

## **FAMILY GROUP DECISION-MAKING NEW DIRECTION FOR SOCIAL SERVICES**

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*"Tell me and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand. "* - Native American Proverb

### **PURPOSE**

Contra Costa County is facing a major challenge in Child Welfare Services given the depleting resource of foster homes. Ever more apparent is the need to develop a service delivery system that easily involves and assesses the appropriate use of relative placement as a viable option to foster care and Juvenile Court intervention. With the central objective of assessing relatives for emergency and long term placements of children in out of home placement, this BASSC Interagency Project explores Santa Clara County's innovative Family Conference Model as a possible service program for Contra Costa County.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A truly powerful process occurred when a family came together for a family conference in Santa Clara County to address the long term placement needs of two young children, three and nine years of age. The half brothers, dependents of the Court, were removed from their parents and placed in an emergency short term relative placement with the elderly maternal grandparents due to child abuse as a result of substance abuse of the mother and her spouse, father of the three year old. Present for the family conference was the mother, both fathers, the maternal grandparents, a married maternal aunt and her spouse, a single maternal aunt, the Family Reunification Child Protective Social Worker, this observer, and the Family Conference Facilitators. This family conference was requested by the Social Worker with the consent of the parents to decide the best permanent placement plan for the young boys. After discussing the family strengths, the family's and the Court's concerns. the family met privately and agreed upon a plan for the boys if the parents were successful in completing the Court Ordered Reunification Plan as well as a long term placement plan if the parents were not successful. For the first time, all the family members were united together to hear the strengths within the family, to hear the Court's concerns of the substance abuse and the need for a permanent placement plan if the parents are not successful in the reunification process which may include adoption for one or both of the children. The married maternal aunt expressed her concerns that the maternal grandparents were limited in their ability to provide for the children on a permanent basis due to financial, residential, and medical reasons. Together and through their own private process, the Family agreed: 1) the parents would be in compliance with the court orders by the 12 month review; 2) returning the children home would be the ideal situation; 3) if reunification services are terminated, the family wanted the father to gain custody of the older child, and the married maternal aunt to become legal guardian of the younger child. For the first time, all the family members felt heard. They learned of the crisis in these young children's lives, and the legal requirements. For **the first time** the family became part of the permanent planning process, and the Family Reunification Social Worker felt the family was working with her and not against her. The Family Conference Summary Report of the family's plan was sent to all participants and attached to the next Court Report.

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This powerful process was committed to strengthening and empowering a family to take responsibility for their children's placement outcomes. Since the early 1990s, many child welfare agencies in the United States have been organizing family meeting processes to capitalize on the family's strengths and wisdom to develop service plans for their children to ensure their safety. This approach is Family Group Decision Making (FGDM). It is a family centered, child focused, strength based and culturally competent practice that brings parents and other family members into the child welfare decision making process. It is a partnership between the family, the community and government working collaboratively toward the achievement of positive outcomes.

## **HISTORY**

This creative new approach to working with families whose children have been abused or neglected first emerged in New Zealand in 1989. It emerged in the United States one year later when the Oregon State Children and Family Services began to use a family group decision making process to promote and utilize family strengths, family resources and natural family support systems to ensure children's safety.

Experiencing a significant increase in the size of its foster care population, and recognizing that removing children from their parents, families, and neighborhoods can be as harmful as the maltreatment they experienced, Santa Clara County sought an alternative to traditional practice that would empower families and divert more children from the child welfare system. In the fall of 1995, John Oppenheim, Social Services Agency Deputy Director and Director of the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS), and the Honorable Leonard Edwards, Superior Court Judge, began discussing the merits of a Family Group Decision Making model similar to those implemented in New Zealand and Oregon. Since 1996, Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) has been offering families who come to the agency's attention an opportunity to participate in a Family Group Decision Making process called the Family Conference Model. Santa Clara County's Family Conference Model adopted different aspects from New Zealand's Family Group Conference Model and Oregon's Family Unity Model. While professionals can be in the room throughout Oregon's Family Unity meetings, Santa Clara chose to base its program on the New Zealand model that excludes professionals from the decision making stage of the meeting.

Santa Clara County expanded their commitment to the use of FGDM in 1998, when the County Board of Supervisors approved funding for the Family Conference Institute for the purpose of providing the following services:

- Recruit, train and support facilitators.
- Centralize resources for all Family Conference referrals.
- Expand the Family Conference Model to other agencies in Santa Clara County serving children and families.

## **FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT**

The use of Family Group Decision Making represents a fundamental shift in the way Child Welfare Services are designed and delivered. Current Child Welfare Services are "professionally centered." In "professionally centered" services the "professional expert" determines what the client needs. Families are viewed as operating from a deficit, and therefore, services are aimed at correcting family deficits by fitting families to a professional service. This requires a low level of family decision making because it focuses on identifying and removing problems using fixed roles and fixed service provisions.

FGDM, on the other hand, represents a shift to a "Family Centered" service delivery system. In "Family Centered" services, families identify the need. Families are viewed as operating from capability, and services are aimed at identifying and strengthening capabilities. Therefore, services are tailored to the uniqueness of the family need. This requires a high level of family decision making, and focuses on enhancing competencies with flexible roles and flexible service provisions. There are, however, some limits to the application of a family centered approach. For some families it may be necessary to use a more authoritative or "professionally driven" approach when child safety is in jeopardy or when parents lack the capacity or willingness to participate in a collaborative decision making process.

## **VALUES**

Family Group Decision Making is based on the values that:

- Families have strengths that can be used to resolve issues and concerns related to the care and protection of their children.
- These strengths are discovered through listening, noticing, and paying attention to family members.
- Focus is on issues and concerns rather than problems.

## **REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING**

The primary reasons to implement Family Group Decision Making in child welfare services are:

- A disproportionate number of children in care are minorities.
- Children are spending more time in out-of-home care.
- Children have multiple placements.
- Services are not based in the culture of the children.

## **WHEN TO CONSIDER A FAMILY CONFERENCE**

Family Conferences are developed and utilized at critical decision making points throughout the child welfare process:

- After the initial investigation or assessment is completed, and there is reasonable cause to believe that the child is in need of care and protection.
- When out-of-home placement or reunification is being considered.
- Anytime it would benefit the family to gather their relatives with community members and DFCS staff to discuss possible outcomes for the care and protection of a child.

Santa Clara County completed 131 Family Conferences in 1998:

Emergency Response	18
Emergency Response Court	33
Family Reunification	38
Permanent Placement	27
Family Maintenance	10
Voluntary Family Maintenance	4
Voluntary Family Reunification	1

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The Family Conference participation policy is inclusive. The best definition of "family" is the definition that families use themselves. Whatever the family; birth, nuclear, extended, informal, blended, step, foster, adoptive; families work better when they have the opportunity to define themselves. To prevent the Family Conference from becoming adversarial in nature, involved attorneys do not attend. In some instances, a non-attorney representative of the child's attorney may attend as an advocate on behalf of the child.

## **TRAINING**

The Family Conference Institute has developed procedures for orientating staff interested in using a Family Group Decision Making process as well as procedures for recruiting and training staff to become part of the facilitator pool. For staff interested in becoming a facilitator they must attend the one day Orientation Workshop, a three day Facilitator Training Level I Workshop and a four day Advanced Facilitation Workshop. To help educate staff on FCM, The Family Conference Gazette, a quarterly newsletter, is distributed to all DFCS staff. It contains information on the purpose, process and current outcomes of the Family Conference Model.

## **CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

Cultural competency is critical to the success of a Family Conference. Not only are all new facilitators trained in cultural competency, they also reflect the ethnic backgrounds of the different populations served and have a variety of language capabilities.

## **PHASES OF FAMILY CONFERENCE MODEL**

Phase I - Information Gathering includes the children, birth parents, relatives, extended family members, the social worker, the facilitator and other community professionals. During this phase, the professionals and the family discuss the family's strengths, concerns and any court information relevant to the issues specific to the conference.

Phase II - Private Family Time is the period during which the family discusses the issues presented and attempts to reach a decision about what is in the best interests of the children. The facilitator is available to participate in private family time at the request of a participant if he/she expresses they do not feel safe being alone with their family.

Phase III - Decision Making provides an opportunity for professionals to rejoin the family and have the family present their plan.

The average conference can last from three to five hours. Food is provided for the Family Conference due to the length of the conference. When the meeting is over, the facilitator is responsible for preparing a written report that is forwarded to all conference participants. In court cases, the family's plan is presented to the court where the Judge retains the ultimate authority to make changes. The social worker is responsible for coordinating and researching any services recommended in the family plan. Santa Clara County recently received a grant to purchase resources for families to complete the Family Plan (i.e.; transportation, housing).

## **FOLLOW-UP FAMILY CONFERENCES**

A Family Conference is not to be viewed as a "one time event." Participants are offered the option prior to the conclusion of the initial conference if they would like a follow up conference within a specified time period. Moreover, families are to be notified during the initial conference that if any aspect of their agreed upon plan fails, any participant can contact the referring social worker and request a follow up conference to address the shortcomings of the original plan. Follow up conferences will then be scheduled at the discretion of the referring social worker and the Family Conference Lead Facilitator.

## **FUNDING**

The Family Conference Model in Santa Clara County is funded entirely through the county. Santa Clara County has received grants, however, to purchase items to complete the Family Plan and to complete a three year evaluation of the program.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTRA COSTA COUNTY**

Family Group Decision Making clearly has demonstrated to be an effective way of assessing relatives for emergency and long term placements of children in need of out of home placement throughout the Child Welfare System. In addition, it has been quite effective, when used in the Emergency Response phase of Children's Services, in avoiding entry into foster care system all together. More importantly, however, not only is it, an effective way to assess relatives, it empowers relatives and families and makes them part of the planning process and solution.

Implementing FGDM in Contra Costa County . Children's Services would be very beneficial in addressing most of concerns recently identified at the annual Children Services Management Supervisor Off-Site Meeting. FGDM would reduce many workload issues, social worker burnout and retention, hostile Court atmosphere and support for Kinship Services. The results of FGDM are so successful that it is now in the process of being expanded to Cal-Works in Santa Clara County.

## **BENEFICIAL IMPACTS**

Santa Clara County's anecdotal reports indicate that FGDM has benefited participants and the child welfare system in the following ways:

- Decrease number of children placed into foster care.
- Decrease delays in the court process.
- Decrease frequency of contested court hearings.
- Reduce job stress for Social Workers
- Provide support for parents and guardians.
- Identify relatives early.
- Prevent future incidents of child maltreatment.
- Reduce expenditures of foster care resources.
- Identify and tap resources within family systems.
- Increase relative placements.
- Stabilize placements.
- Reduce length of time spent by children in outof-home care.
- Increase incidence of siblings remaining together.
- Increase the number of cases that successfully reunify.

## **LEGAL MANDATE**

The use of a family centered, strength based assessment and planning process is the future of human services for California in the next millennium. Senate Bill 933, Chapter 311, Statutes of 1998, requires the California Department of Social Services to make available "Best Practice Guidelines" for the assessment of children and families to all county placing agencies and the

courts. The "Best Practice Guidelines" lay the foundation for the development of a family centered, strength based assessment and planning process across the full spectrum of the child welfare and foster care services.

## **KEY LESSONS**

Santa Clara County has pioneered this reshaping of human services in California. and much can be learned from their experience:

- The support of the County Board of Supervisors, the Superior Court Judges, and the Director of the Social Service Department are absolutely critical to making this fundamental shift in the design and delivery of child welfare services.
- To view FGDM as appropriate for only Child Welfare Services would be clearly short sighted. The implications are far greater and very applicable to all County Departments serving children, families and adults. It is only when governmental and community service delivery systems focus on developing and using the positive strengths of the nuclear and extended family can the best, most successful, services be provide to all clients.
- They found more success implementing the program when allowing DFCS Staff to voluntarily incorporate FGDM into their casework practice rather than making it mandatory.
- The use of DFCS Staff to be the full time facilitators improved the use of FGDM by regular DFCS Staff. The DFCS full time facilitators were well known and respected by DFCS Staff and were positioned within the DFCS building to facilitate communication, consultation and referrals.

## **ACTION STEPS**

1. Integrate FGDM into the service delivery system of all Departments within the Social Service Department serving children, adults and families county wide; i.e.; Children Services, Cal-Works, and Adult Protective Services. After fully operational for a couple of years, FGDM may be considered for other Departments within the County; i.e.; Mental Health, Public Health and Probation.
2. Establish an FGDM Department that would oversee all FGDM services to Children's Services, Cal-Works and Adult Protective Services. The FGDM Department would be administered by a Division Manager, a supervisor, 6 to 8 full time facilitators, 2 social casework assistants, and 1 clerical support position. The 6 to 8 full time facilitators should be ethnically and language competent to the County's client population and representative of the County Departments involved.
3. Develop one facility in each of the East, Central and West regions of Contra Costa County. The three facilities should be community based and user friendly, conducive to facilitating up to three family conferences at a time. *Child care should be available on site while family*

*conferences, are being held.* The FGDM Facility should be available during the day, evening and weekends.

4. Train a pool of facilitators in groups of 20 trainees at a time. When fully operational, the facilitator pool would be composed of 45 trained facilitators. The facilitator pool should be representative of all County Departments, and made up of both County Employees and *Community Based Organizations*. The facilitator pool would be trained in cultural competency, reflect the ethnic backgrounds of the different populations served and have a variety of language capabilities. This facilitator pool would be used primarily to work with the full time facilitator as a cofacilitator. These facilitators would be volunteers who provide facilitation in addition to their full time work responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

During Family Conferences, this observer could feel the power of emotions, the positive forces of cooperation between the professionals and the family members, the lessening of the conflicts normally experienced in Child Protective Services, and the combined strengths of the family and community members. The positives of this philosophical shift in service delivery were clearly apparent in attitudes of the facilitators, co-facilitators and support personnel involved in the program. Everyone involved with the Family Conference Model seemed to have more energy, be happier, and feel extremely positive about the work they were doing. Family members, involved community professionals, and staff came away from the family conference feeling extremely positive about the experience.

The Family Conference Institute Staff apply FGDM essential elements whenever consulting with other departments or managing a meeting. The principles of FGDM are very applicable to unit meetings, division meetings and managerial planning meetings. Empowering people, capitalizing on their combined strengths, focusing on issues and concerns rather than problems and respecting their culture, feels good to everyone. Just as the historical Public Welfare Assistance Programs have been turned in new directions that empower clients, it is also time to turn the historical Child Welfare Services in new directions that also empower clients through the use of Family Group Decision Making.