

Summary of Findings
Focus Groups Jefferson County Systems of Care Grant

Butler Institute for Families

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Submitted by:
Butler Institute for Families
University of Denver
Graduate School of Social Work
September 5, 2007

Table of Contents

Background 1
Approach and Procedures 1
Summary of Findings..... 2
 Implementation 2
 Expectations 3
 Collaboration Between CYF and Other Divisions..... 4
 Cultural Competence 5
 Family Involvement 5
 Strengths-Based Approach to Practice..... 6
 Community-Based Services..... 6
 Overall Impact of the SOC Grant 7
 Sustainability..... 7
 Wrap-Up and Closing Remarks 8
Summary Observations 8

Background

Jefferson County Department of Human Services (DHS), Children, Youth & Families Division (CYF), was awarded a five-year federal grant entitled “Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care” (SOC). The SOC grants, awarded to sites across the United States, are intended to improve the level of child safety, permanency, and well-being by providing services that are based upon five SOC principles. The principles are: 1) inter-agency collaboration and communication; 2) cultural competence; 3) family involvement, 4) services based upon individual strengths and community-based delivery; and 5) mechanisms in place to ensure accountability.

The Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, is serving as the external evaluator for the grant. The evaluation design includes the collection of qualitative data through focus groups conducted with stakeholders, including caseworkers, supervisors, and Community Partners/Advisory Committee members. This report summarizes the results of three focus groups consisting of individuals who represent community agencies and individuals working with the SOC project, CYF caseworkers, and CYF supervisors.

Approach and Procedures

Three focus groups were held in May/June 2007—one with Department staff such as Head Start, Workforce Development, Community Assistance, and other Community Partners (i.e., housing, faith-based, community resources) and two with CYF staff. The Community Partners’ and the CYF Supervisors’ focus groups were held in lieu of regularly scheduled meetings in order to increase the level of participation by the respective audiences.

Focus groups for CYF staff were well-attended—17 of the 20 CYF supervisors attended and 14 of more than 100 direct service caseworkers participated. These 31 CYF staff represented each of the program areas within CYF, including Intake, Ongoing, Delinquency Services & Treatment, and Resource & Permanency Planning. Representatives from Finance and Resource were also in attendance. The focus group for Department and Community Partners had 12 participants representing a mix of community and Department of Human Services stakeholders.

At all of the focus groups, the facilitator introduced herself, explained the rationale behind the use of focus groups, and described the roles of the facilitator and note taker. (For the Advisory Committee focus group, the note taker was an SOC staff member, familiar to all Advisory Committee members present; for the other two groups, the note taker was a Butler Institute staff person.) Special care was taken to assure those present that the person taking minutes was obligated to respect the confidentiality of the individuals present. The focus group facilitator explained the informed consent form and reviewed the group confidentiality policy, and participants reviewed and signed their consent forms before the facilitator began the group.

A structured focus group protocol, developed by members of the evaluation team and approved by the University of Denver Institutional Review Board, focuses on the five principles of the SOC approach listed above and the following three evaluation areas pertinent to the grant:

1. **Implementation:** How and what did the implementation of the grant look like? What worked and what proved to be problematic? What activities and strategies are associated with the grant? What have been the barriers or challenges to implementation?
2. **Impact:** What changes have occurred because of the grant?
3. **Sustainability:** What is the likelihood that activities and changes that have occurred as a result of the grant will continue after the grant has concluded?

Before beginning the focus group, the facilitator reviewed the purpose of the focus group, the expected duration of the group (one and one-half hours), and paraphrased the following introductory script:

“The SOC Grant has funded a set of specific objectives and activities. We are here to gather information about your experiences in your job and working with the Division of Children, Youth & Families (CYF) and the target population (children who have been reported and substantiated for child abuse/neglect and their families) and to learn more about the impact of the Systems of Care grant in the community.”

A summary of all focus group results follows.

Summary of Findings

Implementation

The facilitator asked the participants several questions about their knowledge of activities that occurred during the last year related to the grant’s implementation and/or any effective strategies employed, as well as any barriers to those activities.

- Participants in each of the three focus groups readily brought up several activities related to the SOC project. The most enthusiastically endorsed activity was the Community Resource Fair. Participants thought it went extraordinarily well and the turnout by both agency participants and the public was outstanding. Participants estimated that close to 1,500 people attended the Fair.
- The cultural awareness trainings were also cited as a product of the SOC project. Participants noted the kick-off luncheon and a series of cultural competence training events. Participants also mentioned topical trainings [known as Partner Information Trainings (PIT)] such as probation. Some participants said that they wished they had more time to attend these brown-bag events.
- Participants also said the child welfare orientations offered to parents coming into the system were the result of the SOC project. Participants stated that it had been difficult to get parents to attend the orientation sessions and they were under the impression that it was now going to be mandated by the courts (which would increase the level of participation). [However, the SOC Program Manager later clarified that it is not mandated but that the court intends to encourage participation.] Participants stated that a task force was put together to address the reasons for lack of participation and

- they came up with several recommendations. CYF participants thought that with all of the other workload issues, it wasn't their job to get parents to attend the orientation.
- The Parent Partner Program was brought up as an effort resulting from the SOC project. Some participants thought it was a "terrific" program, with good parents and steady implementation. Others thought the Parent Partners Program had not gone as well, with few participating parents and unresponsive staff. Participants also expressed appreciation for the Parent Handbook in a 3-ring binder to help parents navigate the child welfare system.
 - A volunteer program was cited as a product of the SOC project. CYF participants seemed to appreciate the efforts made by the volunteer program, including making tickets available to the Colorado Crush. They did say that since it was a new program and there were many safety requirements, it was difficult to get it started.
 - Participants mentioned the mentoring program for kids and said they appreciated the program.
 - Participants described an activity that they referred to as "A Day in the Life of a Client" [referred to as a Scavenger Hunt by SOC staff], an activity to acquaint CYF staff with the realities of being a CYF client.
 - Participants in the Department/Community Partners focus group said there was more outreach and collaborative activities to/with the community and more community involvement.
 - Policy and procedures have been developed and implemented that make it easier to communicate and collaborate across divisions within DHS.
 - Training is now being offered system partners.
 - It is also perceived that the sharing of information with other agencies and the community has been greatly enhanced.

Expectations

Participants were asked whether there were things that were supposed to happen as a result of the SOC project but that, to their knowledge, had not occurred.

- CYF staff participants expressed disappointment that the ideas generated at the cultural awareness trainings to improve the building aesthetics and make it more culturally diverse (e.g., with artwork representing diverse cultures) had not happened. They appreciated being able to generate ideas at the trainings and were discouraged when these ideas had not come to fruition. Other examples of unimplemented ideas were advertising in culturally diverse environments and having a culturally-competent go-to person in each unit.
- Some Department/Community Partners participants mentioned the "slow process" of implementation.
- Community Partners participants stated that SOC [staff] has tried to "get judges to the table" but that they do not attend meetings and discussed that judges are the "ultimate decision makers." They were surprised that the judiciary was not trying to change [consistent with other changes associated with the grant].
- Some participants at the Department/Community Partners focus group perceived that there wasn't the level of "buy-in by upper level management" that they anticipated.

For example, a participant commented that SOC seemed to be seen as a separate component of CYF; whereas, in contrast, the Family to Family Initiative is seen as a part of CYF. Participants speculated whether the source of funding [State versus Federal] may be one factor that accounts for the difference in perception. Other participants commented that this happens with grants as they are seen as a “focus” rather than a “practice.”

Collaboration Between CYF and Other Divisions

The facilitator asked the participants questions about how well CYF and the other Divisions within DHS collaborate with one another.

- Some participants were challenged by this question, as they considered both the level of collaboration between CYF and other Divisions with DHS and between CYF and the community. Most of their comments related to cross-division collaboration. The general consensus among CYF staff members was that efforts are ongoing; however, CYF does not collaborate well with other Divisions or the community. One CYF staff participant commented, “My experience is that we’re terrible partners with other Divisions and within the community.” A participant continued by saying that collaboration had also been challenged by a recent CYF restructuring.
- Department/Community Partners first response was “no” and cited the huge turnover of staff as a big factor. But participants at all three focus groups noted examples where collaboration was occurring or increasing. For example, Division Partners stated that they did see more collaboration among supervisors, that there is more effort being made to collaborate at trainings, and that the brown-bags and PITs have broadened their understanding of common county issues.
- CYF staff specifically noted that lines of communication within the County were more open and that Colorado Works and CYF were beginning “the last few months” to work more with one another.
- Several CYF staff noted that because of the joint Partner Informational Trainings on TANF/Child Welfare, Headstart, Adult Services, etc., CYF is finally reaching out to other Divisions. A participant noted that staff in attendance had identified staff to contact and that facilitated communication. However, other participants stated that while they exchanged phone numbers with fellow participants, nothing much has come of the experience.
- Participants were specifically asked whether they collaborated on specific cases with their peers from other Divisions and participants expressed that no, they did not.
- Some participants did think that the collaboration between CYF and other Divisions was a “little different” than before, as at least now they are checking to see whether there is an open TANF case, and others have had positive experiences with Medicaid. Others thought the collaboration level was the same. Others added that it was different from caseworker to caseworker.
- One person suggested that it would be helpful if there was a TANF worker database for caseworkers to check to see who is assigned to their clients.

Cultural Competence

The facilitator asked participants about issues related to cultural competence.

- Participants described the challenge of defining cultural competence and that it's an ongoing process and made the distinction that awareness is different than competence. Another group said it was more than ethnicity and described it as understanding the unique difference of individuals and groups.
- Participants generally think that in regards to cultural competence CYF is improving. Client forms are now available in languages other than English, and there is a Spanish-speaking County Attorney. Yet the provision of culturally competent services continues to challenge the County, as there just aren't sufficient resources.
- It was noted that workers are not really competent in dealing with families living in poverty, and even might be judgmental at times.
- Participants remarked on the lack of Spanish-speaking workers, making it a real challenge to work with non-English-speaking clients.
- Part of the reason for the lack of bilingual workers is that the agency does not adequately recruit diverse staff according to the majority of participants. Focus group participants did not think DHS had a culturally diverse workforce. One person mentioned that an ad was placed in *La Voz*, but they got no responses in the limited amount of time it appeared, and this person wondered if it would have gotten responses had it been in there for a longer period of time.
- Participants had mixed responses about whether the level of cultural competence was the same or different. Many people thought it had improved because it is now on the forefront of people's minds and there is more discussion. Others thought the level of cultural competence was the same and that lip service was paid to it, but there have been no real changes.

Family Involvement

The facilitator asked participants if, in their experience, CYF involves children and families in the target population (reported/substantiated for child abuse/neglect) in decision making in a meaningful way.

- CYF staff participants generally believe that family involvement has increased, mainly because of the required use of TDMs (Team Decision Making), the Parent Partners program, and the Child Welfare Orientation. A Department/Community Partners participant also noted that sometimes having a Parent Partner involved can break through the barriers with families, resulting in less suspicion and resistance.
- Participants cited other examples of family involvement; sometimes adoptive families come back and volunteer with the agency.
- A minority of the participants expressed that family involvement was at about the same level. A CYF staff member noted that family involvement results in increased workload at the worker level and that it [family involvement] isn't where they wanted it to be but probably won't get any better due to the demanding workload.
- Many participants agreed that involving families had changed practice, and they see this as positive development. However, other participants were not at all sure to what

to attribute the change. Some were sure it had nothing to do with SOC; others suggested that CYF was involving families more out of necessity because they were desperately in need of kinship homes due to the lack of foster homes. Changing federal requirements were also suggested as the impetus.

Strengths-Based Approach to Practice

The facilitator asked participants if, in their experience, CYF takes a strengths-based approach toward its families.

- When two groups were asked about the use of a strengths-based approach, there was mostly silence. Participants did not seem to have a response; but after a bit more reframing they offered a few more comments.
- Participants said that the use of TDMs were an important mechanism for achieving strengths-based practice.
- Participants generally thought that the approach to strengths-based practice was the same.
- In one group it was noted that not a lot of treatment plans are recording strengths. While deficits are noted, they are not regarded as detrimental to the situation as they might have been in the past. Instead, rather than the problem being highlighted, workers and supervisors are looking at the whole family and its capabilities.
- The suggestion was made that paperwork drives the way people think about issues and that a change to more strengths-oriented forms and documentation would facilitate more strengths-based practice. "Paperwork needs to first talk about strengths."

Community-Based Services

In response to the facilitator asking participants if, in their experience, CYF prioritizes or makes every effort to serve children and families in their own communities, respondents offered conflicting perspectives. One group cited several examples of improvements in this area.

- Outreach and efforts are being made to enhance resources and services in high-need areas that were noted through the geographical mapping process.
- In the last year, CYF and TANF have approached Lakewood Housing about ways to create housing for families in need. They are addressing a concrete service need for CYF clients and that is housing.
- There is more assignment of case managers to geographical-based areas.
- There are increased community resources and definite ways to coordinate resources.

In contrast, other respondents did not express a lot of confidence in the availability of community-based services.

- For this group, if they expressed anything at all, it was that the level of community-based services was the same.

Overall Impact of the SOC Grant

The facilitator asked participants to compare their place of work today to this time last year and to describe what, if any, impact the SOC grant has had on their work.

- Participants remarked on many positive changes resulting from the SOC project. The project can do things for the agency that otherwise would not happen.
- Enhanced communication and collaboration were seen as the major impacts. Participants in all three focus groups agreed that lines of communication that did not exist had developed, and the system seems more open to collaborating. It was thought that SOC has been more open and has served as a model.
- The availability of more training was mentioned by many participants as a positive difference resulting from the SOC project. In particular, the ongoing on-the-job training (OJT) for caseworkers was pointed out as an example of a positive change.
- One participant thought the project had increased the number of relationships with churches.
- Others thought more effort was being made to outreach with children and families.
- One person thought that the project had definitely raised the level of awareness that changes are necessary, but the agency seemed stymied on how to implement the changes; great ideas get brought up, but no one has the time to implement them.
- The increased use of information (data) was also brought up as a positive result; one CYF staff participant noted that the former SOC research analyst provided a lot of information. For example, one CYF staff noted, “We are trying to figure out what to do with minority over-representation. They’re [SOC] are able to do things that we can’t.”
- The County has been divided into geographical zones and the schools now have a contact person in each zone.

Sustainability

Participants were asked: “If the SOC grant ended tomorrow, how likely is it that the work of the grant would be sustained?”

- Most participants were fairly pessimistic about the SOC Project efforts being continued beyond the grant period.
- A minority of the participants thought that “echoes” of the Project would remain. The use of TDMs will continue, and they really are all about community collaboration. Also, some participants thought the Resource Fair would continue, especially given the success of this year’s Fair.
- Some thought that communication and collaboration could continue and noted that the Family to Family Initiative might help sustain some of SOC practice philosophy.
- Other participants hoped that the brown-bags would continue, but they also said that the reality is that they’re just too busy to attend them.
- Other suggestions for components to carry forward included the Child Welfare Orientation program, Parent Partner Program, and the Volunteer Program. They acknowledged that this will require that the Department create positions.

- Participants were less enthusiastic about trying to continue the community outreach because it is more difficult to do than some of the other SOC components.

Wrap-Up and Closing Remarks

Participants were finally asked if there was anything that had not been covered that they felt was important to explore. Participants noted that there was beginning to be more communication between CYF and other Department staff and community members and that they were seeing more collaboration with resources and other programs. They also expressed the fact they were impressed with SOC staff under Susan [Franklin, Project Manager] and were hopeful that upper management would recognize the efforts put forth and embrace SOC so it would be sustained.

Summary Observations

The SOC Project has made an impact and the agency has moved in the right direction; however, much work still needs to be done, especially in following through with reforms and achieving sustainability. The three groups presented different and, at times, conflicting perspectives, making it challenging to arrive at consensus for conclusions on SOC effectiveness. Some of the key themes that did emerge include:

- Cultural competence is a goal, not a state of being. SOC has scratched the surface, but additional efforts at the County level need to be made to take the general CYF workforce to the next level. Also, greater follow-through needs to occur on suggestions made at the cultural awareness trainings.
- Improvements in communication and collaboration are now occurring and will probably continue to grow even after SOC funding ends.
- Family involvement has increased substantially over the last few years due to a combination of policy and practice changes and initiatives, including SOC.
- Collaboration with community agencies is increasing resources and the ability of workers to serve families in their communities.
- SOC has served as a model in communication, collaboration, cultural competence, strengths-based and family-focused practice, training, and capacity building. In general, participants felt that the principles and philosophy of the SOC grant have not been fully embraced and integrated into CYF practices on a day-to-day basis.
- Without designated resources, many of the SOC initiatives will not be sustained beyond the grant. Participants stated that while many of the activities were valued, existing CYF staff would not be able to assume additional responsibilities currently maintained by the SOC grant staff.

Focus groups were completed during the summer of 2006, approximately one year ago, and so it is useful to compare and contrast the similarities and differences. Following last year's focus groups, participants' perceptions about the impact of the grant were examined in the context of adult learning—moving from awareness of a new topic to the acquisition of skills and application of those skills. Level I is awareness; the goal at this level is to provide a broad overview of the topic, a conceptual framework, or to present and clarify the rationale for information. Level II is knowledge and understanding; the goal at this level is to provide comprehensive, factual information about the topic and to promote an understanding of the

linkages as part of a whole. Level III of adult learning is the application to the job, to understand “what’s the point in my knowing this” and begin to be able to apply the knowledge to everyday job activities. Level IV is skills application; this level is not only knowing how to apply the knowledge, but demonstrating proficiency in doing so.

In Jefferson County, and in sites across the country, the overall goal is to accomplish Level IV—to operationalize the principles of a Systems of Care so that interagency collaboration and communication, cultural competence, family involvement, services based upon individual strengths and community-based delivery, and accountability are no longer “topics” or “principles” but just “the way we do business.”

Last year it appeared that the SOC grant had largely accomplished Level I, awareness, and had made significant progress in Level II, knowledge and understanding. The grant was beginning to make progress towards a number of principles in accomplishing Level III, applying the knowledge to day-to-day practice. Over the past year the grant has continued to make significant progress in broadening awareness, knowledge, and understanding about the grant’s purpose and goals—i.e., Level I and Level II of adult learning. For example, focus group participants cited the increased number of participating agencies and attendees at this year’s Resource Fair and its success in increasing the level of awareness and understanding about resources in the agency and community. Participants also noted the ongoing Partner Information Trainings and the success in increasing staff knowledge and understanding about the roles, responsibilities, and resources of each Division.

It appears that at Level III—application to the job—a great deal of progress has been made in specific aspects of practice. For example, CYF staff clearly articulate the use of Team Decision Making (TDM) practices as a means to more fully engage families and their support networks in planning for safety and well-being. Another example of progress in Level III learning is that, while several participants had concerns regarding how well the Parent Partner Program was *screening* potential partners, the majority of participants were positive about and clearly understood the application in day-to-day practice—i.e., how a Parent Partner would work with the family and case manager. Similarly, participants were clear about “what’s the point in my doing this” in regards to Child Welfare staff “working in collaboration with” TANF staff. They knew what practices were expected, such as pulling up automated information, contacting the TANF worker, etc., and why those practices were beneficial for families.

There are other aspects of the SOC grant in which focus group participants’ comments suggested that, as a whole, the agency is struggling to move from a Level II of learning, knowledge and awareness, to a Level III, application to the job. One aspect of the grant where this appears to be the case is that of cultural competence. In the past year, staff indicated that the agency has made it a priority and that staff have attended trainings and brown-bag lunches. However, although staff participants belief that agency awareness, knowledge, and understanding has greatly increased, many still question whether the agency is effectively *applying* that knowledge to day-to-day practice. Participants cited examples of ideas that have been generated to increase DHS and CYF cultural competency but that have not been implemented. For example, staff participants cited the lack of efforts to recruit a culturally diverse workforce or aggressively recruit service providers to serve non-English-speaking families (e.g., Vietnamese, Russian).

Another example given was that of changing the visual appearance of the walls or using more community-based media for staff recruitment.

Participants' comments suggest that they perceive a difference in learning at the individual level versus that of the organization; organizational learning lags behind that of the individual. Participants' comments suggest that they see changes in knowledge and practices for the individual worker, but those changes have not been "institutionalized" at the CYF or DHS level as a whole. So, for example, an individual unit or supervisor may be pro-active in recruiting staff from other than the majority (white, female) culture, but staff participants perceive that recruitment or hiring processes for DHS as a whole has not changed. Rather than "trickling down," learning and proficiency is "filtering up."

This year, to a greater extent than last year, participants expressed frustration that the agency had not attained the level of integration or application of SOC principles that they would have expected to see—in other words they expressed dissatisfaction that Level IV, a high level of skill proficiency, had not been achieved. This may suggest that, whereas staff last year were satisfied with attaining awareness and understanding, they now expect "mastery" of Levels I, II, and III and consequently expect greater proficiency in integrating day-to-day SOC practices across the board.

However, Level IV, the highest skill proficiency, is an ideal with any change in practice and particularly challenging and unrealistic in a system with resource limitations, competing demands, and often frequent staff turnover within the agency and community. At this stage, it may be beneficial for SOC and CYF leadership to clearly convey the progress that has been made so that staff and partners see the extent of change in day-to-day practice. It may also be important that staff understand that while full mastery is the goal, it is also an ideal and, thus, an ongoing process, so that staff don't become discouraged by what they may perceive as a lack of progress.