

Family Assessment Response in Washington's Child Protective Services: *Interim Report*

The 2012 Washington State Legislature made changes to the way the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) responds to reports of child abuse and neglect. Reports are made to Child Protective Services (CPS).

Previously, all accepted reports of child abuse and neglect were subject to an investigation, where a caseworker determined whether abuse or neglect had occurred.¹

The new law created a "differential response" approach where low-to-moderate risk cases receive an assessment of family needs, strengths, and risks—the Family Assessment Response (FAR). Investigations are completed only for those cases where the risk to children is greatest.

The 2012 Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) to evaluate implementation of FAR.² The evaluation, due in December 2016, will include child safety measures, out-of-home placement rates, re-referral rates, and caseload sizes and demographics. This interim report provides a brief background on differential response and an overview of the early implementation of FAR.

¹ Accepted reports are those allegations that meet criteria for abuse or neglect and where there is sufficient information to follow-up on the report.

² ESSB 6555, Chapter 259, Laws of 2012.

Summary

The 2012 Washington State Legislature made changes to the way the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) responds to reports of child abuse and neglect. Previously, all accepted reports of child abuse and neglect were subject to an investigation, where a caseworker determined whether abuse or neglect had occurred.

The new law created a "differential response" system where only the highest risk cases will be investigated. In Washington, the differential response is called the Family Assessment Response (FAR). Low-to-moderate risk cases will receive an assessment of the families' strengths and receive services and concrete goods that reduce the likelihood of future maltreatment.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy was directed by the legislature to evaluate the Family Assessment Response by December 1, 2016. In this interim report we provide a brief background on the new system, describe the way the model is being implemented in Washington State, and outline our evaluation approach.

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Background

Historically, when reports of possible child abuse or neglect are made to Child Protective Services (CPS), the state must decide whether the allegations are serious enough to warrant a forensic-style investigation. The investigation determines whether child abuse or neglect occurred and if further actions—including services for families, possible involvement of dependency court, and removal of children to foster care—are necessary to ensure child safety.

The differential response model was first implemented in three states in 1998. Under differential response, only the highest risk cases receive investigations. The remaining low-to-moderate risk cases receive an assessment of needs, strengths, and risks.

As of 2014, 27 states and the District of Columbia have adopted this differential response approach for CPS cases. An additional three states had adopted and then discontinued differential response and returned to investigations only.

States have implemented differential response for low-to-moderate risk families in a variety of ways and with varying criteria for assignment to either assessment or investigation. Central to the model, however, are the following:

- The families receive assessments rather than investigations;
- No findings are made regarding whether child abuse and neglect occurred; and
- Families may receive additional services and concrete goods, when necessary, to reduce the likelihood of new reports to CPS.

The differential response model has been rigorously evaluated in six states. In 2014, WSIPP reviewed these studies and found that this approach results in small reductions in new reports to CPS and out-of-home placements.³

³ See WSIPP benefit-cost analysis: <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost/Program/141>

Family Assessment Response in Washington

A family assessment is defined in statute as:

*A comprehensive assessment of child safety, risk of subsequent child abuse or neglect, and family strengths and needs that is applied to a child abuse or neglect report. Unlike investigations, the assessment does not include a determination as to whether child abuse or neglect occurred but does determine the need for services to address the safety of the child and the risk of subsequent maltreatment.*⁴

Under the new system, Washington families that are reported to CPS receive FAR unless:

- The allegations include sexual abuse/exploitation;
- The allegations include serious physical abuse;
- The allegations involve a child in out-of-home care where the caregiver is an unlicensed relative; or
- The family has been the subject of three or more assessments in the past year.⁵

If any of the above criteria apply, then the family is investigated by CPS.

By law, FAR cases must be closed within 45 days. Cases may be extended to 90 days if parents agree and are actively engaged in services. Some staff has expressed concern that even 90 days many not "provide adequate time for them to provide services

to significantly reduce the risk of future maltreatment."⁶

Phase-in of FAR

In accordance with the law, DSHS is phasing-in the implementation of FAR. The intent of this phase-in is to provide time for staff training and, if necessary, fine-tuning. Further, the late-implementing offices will serve as the comparison group in outcome evaluations.

In January 2014, DSHS began implementing FAR in three of its 46 offices: Aberdeen, Lynnwood, and two zip codes in Spokane. These offices represent rural, urban, and suburban catchment areas. In July 2014, FAR was introduced in six additional offices: Ellensburg, Lincoln County, Mount Vernon, Martin Luther King, Jr., Pierce East, and Stevenson. By June 2016, all 46 Children's Administration offices will be implementing the FAR model.

⁴ RCW 74.13.020, section 8.

⁵ Washington Children's Administration. (2013). *Screening and Response Assessment: Policy and procedures manual*. Olympia, WA: Author.

⁶ Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration. (2014). *Washington State Title IV-E Demonstration Project. Semi-annual progress report: January – June 2014*. Retrieved from: <http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/far-semiannual-Jan2014.pdf>

In the first three FAR offices, 727 cases were assigned to FAR between January and June 2014.⁷ Under Washington law, families eligible for FAR must provide written consent to participate or their case will be transferred to investigation. In these first cases, only 17 families (2.3%) declined participation. An additional 23 cases were transferred to the investigation path because of safety concerns.

Based on these initial cases, DSHS estimates that if FAR were available in all offices, 72% of cases would be assigned to FAR and the remainder investigated.⁸ This rate would be slightly higher than assignment rates in other states where differential response has been studied; in those states the percentage of cases assigned to the differential response track ranged from 7% to 69%.⁹

DSHS has requested an additional \$13 million (\$6.5 million in state funds) for the 2015-17 biennium to place a FAR lead worker in each of its 46 local offices and provide funding to purchase additional services for families.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fuller, T., Nieto, M., Zhang, S. (2013). *Differential response in Illinois: Final evaluation report*. Urbana-Champaign: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois; Loman, L.A., & Siegel G.L. (2014). *Ohio Alternative Response Evaluation extension: Final report to the Ohio Supreme Court*. St. Louis MO: Institute of Applied Research; Ruppel, J., Huang, Y., & Haulenbeek, G. (2011). *Differential response in Child Protective Services in New York State: Implementation, initial outcomes and impacts of pilot project*. Albany: New York State Office of Children and Family Services; Siegel, G. L., & Loman, T. (2006). *Extended follow-up study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response: Final report*. St. Louis, MO: Institute of Applied Research; Winokur, M., Ellis, R., Orsi, R., Rogers, J., Gabel, G., Brenwald, S., Holmquist-Johnson, H., & Evans, M. (2014). *Program evaluation of the Colorado Consortium on Differential Response: Final report*. Fort Collins, CO: Social Work Research Center, School of Social Work, Colorado State University.

¹⁰ Washington State Department of Social and Health Services 2015-17 Budget Proposal http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/budget/2015-17Biennial/StackDPs/CAPL-N0_Family_Assessment_Response.pdf

Title IV-E Waiver

The implementation of FAR is the central element in the state's Title IV-E waiver, described below.

Foster care is paid for with a blend of federal and state funds. In Washington, the federal government provides a dollar-for-dollar match of state funds spent on foster care. Generally, this is categorical funding. That is, as foster care caseloads rise or fall, the federal funds change in proportion. Thus, if states reduce the number of children in foster care, the federal support is reduced.

In September 2012, Washington State received a five-year Title IV-E waiver. Under the waiver, if foster care caseloads are reduced, the waiver allows DSHS to reinvest the federal savings in services to families. FAR is the primary way the state proposed to reduce the number of children in foster care in its waiver application. DSHS estimated that, over the life of the waiver, 2,430 fewer children would be placed in out-of-home care, saving an estimated \$10.6 million in federal funds.¹¹

States receiving a waiver "cannot be reimbursed for more title IV-E funds for children served by the demonstration than it would have received without the demonstration."¹² That is, the program must be cost-neutral over the life of the waiver. The waivers require that states engage a third party to evaluate the IV-E demonstrations. Washington State has contracted with TriWest Group in Boulder, Colorado. TriWest will conduct an overall system-wide performance evaluation, a process evaluation, an outcome evaluation, and a cost analysis.

¹¹ Arnold-Williams, R. (2012). *Child Welfare Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project proposal for fiscal year 2012*. Olympia, WA: Department of Social and Health Services.

¹² Child Welfare Waiver Demonstrations Commonly Asked Questions About Cost Neutrality. Washington D.C. Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cost_neutrality_questions.pdf

WSIPP Evaluation Plan

The legislature directed WSIPP to evaluate the effect of FAR on child safety measures, out-of-home placement rates, re-referral rates, and caseload sizes and demographics. The evaluation report is due December 1, 2016.

In the evaluation, we will compare families assigned to FAR and investigations from the early implementing offices to CPS families in later implementing offices. Offices will be matched on rural/urban; poverty rates; and historic rates of CPS referrals, dependency filings in the local superior courts, and out-of-home placement. Then, families in comparable counties will be matched to families assigned to FAR in early implementing offices on FAR eligibility, age of youngest child, prior CPS history, race, and poverty as measured by receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) at the time of the CPS referral.

We will evaluate the likelihood of re-referrals and out-of-home placements for families assigned to FAR and FAR-eligible families in offices not yet implementing FAR. Regression analysis will control for factors known to be associated with out-of-home placement and re-referral.¹³

¹³Based on previous work in Washington, independent variables will include the families' number of prior CPS referrals, type of alleged maltreatment, type of reporter (i.e. law enforcement, medical personnel, educators, etc.), age of youngest child, family poverty, race, and characteristics of the DSHS office.

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Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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