

The work conducted in the West Haven Probate Court far exceeds the legislative mandate that requires social workers to conduct a full home study and provide information to the court for decision-making purposes.

contested; and petitioners with prior DCF involvement.

The project's third and final year is dedicated to refining a standardized assessment tool for use by social workers in probate court settings. The Research Department and social workers have been working closely on this task and have decided to tackle another project jointly—a description of the Casey Family Services' home study process. As this pilot project is completed and social work responsibilities are redistributed, the court

may find it helpful to have documentation of the Casey home study process.

Additionally, the collaboration between the Research Department and the social workers led to a recent evaluation presentation at a national conference and prompted a state-wide study of the probate court system. This study, outlined in the Winter 2004 edition of *Voice*, has encouraged the Connecticut Probate Court Administrator's office to consider avenues toward improving the state's probate court system.

Consequently, the Probate Court Administrator has decided to proceed with a pilot probate court project in New Haven this year.

**Note: In recent weeks Patricia Lugo has resigned as a social worker in the West Haven Probate Court. She now works in the administrative office of Casey Family Services as an Information Specialist for the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice.*

What is ... Results Orientation?

*by Ben Kerman, Director of Research,
Eliot Brenner, Director of Clinical Services,
Joy Duva, Deputy Executive Director of
Planning and Policy*

A *Results Orientation* is a healthy organizational practice of looking at data to see if agency, program and case goals are achieved, in order to maximize results and to learn and apply the most we possibly can from our collective experience.

Using data to guide decision making is often easier said than done. Along the way, even the most well-intentioned program team can be tripped up by obstacles such as the confusing language of results, the practitioners' understandable reservations regarding aggregate reporting, selection of ill-fit measures, and the challenges inherent in any systematic accountability system. Over the coming months, we will be engaging in discussions at all levels of the organization on how best to achieve a results orientation at Casey Family Services.

APPROACHES TO RESULTS:

Across disciplines, management and program improvement texts are littered with approaches to create and sustain the use of data. Unfortunately, the proliferation of similar terms may undermine clear communication and successful collaboration (Friedman, 2003). Among the approaches, Results-based Management (RBM) trumpets making decisions regarding programs based on recently measured results and consideration of obstacles and facilitators facing current operations. Another example, Managing for Results (MFR), emphasizes building a results focus into every aspect of management practice and routine. With Casey's Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) effort, as with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's concept of Results Accountability, we recognize that all who can contribute to finding solutions and making improvements must be involved, not only "managers."

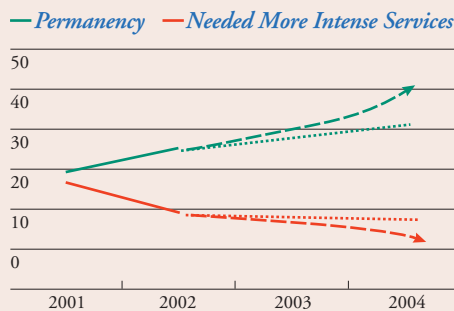
The main benefit from all these approaches comes not from having a lot of statistical reports—but from the process of using them in combination with everything else we know to achieve our goals. Mark Friedman, a proponent of a simple and straightforward approach to data use, recently presented workshops to Casey Family Services' leadership which highlighted "Turning the Curve" on key results indicators. Friedman notes the value of charting a known indicator, projecting where it will go if nothing different is done, considering the internal and external conditions needed to improve the situation (evidenced by a "turn" in the indicator's line when graphed), and then implementing an action plan.

Taking two indicators of status at exit from foster care spotlights the way this could be used at Casey. Figure 1 provides the annual reports for two indicators: The solid green line shows the percentage of foster children discharged to legally permanent families

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achieved through reunification or adoption, and the solid red line shows the percentage of children discharged to more intensive services, such as residential treatment or correctional services. The actual data is presented through 2002, with small dotted lines projecting the expected results should no changes be made. Overall, these indicators are heading in the desired direction. However, *turning the curve* can also mean brainstorming within the program team, looking for ways to accelerate improvements (thick dashed arrows).

Figure 1. Illustration of Turning the Curves with Annualized and Projected Results



THE ESSENCE OF BUILDING ON OUR RESULTS ORIENTATION:

To facilitate goal achievement and practice improvement, the core ingredients of a results orientation include:

- Accountability for success on clearly stated and measurable goals;
- Goals that describe both ultimate outcomes and system performance;
- Regular availability of *results information* concerning these core goals;
- Routine reference to results information to guide decisions concerning program development and improvement; and
- A tolerance for and sensitivity to the tricky balance when we simplify complex contextualized processes with a limited set of indicators.

Accountability and goal focus: The prerequisite is “Results Accountability” – the acceptance of accountability for the impact of our work on mutually agreed upon goals for children and families. The Results Orientation helps clarify the expectations for the organization’s stakeholders, which may include boards, executive management, and funders, as well as service consumers and the workforce itself.

Outcomes and systems performance: Rather than looking solely at outcomes and relegating everything else to a “program black-box,” the Results Orientation also considers both system performance and other features of the environment in order to find solutions. To keep the effort manageable, a limited set of measures is chosen for monitoring purposes. Measures need to be created that are clear and precise in order to provide useful feedback. In child welfare, there is a growing convention of examining Safety, Permanency and Well-being.

Regular availability of results information: Data concerning the results indicators highlighted for inclusion needs to be readily available to those who need it. Widely and easily accessible information demonstrates the commitment to empowering leadership and all staff with the information that they need, as well as the confident openness to new ideas for continuing program improvement. In contrast, the results orientation is undermined by slow and dirty data. Momentum is lost when the indicators are irrelevant or misleading due to delays in getting feedback or “dirty data” (too much missing or inaccurate information).

Routine reference to results indicators at decision-making points: Feedback must not only be available to staff and managers, but it should be used freely when discussing program status and program development. In order to “turn curves,” the shape of the line must be known. Though statistics must not be the only consideration, they provide a powerful tool to help maintain agency

direction and the team’s unity of action toward good outcomes. *What gets measured gets done* (Patton, 1999). Given the rigorous and distracting daily hustle, routine reference to ongoing results indicator feedback needs to be embedded into agency procedures through workgroup missions, meeting agendas, and supervision of staff.

Sensitively placing indicators in context: Data users must be sensitive to the limitations of aggregated data concerning individual results indicators. Overly simplified interpretation of key indicators can undermine good practice. Similarly, there is an intrinsic risk of oversimplification when we use a subset of measures to describe complex, multifaceted and evolving situations. Protection against these risks comes from proactive discussion regarding how results information is to be used, consistent consideration of participant, program and broader community context, and rigorous adherence to professional and ethical standards.

In sum, the results-oriented team carefully thinks through the program model of what is supposed to happen, selects indicators that reflect key system performance and outcome goals, looks at today’s results, and asks what other conditions need to be in place in order to do even better tomorrow. In the coming months, Casey will provide a variety of opportunities for stakeholders to get more involved in building on our Results Orientation.

Useful References

- Family Resource Coalition of America (1999). *Outcome-based Accountability and Evaluation Frameworks*.
- Friedman, M. (2003). www.resultsaccountability.com.
- Schorr, L.B. (1994). *The Case for Shifting to Results-based Accountability*. Improved Outcome for Childrens Project.