

Garfield County DR Legislative Report

Introduction

Garfield County is one of the original five counties to pilot and implement the Differential Response practice. As one of the pioneers of the project many hurdles have been jumped and the work of implementation has been evolving and ongoing. Today our practices continue to evolve as the county strives to deliver quality service in a family engaging manner while holding child safety paramount. Introduction and full fidelity to a practice change calls for departments to not only offer a dual track system but to embrace a culture change and this type shift takes time. Garfield County has committed to integrating learned techniques into the everyday practice of Child Welfare. There are many accomplishments to be highlighted after three and half years of investment into a complete culture change.

Family Satisfaction

Far workers approach families with openness and explain upon the first contact that although DHS is responding to a concern brought to our attention the family has a choice to choose between a Family Assessment Response or a High Risk Assessment. Through this approach the family feels an immediate sense of empowerment and partnership. This communication sets the stage for an open dialogue to continue throughout the case. Workers utilize a method learned early in the implementation phase called Three Columns and through this tool they are able to have an open conversation with adults and children. In one case when the worker finished with the Three Column approach the mother started crying and said “no one has ever told me about all the strengths I have.”

Other approaches are also utilized such as Solution Focused questions. In this approach workers ask parents and children where they feel a case should go and as the experts on their family what do they feel should happen in their case. In a case where the worker used this approach she had a mother admit to extensive substance use and the mother told the worker her child wasn't safe with her and identified a relative for the child to stay with. This case was able to be handled through a voluntary arrangement and the child stayed with the relative until the mother entered treatment and established a period of sobriety. The mother continues to call the worker a year later and report how they are doing and inquiry on resources.

Workers employ risk statements that are developed with the client to clearly articulate what the concerns are in the case and why the department is worried. Through this transparent engagement parents understand clearly the areas they need to address to insure safety for the children. As family facilitated meetings have been enforced as a standard operating procedure facilitators and workers are able to develop plans that include and are dependent on family participation. In one case the client identified she needed a substance abuse evaluation and treatment. She was engaged in the planning of the service and ultimately complied with the plan she herself created. Through open and honest engagement workers have found clients to be compliant and have replaced threatening language with language that allows families to be the expert in their cases.

In a recent family facilitated meeting a support person for the mother shared that he had been involved with many clients (he was a sponsor through AA) through the years that had open cases with DHS. His observation was the “system” had changed and he found the change to be positive. Case workers, supervisors and the whole interaction seemed more inviting and engaging. He felt the system had changed from fault finding to supporting. This system change has come as a result of the dual track option.

In another situation where law enforcement was involved they asked the worker “are you doing that FAR thing?” Our partners have become familiar with our new approach and respect that there may be times where our assessment happens separately from their investigation. The community has embraced and supported the changes that have been incorporated and understand that practice has shifted. Schools are participating in family meetings and many times are being utilized as a support system for the family and child. Transparency is an expected norm with the community and the families we work with.

Worker/Supervisor Satisfaction

Garfield County has retained the two original FAR workers. This speaks to worker satisfaction given the high turnover rate of Child Welfare workers. The county has added an additional two FAR workers over time. Workers report a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment with the work they perform with families. Noted areas of particular satisfaction are the techniques taught to them that allow for a relationship with the family to be formed and provide a conduit for change. As research has proven relationship is a change agent and the workers ability to connect to the family in a way that families understand the worker is invested in their success can influence the outcome of a case.

Through the use of RED Teams, Family Engagement meetings, and Group Supervision workers and supervisors feel a comradely of support. These practices engage the department as a whole to accept a level of responsibility for the family’s outcome. When a family succeeds the department can revel in the success. Through the use of RED Teams assignment rates have decreased by 15% therefore allowing the workers to concentrate on children and families at highest risk and need. Through Group Supervision workers are availed to the group’s expertise and recommendations opening a new venue for processing difficult cases and decisions. The group helps to develop areas of risk that can then be taken to the family meeting and discussed transparently with the family. Workers and supervisors feel supported and validated.

Through the use of group supervision workers are assisted and encouraged to identify areas for support planning with a family. A road map for a family after the case is closed. This assist the family in identifying their natural support systems and encourages the family to lean on identified members in times of crisis. Through this planning families can rely on individuals in their circle rather than the system.

Cost Effectiveness

When workers conduct a Family Assessment Response and the finding of abuse and neglect is removed from the encounter with the family, workers are able to concentrate from the first encounter on the need for services. As a result a FAR worker may introduce services at the first meeting with a family and works towards the development of a service plan. In High Risk Assessment the workers concentration lies in gathering information in the assessment that either substantiates that abuse or neglect happened or not. Although a department may realize an increase in service based cost a savings may be felt in the long term outcome costs. In Garfield County the department supports the use of community resources. Workers have established relationships with agencies able to meet the needs of vulnerable populations and the need for families to continue involvement to access services isn't needed. Due to the legislative change in Core, families can benefit from this funding source without the involvement of Child Welfare.

Placement numbers in Garfield County have gradually decreased over the years. Although Differential Response may not be able to take full credit for this decrease in placement numbers the county is confident this change has enhanced our ability to affect placements. As a result of Differential Response the county has embraced a full practice change. Through the incorporation of many new approaches placement outcomes have been positively affected.

Barriers/Lessons Learned

As referenced in the introduction as a result of being a pilot county Garfield had to accept that evolution and change is inevitable and lessons learned are part of the process. Some of the barriers encountered were

- Some workers resisted change and didn't embrace a dual track system.
- The department had to "practice" FAR on substance abusing parents and domestic violence referrals. In time RED Team was better able to identify families that would best be approached through a HRA versus a FAR response.
- We were a pilot county and there were many questions but few answers. Barriers were encountered as the county "tried on" processes that needed constant adjustment.
- Workers had to be trained and coached that FAR was intended as a rigorous assessment and although relationship building was important child safety was paramount.

Lessons learned were

- Implementing a parallel process is essential. If there is an expectation that workers will approach families differently then supervisors need to approach workers differently.
- Evolution is inevitable and should be expected and embraced.
- Thoughtful and thorough planning needs to accompany the implementation of a dual track system.
- There was a need to adjust our units and worker responsibilities as more cases were being assigned FAR as the practice was firmly embraced.

- Through separating FAR from HRA fidelity was easily managed an unintended consequence occurred when an atmosphere of competition presented.

Future of Differential Response and Recommendations

Garfield County has grown and practice has so significantly changed there is no going back. The county supports the continued use of a differential response system. There have been numerous positives outcomes. These include the shared positive experiences of our families, workers job satisfaction, community support and an atmosphere where workers feel they are able to do the type of work they went to school to do. Long term outcomes reflecting the full impact of differential response will take many years to realize. A culture change in a field takes more than a few years for results to be reflected in outcome data.