

# **Fremont County Differential Response Legislative Report**

## **Introduction**

Fremont County Department of Human Services was lucky enough to have been selected to be one of the original counties to pilot and implement Differential Response into our Child Welfare practice. DR is now the foundation of our daily practice in child welfare. These new practices as well as the implementation process have brought forth a complete culture change.

## **Practice Change**

Fremont County Child Welfare practices now show little resemblance to our system prior to DR implementation in 2010. Although our agency has often implemented new best practices over the years, Differential Response brought forth an entire systems change. The practice change is staggering.

## **Enhanced Screening**

Prior to the implementation of DR, Fremont County did not employ screeners. Each caseworker and supervisor took assigned days to answer intake calls. This was less than ideal and provided little consistency in the quality or quantity of information gathered.

We now have two full-time screeners who faithfully do enhanced screening, utilizing the DR Enhanced Screening Guide. It is remarkable the value of the information gathered in order to assist us in making better informed decisions regarding our response to abuse and neglect concerns. The screening guide assists the screeners in digging deeper with callers for information that they typically would not offer without prompts, such as family and child strengths, other adult supports the child might have, or weapons in the home.

## **RED (Review, Evaluate, and Direct) Team**

RED team is a regularly scheduled meeting of Child Welfare staff that gathers to review all of the abuse and neglect complaints that were received since the last RED team. In Fremont County, we hold RED team each weekday morning at 9 a.m. We also hold a second RED team in the afternoon at 3 p.m. if we have received 6 or more reports since the morning RED team. Our RED team is comprised of representatives from all four of the Child Welfare teams, to include a variety of perspectives: Intake, Ongoing, Core Services In-Home Service Caseworkers, and specialty positions, such as foster care certification workers, adoption workers, etc. There is also a requirement that at least one supervisor be present in each RED team.

RED team has changed the face of Intake in that no decision is made in isolation and the responsibility is shared. Prior to DR, Fremont County was fortunate enough to have a seasoned

supervisor for our Intake team for over 15 years. She changed positions just prior to the DR implementation, but she commented one day after RED teams were running, *"I might still be supervising if we had these years ago. I carried all that responsibility alone for too long."*

### **Facilitated Family Meetings**

FCDHS launched the Family to Family model in Fremont County 2006. As part of that, we implemented Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings. This proved to be very valuable in our practice and continued to be so with DR. In 2013 we changed our practice in regard to meetings through the IV-E Waiver, by transitioning from TDMs, to Family Engagement Meetings (FEMs) which encompass all facilitated family meetings during any point in a case. We also added Permanency Roundtable meetings to facilitate the relentless pursuit of legal permanency for our children and youth. The feedback that we receive from families through our closure family satisfaction surveys is very positive about the benefit of FEMs.

### **Group Supervision**

Group supervision is a valuable structured process that can assist caseworkers with outside perspectives of a challenging case or situation. Similar to RED team, in Fremont County we ask for cross-team representation to enhance the viewpoints and creative thinking. The case is "mapped" on a large white board using a framework, which is also utilized in RED team. Specific next steps are determined through the process. Caseworkers nearly always report that it was helpful.

### **Front Loaded Services**

FCDHS is very proud of our ability to front load almost every Core Service our agency offers. We provide a great deal of the Core Services internally, rather than contracting with outside agencies. These include life skills, home-based services, Functional Family Therapy, Love & Logic Parenting, High Conflict Parenting and day treatment. We have our Core Caseworkers paired with our Intake and Ongoing caseworkers, to allow for prompt initiation of services. Additionally, we have an agreement with our local substance abuse treatment agency that they will engage clients in treatment within 24 hours of a referral being made. We are currently working on a similar plan with our local mental health agency.

### **Dual Track Assignments**

The dual track system is, perhaps, what most people recognize as the Differential Response model. The Family Assessment Response (FAR) track is reserved for low to moderate risk allegations of abuse or neglect. This is the component that was the most difficult to fully implement and utilize to its greatest potential. Those challenges will be more thoroughly addressed later. Now that we have had time to fully embrace this practice change and all it has to offer, this is clearly a benefit to the families we serve. Fremont County continues to be more

conservative than some of our other DR Counterparts in the FAR assignment versus High Risk Assessment; however we utilize it with much greater frequency now than we did initially.

### **Family Satisfaction**

During the initial implementation and research study of Differential Response, families were provided the opportunity for feedback through a survey administered by an entity outside of DHS. As with most surveys, the response rate was small. Anecdotally, however, now that Differential Response is our standard practice and not a pilot, it is clear that family satisfaction is much greater with this practice. We have more calls now from parents who received services through a successfully closed FAR, that call us later for a “booster session” or additional supports than we ever did before. DHS is no longer viewed as only here to remove children or punish parents. We are often viewed as support and a resource. This might be the most significant indicator that Differential Response is valuable.

### **Staff Satisfaction**

This is a very difficult area to address for Fremont County because the number of current staff that were here prior to DR implementation is small; there are only 10 out of 40 staff that were with FCDHS during the initial implementation. Of those 10 individuals, 9 would say that Differential Response has positively impacted their practice and thus their work satisfaction. The remainder of the Child Welfare unit wouldn't have anything to compare it to.

### **Challenges/Barriers**

Fremont County experienced many challenges during the initial phases of implementation. Internally, Child Welfare Administration was changing due to several retirements, and this caused some delays in developing a thorough and sound plan. Additionally, it was such a drastic paradigm shift for a few of the longer term employees that it did result in some staff choosing to change their career path.

Turnover has been particularly high over the past 4 years, unrelated to DR, causing challenges in keeping everyone trained in all of the DR components. Most of the trainings that were initially offered were held, understandably, either in Denver or Larimer County, which posed a challenge for our County. With the development of Regional Training sites, this hardship will be minimized for newer counties rolling out, if these sites are utilized.

Initially, it was a challenge for Fremont County to comfortably assign an assessment FAR if the allegation included any form of domestic violence or substance abuse. I think it was merely time and experience that helped us slowly gain confidence in our ability to manage safety in a different manner. We were also likely reacting to the concern from some of our community partners that unconvinced that child safety would not be jeopardized. This was a short term challenge, however.

## **Recommendations**

Fremont County strongly recommends that Differential Response continue to be implemented in its fidelity within Colorado. It provides the opportunity for a proportional response to concerns of child abuse and neglect. The original research completed on the implementation of DR in Colorado indicated that children are as safe in FAR as they are in High Risk Assessments. It would seem that if children are as safe, family and staff satisfaction are improved, and the ability for quality decision making is enhanced, continuing the practice throughout the State would be in the best interest of Colorado families.