

Strengthening Families

Winter 2009

A New Idea Takes Hold — Family Team Conferences

This winter, a Child Protective Investigator from the Department of Children and Families and specialists from the Partnership for Strong Families, and Meridian Behavioral Healthcare demonstrated the power of a new approach to help a parent in crisis. Working as a team, they can report a good outcome, with the family safe and together.

Several months ago, when M.R. was pregnant, her boyfriend battered her so law enforcement and DCF were called. She was given referrals for services and urged to get help, but she did not follow up. A second call was made to the hotline due to more domestic disputes.

M.R. says now that, "I was scared. I thought, oh my goodness, they are going to take my kids. The counselor told me right away that she was there to help me and not take my kids."

The investigator, Jennifer Flinn, said, "I could tell she was terrified, she didn't have to say a word. Parents are much more willing to work with us if we are supportive and try to create a relationship to help them solve some problems. We are changing the way we work to provide services faster. I think it's changing

how families view DCF."

Next, Ms. Flinn called Toni Spoliansky at Partnerhip and Rosa West from Meridian Behavioral Healthcare to join her for a Family Team Conference to set up services right away. M.R. was invited to have her

mentor there, she was at ease to talk and make a plan for her family. The mentor told me he was surprised to be asked and it was such a nice thing to be included to help her and her children."

M.R. has followed up with all services and says she loves having the Meridian counselor come to her house to meet with the family. She adds, "Everybody was helping me and not trying to divide me and my kids."

Ms. Flinn adds, "M.R. is a good parent but needs encouragement. Her older children are doing well in school and she's back at work. Best of all, she and



her children are safe and she's benefiting from counseling about domestic violence." All the people at this Family Team Conference, believe the meeting holds the key to supporting parents in making changes that provide a safe home for their children. Ms. Spoliansky reminds us, "Sometimes parents have been too scared to get help. Parents want to do a good job for their kids."

This is another way to help parents do just that and keep kids safely in their homes instead of in shelter. Ms. Spoliansky is sold on the value of using Family Team Conferencing. "It takes training and practice, but you guide the conversation to help the parent identify what they do well. Sometimes you have to encourage them. M.R. was so happy to have her spiritual

mentor come to the meeting, too. In two hours they made a plan to address the family's need for daycare and counseling, based on M.R.'s strengths as a parent and the support from people important to her as well.

Ms. Spoliansky is sold on the value of using Family Team Conferencing. "It takes training and practice, but you guide the conversation to help the parent identify what they do well. Sometimes you have to encourage them. M.R. was so happy to have her spiritual

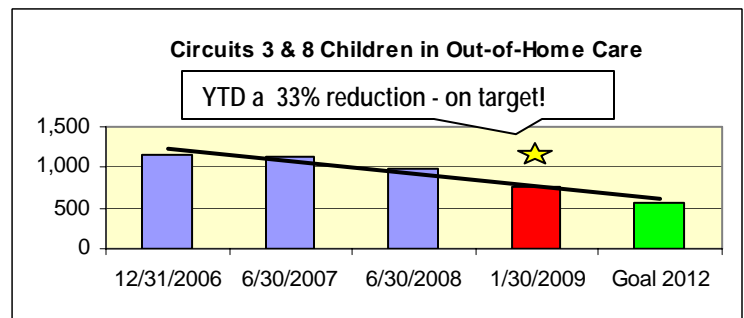
"We must reunify families when we safely can, and do it with a sense of urgency, common sense, and a sense of community."

George Sheldon
Secretary
Department of
Children & Families



Tracking Progress: Children in Out of Home Care

Ester Tibbs, Circuit Administrator notes work to safely reduce the number of children in out of home care is on track. "Together, we are making progress. The goal is to have a 50% reduction by 2012. We have a 33% reduction and met the June 2009 progress goal to secure safe and stable homes for children."



Keys to Re-thinking Child Protection Services & Making Changes

Our Services Should:

1. Be family centered to build on family strengths and community resources.
2. Engage families positively with services.
3. Get help in fast for substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence issues.
4. Make every effort to place child with relatives or in their own community, if shelter is necessary for safety.

☑ Extensive training has been provided to all levels of staff about the importance of safely reducing the number of children in out of home care. Senior leaders have addressed multiple community groups and forums on this new direction and built a receptive audience eager to support needed changes.

☑ Another key has been the active solicitation of staff input and feedback during the project, especially during procedure and process changes. The incorporation of staff in all Continuous Quality Improvements with feedback has also boosted support for the changes.

☑ Team Decision Making: We have made significant changes in review of high-risk investigations and case plans. Staff teams with varying expertise ensure the individual needs of the family are met while safely maintaining children in their own homes. At all levels, staff are learning strategies to promote a family's timely engagement in services.

A Decision Team Consultant provides leadership and facilitates many of teams. The success of Family Team Conferences (on page 1) is an example of the new teamwork in place.

☑ Diversion Services: The Partnership provides needed

services to families based on family needs and strengths. This work is done within the first days or even hours of an investigation to stabilize families and assure children remain in their homes. Diversion staff are even co-located with Department investigators.

☑ Partnership with Casey Family Programs: Given the ambitious reduction goals of both Casey Family Programs and the State of Florida, a partnership was created to connect Florida to Casey's national reduction strategy. Casey Family Program consultants and the technical assistance have been generously provided and have been vital to the entire effort.

A Neighborhood Resource Center in NE Gainesville with the Partnership Library - of the Alachua County Library District

We want the Center to:

- ✓ Build friendships and ties to the community for all families
- ✓ Be a place for parent-child activities for moms and dads
- ✓ Help with family problems
- ✓ Boost school success
- ✓ Link families to needed help

Family Support & Child Development: Family activities and when needed, help families find the right services. Plans include play groups, classes, tutoring and parent activities.

Our partners: *Healthy Families Alachua, Head Start, Healthy Start, UF/CAPP Nurturing Program, Early Learning Coalition,*

HIPPY, Children's Home Society, YMCA, United Way, Partnership Library.

Health & Safety: Health education, screening and help finding medical care. Prevention programs and when needed, help finding services for health issues or counseling.

Our Partners: *Healthy Start, Al. Co. Public Health Department, Children's Medical Services, Early Steps, UF Eastside Clinic, CHOICES, UF Medical School Residents/Nurses, Peaceful Paths, Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services, UF Student/ Interns in a variety of programs*

Self-Sufficiency: Concrete help for immediate needs with a view to long term solutions - GED,

job skills, employability, housing, transportation, managing a household budget, cooking, etc.

Our Partners: *Alachua County Community Support Services, Alachua County & Gainesville Housing Authorities, Central FL. Community Action Agency, Florida Institute for Workforce Innovation, Florida Works, Gainesville Community Ministries, Catholic Charities, United Way, Regional Transit, Gainesville Job Corps, Dignity Project*

For more information on the Center, contact Center Coordinator, Carressa Hutchinson, Partnership for Strong Families at 393-2740, x416. The Center & Partnership Library will be located at 1132 NE 16th Avenue. Opening in late Spring.

"Our partnership with Casey Family Programs and the Alachua County Library District is making our dream of a Neighborhood Resource Center a reality. They have made this effort possible."
Ester Tibbs
Circuit Administrator

African-American Children in Alachua County:

- 30% of the child population
- 52% of the reports to the state Hotline
- 54% of the children in Out-of-Home Care

An Emerging Focus: Racial Disparity of Children in Out-of-Home Care

In Alachua County, 54% of the children in out-of-home care due to maltreatment are African-American, while only 30% of the child population is African-American. Yet, research confirms that there are no significant differences in the rates of child maltreatments by race. Why do we have such an imbalance? What does it mean for our community and our children?

Alachua County and other urban areas across the state and nation are struggling to answer these questions. (Our neighboring rural counties do not show this imbalance.) Nationally, research points to the interplay of three themes: family risk factors; community risk factors; and agency factors, such as cultural and reporter bias.

In our county, most of the

calls to the abuse Hotline are about African-American children, so the issue is community wide. It is not a problem that belongs just to the Department and the solution will need to be found within our community. As community groups work to keep children safely in their homes, there will be opportunities to look at this problem together and discuss what we need to do to – together.