

California Children's System of Care

A New Approach: Multi-Disciplinary Teams

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Navigator Program through Contra Costa County could be a strategy to support Santa Clara County families that do not enter the child welfare system but still have significant needs. Santa Clara County is in the process of launching the California: Children's System of Care in response to AB2083. Adapting the Navigator Program to a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach for families that do not meet criteria for Child Welfare Services could prevent future referrals. Many of the issues that generate Emergency Response (ER) referrals, sometimes identified as

complicating factors like unemployment and socio-economic stressors, could be addressed through an MDT and a needs assessment conducted with the family. Based on the needs identified, these service providers can come to the table and brainstorm with the family to meet the family's needs outside of child welfare. Ultimately, the adapted Navigator Program and MDT could prevent the recurrence of maltreatment, and promote self-sufficiency for families while reducing the number of children coming into the child welfare system.

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Introduction

Contra Costa County's Navigator Program is formally known as 4 Our Families¹. The goal of this program is to empower families and individuals, and to assist them in creating their own paths to healthy independence. In 2018, the Navigator team began a "whole person approach" to provide a warm, welcoming environment designed to: identify and overcome obstacles to success, provide coaching to enable participants to be their own advocates going forward, and provide supportive navigating of resources available to their participants. The Navigators consist of four Social Service Program Assistants and one Senior Level Clerk. This team is housed in the CalWORKs Division at six different locations throughout Contra Costa County. They work within the community to develop relationships with new agencies such as Faith-Based Organizations, Community Based Organizations, and existing internal and external organizations to holistically serve client needs.

Initially, clients were referred to the team by county reception offices, email, phone calls, walk-ins, and referrals from the many organizations with which the team collaborated. Due to the pandemic, the team mobilized in early 2020 to provide a rapid response approach to address the needs of their clients in Contra Costa County impacted by COVID-19. Expediting access to services was paramount. The Navigator would identify and address the barriers that clients and their families may be experiencing and provide effective coordination of services and referrals during the initial interview. The navigators facilitated and coordinated access to housing, food, financial assistance,

application assistance, legal support, children's needs, transportation, medical assistance, immigration assistance, mental health services, substance abuse services, and many other programs that augment the services that the Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD) provides the community. The Navigators re-engage the client after 30 to 60 days of service delivery to assure that client needs have been met, provide other resources that the client may need, and address any new needs or concerns. The 4 Our Families Navigators have assisted over 4,000 families.

Santa Clara County Background

The impetus for studying the Navigator program stems from CA Assembly Bill 2083, signed and enacted into law in September of 2018. This bill requires each county to develop and implement a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) setting forth roles and responsibilities of agencies (system partners) and other entities that serve children and youth². The following agencies ratified the MOU: Social Services Agency, Department of Family and Children's Services, Juvenile Probation, Behavioral Health, Public Health, Santa Clara County Office of Education, Juvenile Court, Regional Center, and Legal Advocates for Children and Youth, among others. The MOU followed the blueprint set forth by AB2083, leading to California's Children's System of Care, guided by the Integrated Core Practice Model.

The Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) has made concerted efforts to reduce the number of children entering the Child Welfare System (CWS) with

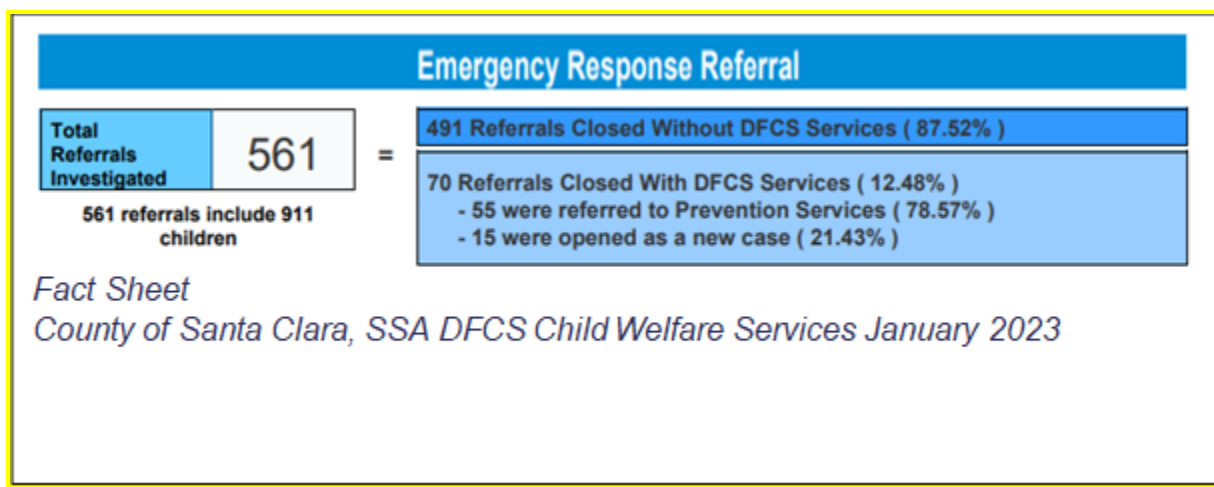
¹ Contra Costa County, For Our Families, Spring Projects for BASSC Executive Development Program, 2023.

² AB 2083: Children and Youth System of Care (2020). California Welfare Directors' Association Conference. Retrieved from: https://www.cwda.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/ab_2083_toward_effective_children_and_youth_system_of_care_1.45pm_draft3.pdf?1604511094

particular emphasis on reducing the disproportionality of families of color. In January of 2023, DFCS Emergency Response (ER) conducted an investigation of 561 referrals: 70 closed with Prevention Services, 491 closed without services (Table 1). DFCS is focused on reducing the number of families that come back with new

referrals and thus reducing the number of families potentially entering the CWS. Many of the 491 families investigated by ER, and closed without services, could potentially be eligible for a multitude of services not involving DFCS.

Table 1. DFCS Emergency Response Referrals



Recommendations

Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency has created an asset map with over 180 programs throughout the City of San Jose and the County of Santa Clara. However, the vast majority of these programs are unknown to ER social workers. This is a resource rich county, but if the staff are unaware of them, then they cannot refer families to these services. Santa Clara County could adapt Contra Costa's Navigator Program with particular emphasis on serving families who do not meet criteria for Differential Response or Non-Court Services. This adaptation could be modeled on a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach that brings together agency and community partners to identify needs and create warm handoffs. The MDT process

could help reduce the number of families that come back to DFCS with new referrals. Some possible recommendations for developing this MDT process could include:

- Obtain funding from The Families First Services Prevention Act (FFPSA), which has substantial funding attached to it and could be a source of revenue along with the existing contracts already funded. It could include the MDT component in the service array for families who come to the attention of the Department at the ER level.
- Create an Opt-In Assessment Form to participate in the MDT process. DFCS has a Pillars of Needs data collection tool that could be

repurposed to capture families' needs.

- Amend the existing contract with Cultural Brokers to be a standing participant of the MDT to assist families with completing documents for various services available in the community.
- Pilot test the proposed MDT process in South County's ER, due to the manageable size of this team under a single manager.

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Conclusion

The success of the Navigators program in Contra Costa County is a testament to the county's commitment to the wellbeing of its residents. The continued partnerships in the community represent an investment in maintaining and strengthening relationships with community partners. Adapting the Navigator Program to the MDT model could engage families in the spirit of AB2083.

Keeping children in their communities with their families is a core value for DFCS. Bringing services and support to the family would underscore DFCS' commitment to families, while connecting them with services through MDTs. The proposed MDT model would create a safety net strong enough to keep the family from being re-referred to Child Welfare Services. This additional level of prevention would further augment the prevention services array within Santa Clara. With an eye on continuous quality improvement, a pilot in the South County office could demonstrate how the model works and explore alternatives to best meet the family's needs.

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