

Preliminary Findings of the Implementation Evaluation

Casey Family Services contracted with Dr. Barbara Pine of the University of Connecticut, who is well known for her work in the area of reunification, to be the principal investigator for an implementation evaluation of our redesigned Family Reunification Program. To help with the research in Maine, she has enlisted Dr. Gail Werrbach and Dr. Cary Jenson of the University of Maine. The project director is Dr. Robin Spath. Recently, this team of evaluators presented the findings from the process evaluation to Casey Family Services administrators in Shelton and program staff in both Hartford and Maine.

The report of the case study of the program noted the political and administrative context in which the program operated. Thus, the reorganization of the delivery of services within the Hartford region of the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the heightened emphasis on child safety in Maine have had an influence on the operation of the program. In spite of these challenges, the case study findings found a number of strengths in how the program operated.

Chief among these strengths was the staff's expertise, dedication and commitment to helping families work toward reunification. Workers with both the state and Casey Family Services are working as a team, collaboratively planning and providing needed services to families. In addition, researchers found the program to be comprehensive. Families can usually obtain the assistance they need from the variety of services offered or arranged for by the staffs at Casey Family Services and state agencies. This may make it easier for families to fully participate in treatment.

In assessing the extent to which the revised Reunification Program was being implemented as planned, the researchers found that some components were being implemented more fully than others. Several key elements of the redesign — the referral of families with first-time placements, early referral and intervention, and case coordination and teamwork — were operating as intended. However, a number of other program components were not consistently provided or were not entirely developed. These included post-reunification services, concurrent planning, and family group conferencing. Recruiting foster parents who are specially trained to contribute to the reunification effort has also been a hurdle for the program.

According to the evaluators, the program faces a number of challenges. Chief among these are the multiple issues with which families must deal. The extent, scope and nature of the treatment that must be undertaken as a result means that the work can be emotionally draining for staff and often requires many contributors to the effort. This, in turn, means that balancing the responsibilities and perspectives of team members requires considerable teamwork, communication and coordination skills.

As a result of this intensive case study of the Reunification Program, the evaluators made the following recommendations:

- Examine the recruitment, training, and retention of foster parents, so that an effective recruitment effort can be sustained at each site;
- Further articulate the content of post-reunification services; Develop comprehensive training in the areas of family group conferencing, mediation, and concurrent planning; and
- Create more structured opportunities for enhancing the existing teamwork and knowledge sharing between Casey Family Services and state agencies.

The outcome component of the evaluation of this program is already under way, but because of the importance of following families after children are returned home to see if their placements remain stable, the outcome evaluation will likely take about four years to complete. The Advisory Committee has agreed upon the selection of instruments for measuring the outcomes.