assured; respect for and partnering with families in decision making; strengthening and preserving families; and offering community-based and culturally competent services.

ARS Eligibility Criteria

- Families must live in one of the two targeted communities
- A child 0-5 years of age must reside in the home or a pregnant mother must reside in the home

ARS Target Population

- Families with children ages 0-5 at risk for entering Child Welfare System
- Abuse and neglect allegations for children ages 0-5 that do not pose an immediate risk of serious harm to the child(ren)

If it has been established at the time of the report that there is a child 0-5 in the home, then these additional categories of children and youth are eligible for services:

- Families with children 5-17 at risk for entering the child welfare system
- Abuse and neglect allegations for children 5-17 that do not pose an immediate risk of serious harm to the child(ren)
- Physical abuse allegations for children 5-17 that relate to physical discipline and do not include current injuries, and
- Physical abuse allegations concerning parent-teen conflicts that do not have current injuries.

ARS services are provided by local community-based organizations, with strong support from county agencies, input from families, and a high degree of accountability through program evaluation and outcome measurements. ARS services will include a stable and ongoing in-home connection to culturally competent Family Advocate Case Managers who are clinically supervised by professional social workers; and include access to multi-disciplinary teams that represent health, mental health, child development and education.

ARS Assessment Tools

ARS assessment tools that are used include:

- Structured Decision-Making (SDM)
- California Response Priority
- Safety Assessment

- Risk Assessment
- Ages and Stages-child development assessment
- Edinburgh Depression Scale
- Beck Depression Inventory
- The 4Ps Plus Screen for Risk of Alcohol or Drug Abuse
- Mental Health Inventory (5)

The challenges faced during the ARS implementation include: the Agency's fiscal issues- the challenge presented by the continuing state and county budget crisis affected the Agency's ability to participate at the level anticipated when the ARS planning process began. This affected both the numbers of families to be served and the eligibility criteria. County staff that had been working on the federal grant transitioned and impacted the necessary process to have the grant approved by the Alameda County Board of Supervisors before being able to access the federal grant funds. Additionally, the task of bringing together a large public agency, ECC, and two community organizations to create an integrated service system is in itself a challenging proposition. The other major challenge that needed to be addressed was the dissolution of the parenting agencies in East Oakland. It was learned that while individuals and their organizations may have the desire to serve a certain community, it is important to understand organizational cultures and to determine the commitment to the process and the model as well as the program.

The ARS program initially offered services to 100 families in the Hayward and East Oakland communities. Of the 100 families that were interviewed in person in their homes, 50 families were in the initial start-up, and of those there were 35 families approaching the 9-month time limit. The CPS hotline received and processed 517 referrals during the first year, which were identified as eligible for

ARS services. Each referral was reviewed by the emergency response supervisor/ARS liaison to determine if they met the ARS criteria and identified 80 referrals that were referred to the community-based organizations.

ARS contracted services include: in-person, in-home response within 10 days; family strength-based assessment with family input; in-home parent education; screening of all children for health and development needs; actively referring to services; securing “basic needs”; referring to intensive family support services based on acuity of needs; and referring back to DCFS as needed when risk of abuse and/or neglect is assessed as high.

ARS eligible families will be thoroughly counseled on the purpose of the program; advised of their options to participate in ARS or have DCFS be informed that they refused this service; asked to give their consent to participate; and advised that they can revoke consent at any time.

The CBO’s faced some challenges that included participants starting but not completing, or the advocate not being able to build a relationship with the participant. ARS is a volunteer program and participants have to consent to receive services thus resulting in some participants refusing services. Some of the family situations made it difficult to connect with participants as they were homeless, did not have a phone, or no longer resided at the last known residence which resulted in ARS closing the case.

Some outcomes of the ARS program include:

- Enhanced economic self-sufficiency among program participants;

- Increased access to early and comprehensive assessment to support children and families emotionally, developmentally and economically;
- Measurable improvement in school attendance and academic performance; and
- More children able to live safely at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for San Mateo County to implement a program similar to ARS, consideration of the following strategies is recommended:

- Educate, collaborate, and partner with CBO’s which are charged with the mission to promote well-being of children and families;
- Seek creative financing through nonprofit partnerships—this option allows nonprofit agencies with the ability to fundraise to leverage additional funding (i.e. grants);
- Create, in partnership with the CBO’s, a comprehensive plan and guiding principles:
 - Determine eligibility criteria
 - Define target population
 - Develop measurable program outcomes
 - Determine and create program components, services, and tools
 - Develop an accountability evaluation plan that includes a confidentiality and privacy policy, community grants accountability, qualitative and quantitative evaluation, technical infrastructure and support; and
- Develop a Workforce Preparation plan to educate and train both Agency and CBO personnel.

The challenge of designing and implementing child abuse and neglect prevention and early intervention services is best approached with data analysis, community capacity-building, and ongoing family input. By accomplishing the goal of linking families to community resources that can stabilize and

strengthen families, we can ensure the safety of children which will impact the need to make repeat referrals to the CPS system.

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RESOURCES

The Oakland Tribune, Unique county program tries to keep families together, by Donna Horowitz
Every Child Counts (ECC) ARS Program
Information and Another Road to Safety Outcome Indicators May 2002
Alameda County Social Service Agency, Another Road to Safety Program Information
LaFamilia Counseling Service Program Information

