

**Title:** Family Group Conferencing Initiative; Site Visit Report

**Grantee:** Family Services Division (FSD) of the Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF)

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## SUMMARY

The goal of the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) is to build leadership skills in mid-level managers in public and Tribal child welfare agencies to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Participants select a topic for change in their agencies and receive support throughout the training process about how to implement the change effort.

Nominated by the Vermont Department for Children and Families, Ruth Houtte, a director in 1 of the 12 district offices in the Family Services Division (FSD), participated in the training provided by NCWLI. Ms. Houtte's topic for change was to implement family group conferencing (FGC) in her St. Johnsbury District Office.

During her NCWLI session, Ms. Houtte developed a vision statement for FGC in her district, which she later presented to her staff. This was important to determine whether staff values were in line with those embedded in this practice, to air any resistance if it existed, and to create buy in for the change. After hearing staff input and having internal discussions, the district office decided to incorporate FGC into its case practice, initially with cases involving teens.

There was minimal resistance to the practice change, with most staff in agreement with the FGC approach and values; some saw it as being very much in line with their social work roots. St. Johnsbury staff reported that they believe that FGC has helped establish or reestablish family relationships, increased the options available to families, opened the lines of communication between the families and the agency, and led to positive outcomes that would not have been possible using a traditional child welfare approach.

The NCWLI training also had an impact on a larger scale. In addition to introducing FGC in her district office, Ms. Houtte helped support a broad system change effort, including incorporating family engagement throughout FSD. This systemwide reform effort was spurred on by the State's 2007 Child and Family Services Review and subsequent Program Improvement Plan and was driven by the agency's Transformation Plan, which was written by Deputy Commissioner Cindy Walcott, along with input from staff. As part of her contribution to promoting broad system change, Ms. Houtte co-chaired the Transformation Steering Committee, which oversaw how various workgroups coordinated the change process. Ms. Houtte also co-chaired workgroups that developed the Vermont Family Time Policy and Guidelines and the FSD Practice Model. The NCWLI training helped her structure committee meetings efficiently and advance the process effectively.

Ms. Houtte said that NCWLI was one of the most amazing experiences of her professional career. She was able to use what she learned immediately on her return to the agency, and she received a lot of support and consultation from NCWLI staff in her work.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Leadership Training to Promote Family Group Conferencing" (<http://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

After the training, Ms. Houtte supported two change efforts in Vermont: implementing family group conferencing (FGC) in the St. Johnsbury District Office and supporting a broad system change effort led by the Family Services Division (FSD) Central Office.

### ***The FGC Initiative***

The St. Johnsbury District Office, one of 12 district offices within FSD, has a district director, five social work staff, two senior social workers, and other support staff. Additionally, five Easter Seals staff are contracted and co-located to provide child and family support, and assist with FGC facilitation, coaching, and assistance; home visits, and communication with families. The District Office switched to a team approach prior to the shift to FGC. With this shift, the social workers and Easter Seals staff were divided into two teams, each led by a senior social worker who holds supervisory responsibility for the social workers yet maintains a small caseload. The teaming approach, which is unique in Vermont, allows staff to provide more comprehensive coverage on cases and to discuss issues with a team that is already familiar with the cases.

Before Ms. Houtte attended the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) training there had been discussion within her office about FGC. Staff recognized a cultural shift in the child welfare field and wanted to start working with families in a new way. After the initial NCWLI session, Ms. Houtte developed a vision statement for FGC and brought it to a staff meeting to explain the rationale for making the change and determine whether it aligns with existing staff values. Assessing whether the change itself maps to staff values and beliefs was a technique—adaptive work—that was emphasized by NCWLI staff.

After hearing staff input and having internal discussions, the District Office decided to incorporate FGC, initially with teens, into their case practice. Teens were selected as the target population because FGCs provided an opportunity to connect them with families, either through a permanent placement or through new or re-established relationships, before they age out of the child welfare system. Teens also are better able to understand and participate in the FGC process and may have a better idea of their desired outcomes than young children. Additionally, since FGC cases involving teens tend to be less risky than with younger children, it gave the staff an opportunity to develop their FGC skills so they could eventually develop more comfort and conduct FGCs with riskier cases.

Although there was some resistance to this practice change, most staff were in agreement with the FGC approach, with some seeing it as being very much in line with their social work roots. One longtime social worker with the agency noted that working with families and not wanting teens to age out of the system were not new values for them. Another worker noted that it was a pretty seamless shift.

The child welfare staff at the District Office had worked closely with families before; FGCs just would be a new mechanism for doing so. Even though there appeared to be general concurrence with the FGC approach, the agency still gave workers opportunities to discuss the change, which helped with staff buy-in. Based on the interviews and observations of the author, the staff seem very much in support of the FGC model. Additionally, Easter Seals staff reported that the shift to FGC was a natural progression for them.

The St. Johnsbury District Office's switch to FGC was aided by Vermont's training partnership with the University of Vermont (UVM), which is title IV-E funded and covers a wide range of child welfare issues. The UVM team helps the District Office in myriad ways, including helping them develop operational agreements and processes, facilitating dialogues, providing opportunities for reflective supervision, and participating in staff meetings. The UVM team also helped the District Office implement its team approach.

### ***Statewide Systems Change Effort***

Following Vermont's Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in 2007 and the resulting Program Improvement Plan, the State decided to embark on a systems change process to address issues that emerged during the review. In particular, Vermont's CFSR indicated the following:

- The State did not have enough client contact, especially at the investigation stage.
- Much of the client contact the State had was contracted out to other organizations.
- The agency waited too long to intervene.
- The agency was inconsistent in its report acceptance.

There also was new legislation (H. 148) in Vermont that helped drive the agency change. Although not a part of the NCWLI project, Ms. Houtte was able to use her experience from the training to help move along Vermont's change process, which was led by the FSD deputy commissioner and other managers.

Ms. Houtte was selected to co-chair the Transformation Steering Committee. Its purpose was to oversee and coordinate the work of the various workgroups developed to drive the change process in accordance with the agency's Transformation Plan. Membership of the committee consisted of the co-chairs of the other workgroups, which centered on topics such as:

- Differential response
- Family time guidelines
- The FSD Practice Model
- Supervisor role redesign
- Implementation of the new Vermont Juvenile Judicial Proceedings Act (JJPA)
- The introduction and use of mobile technology for use by line staff
- Planning for a statewide conference
- Redeployment of contracted resources

Ms. Houtte's NCWLI training helped her better structure committee meetings and advance the change process effectively. The change process is currently in the implementation phase, with the following already having been accomplished:

- Implementing a Differential Response System and a centralized intake system
- Developing the FSD Practice Model
- Instituting a best practice model, Family Time Coaching, and new guidelines for family time (a family-friendly term for visitation)
- Hosting a statewide conference
- Redeploying contracted resources
- Implementing JJPA

In addition to co-chairing the Steering Committee and two workgroups, Ms. Houtte made several presentations to FSD staff using information presented to her at NCWLI. She presented to the following audiences:

- St. Johnsbury Agency of Human Services Management Team
- Vermont Department for Children and Families FSD Statewide Management Team
- UVM Child Welfare Training Partnership Team
- Northeast Kingdom Youth Services Leadership Team
- All FSD staff (at a statewide conference)

The PowerPoint slides she used were part of the curriculum developed by the NCWLI faculty. Ms. Houtte's presentations focused on the role of leadership in the change process, including developing and implementing a vision, the role of the leader, technical and adaptive work, implementation driver analysis, the stages of change and implementation, and evaluation.

## **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

The site visit occurred in two locations in Vermont over two days. On August 31, 2009, the author met with Cindy Walcott, deputy commissioner of the Family Services Division (FSD), and Sheila Duranleau, policy and planning chief and operations manager, FSD. This meeting occurred in FSD's Central Office in Waterbury, VT.

On September 1, 2009, the author had several meetings in St. Johnsbury, VT. The first was a family group conference (FGC) planning meeting, which was attended by:

- Ms. Houtte
- Deb Rand, FSD Supervisor
- Mark Johnson, Vice President, Easter Seals Vermont
- Tara Carpenter, Easter Seals Facilitator
- Holly Hartwell, Easter Seals Facilitator
- Susie Reed, Easter Seals Facilitator
- Gale Burford, University of Vermont (UVM) Training Partnership
- Sarah Gallagher, UVM Training Partnership
- Cheryl Bilodeau, UVM Training Partnership

This was a regular FGC planning meeting during which participants discussed recent or planned conferences and cases. The meeting started with a planning session for an FGC for a current case. The purpose of the conference for this case was to keep the children out of FSD custody and find a new placement for them within their family. The case presented a very complex web of family relationships and dynamics. Some of the issues discussed during this case review included:

- Confidentiality issues, such as whether family members would need to sign any agreements
- Who from the family and the community should attend the conference
- Which members of the family and support network would hinder or facilitate the conference
- How to communicate with the family about the conference

They also discussed a previous case that had a successful resolution. The author noted that the meeting was a team effort, with all members participating and all voices being heard and respected.

The author also attended a lunch meeting with the following:

- Ms. Houtte

- Mr. Johnson
- Dr. Burford
- Ms. Gallagher
- Ms. Bilodeau

During this meeting, the attendees discussed the UVM Training Partnership, FGCs in general, and the change process.

The author also had the following meetings with St. Johnsbury FSD staff to discuss cases that used FGC:

- Case Meeting 1, with attendees: Ms. Rand and Ms. Hartwell
- Case Meeting 2, with attendees: Ms. Rand and Ms. Reed
- Case Meeting 3, with attendees: Ms. Houtte; Emily Carrier, FSD Supervisor; and Matt Bergeron, FSD Social Worker

Case Meeting 3 was a discussion of a case that was troublesome for the agency, but it led to practice and protocol changes, such as the creation of the FGC Planning Meetings, that helped improve the agency's FGC services. To help them learn about how they could have handled this case differently, the agency requested Casey Family Services to review the case. This review helped the agency refine its FGC practice.

There also were several meetings with Ms. Houtte to discuss her National Child Welfare Leadership Institute experience, the FGC initiative, and the broad child welfare system change across Vermont. She said that the following components of the training were particularly valuable:

- A 1-day training on the stages of implementation and implementation driver analysis
- Training components that focused on adaptive and technical work in the change process and how to create opportunities and facilitate adaptive work
  - Adaptive work is necessary when legitimate—yet competing—perspectives emerge, the definition and solution to the problem are unclear, and the primary locus of responsibility cannot be on the leader. Adaptive work focuses on enacting changes in people's values, attitudes, and/or behaviors.
  - Technical work occurs when perspectives are aligned, the definition and solution of the problem is clear, and the primary person responsible for organizing the work is the leader.
- A focus on how the training information can be applied in agency practice, particularly with change projects

Ms. Houtte said that the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) was one of the most amazing experiences of her professional career. She was able to use what she learned immediately upon her return to the agency, and she received a lot of support and consultation from NCWLI staff in her work. For example, one NCWLI faculty member offered to listen via teleconference during Ms. Houtte's first presentation of NCWLI materials for the Vermont systems change process and provided feedback.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

### ***The FGC Initiative***

- Resistance among community professionals to using family group conferencing (FGC) is normal. Community providers may think that FGC is too risky for children. They also may believe that it may change the economy of the system (i.e., providers' services may not be needed as frequently when using FGC methodology and the resulting plans) or will dilute the professionals' voice in making case recommendations.
- For frontline staff, part of buying into FGC is accepting an increased workload due to the more intense efforts required by the process.
- Planning meetings with FGC experts should be held so they can coach on the skills necessary to do the work. Training is not enough.
- Agencies should seek out and use any resistance to FGC, both internal and external to the agency, as a starting point for a discussion of the issues and concerns and to build a foundation for the implementation of this practice.
- Agencies should not try to make the shift to FGC too quickly and hurry the change process. It is vital to gain staff buy-in and establish an effective system before beginning to implement conferences.
- The agency should conduct outreach with community professionals and other stakeholders early in the change process to obtain buy-in for FGC and determine the best ways to involve partners.
- The social worker should prepare community professionals for the FGC process prior to the conference, including giving them information about the process and what is expected of them.
- In the past, the agency asked the facilitators to contact families about FGCs. Current protocol, however, is that the social worker contact the family to explain the process and help guide them through it. This change was made because it helps keep the facilitator independent and the social worker already has a relationship with the family.
- Additionally, in the past, the facilitator led the FGC process. The agency now involves the social worker more in the planning process.
- The FGC facilitator should ask the family to identify who will be the primary point-of-contact for the social worker. This will ease the burden on the social worker by reducing the number of people they need to communicate with on some issues.
- It is important that the participants in the conference are open-minded to the process and different outcomes. It also helps to have a diversity of opinion among the participants.
- Preparing the families for the conference is critical. Rather than having participating family members learn the facts of the case, such as the case details and investigation outcome, during the conference proceedings, the social worker must provide them with information before it so there are no surprises at the conference.
- Supervisors and other upper-level management staff should trust that their frontline staff are familiar with the families because they see the families in their own environments.
- The parents should have input into who will attend the FGC, but agency staff, children, and other family members also should generate ideas about who should be invited.
- The skill of the facilitator is critical, as is their independence from both the family and the agency.
- The family plan developed at the FGC should be specific so that all participants, including family members, agency staff, and community providers, fully understand their roles and responsibilities and any timelines. For example, instead of a family member just being assigned to provide support or respite care, the plan should state what type of support and how often.
- There must be follow-up.

- Agencies should establish a bottom line for the family's plan (i.e., the minimum requirements for the agency to accept the plan) prior to the conference. The Family Safety Planning (FSP) meeting may help establish this bottom line.
  - The FSP meeting is conducted by a non-Family Services Division facilitator early in the assessment process, often before a key decision needs to be made about the case. It is largely a family-driven process.
  - St. Johnsbury uses the Signs of Safety model to structure its FSP process.
  - The FSP meeting includes a discussion of risks and dangers as well as strengths and, based on this, the group develops a safety plan, including next steps, with the family.
  - This is a separate process from FGC, and the FSP meetings occur before an FGC for a case.
  - Both FSP meetings and FGCs bring a lot of transparency to the family and force a discussion of specifics and next steps.

### ***Statewide Systems Change Effort***

- The implementation driver analysis, through which the agency assesses items and activities could help develop, improve, and sustain the implementation process, should be conducted early in the planning process. The seven drivers that should be assessed include pre-service and in-service training, coaching and supervision, recruitment and selection, facilitative administrative supports (e.g., flexible funding), staff performance evaluation, decision support data systems (i.e., having usable and valuable data), and systems intervention (i.e., other related systems are onboard the change initiative). Agencies should assess how each of these drivers may support the initiative, how they be changed to support the initiative more fully, and how that change can be made to happen.
- It is normal for there to be resistance to a systems change effort. Those leading the change should respond to concerns and issues, but they also should stand strong and proceed with the effort.
- It would have been helpful if a high-level staffer from the Central Office attended the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute with Ms. Houtte so that additional staff in the State had the experience and knowledge, which would help even more with the transformation process.

### **Recommendations**

- Agencies should begin FGC as early in a case as possible but not before a merits finding has been made.
- Agencies should look at all cases to see if they would benefit from FGC.
- In the early stages of FGC implementation, agencies should select cases that involve less serious allegations and less complex issues. This will help the staff build their skills and experience with FGC before moving to more difficult cases.
- Over-restrictive confidentiality should not get in the way of bringing people to the table. For example, agency staff previously could not provide certain case information to family members, but now they are encouraged to speak with and even seek out family members to increase the support network for the child and parents and bring them into the FGC process.
- When instituting a change process, don't become complacent if resistance has lulled since the early stages. It can come later in the process, too. Staff meetings are a good

time to continue to discuss issues and concerns that may be emerging or lingering and to use adaptive work processes to explore values and beliefs.

- Managers and supervisors should discuss with their staff the alignment of values and beliefs with practice changes at various points during the change process.
- When contract staff will be affected by the systems change, the agency and the contract staff should determine if the contract staff's scope of work will change and if the contract staff's values and beliefs are aligned with the change. If they decide to proceed, the agency should then ensure that the contract staff have the skills and knowledge necessary for their work and, if not, provide the necessary training and other support.
- Agency staff should assess whether family members are capable of handling the FGC process (e.g., they are emotionally ready; they do not harbor so much anger toward the agency or each other that it will hinder the process).
- Agency staff should provide training on the FGC model, as well as forums for discussion about any concerns, for community professionals.
- One way to prepare child welfare workers for FGC is for schools of social work to teach it in their curricula.

## **Challenges**

- The systems change process takes a long time.
- It is difficult to obtain buy-in from service providers, especially when service providers' businesses may have been built around certain types of practice and the additional involvement of families, their support systems, and others may dilute the service provider's voice.
- Historical family conflicts sometimes come back during FGCs. These likely will need to be resolved before or during the conferences.

## **Successful Strategies and Keys to Success**

- The fact that Ms. Houtte is a district director and not based at the Central Office helped her succeed as a lead person in the statewide systems change effort because she was often presenting to her peers at the district level, who probably would have received the information differently if it had come from Central Office or an external trainer or consultant.
- Showing enthusiasm for the change at the management level of the agency helped gain supervisor and frontline staff buy-in.
- Agencies will need to work closely with some community providers to obtain support for the change. One way of getting community providers and other stakeholders on board is to have them attend a conference, where appropriate, so they can see how the process works and how effective it can be.
- Having upfront conversations with agency staff about their values and beliefs facilitated the shift toward FGC because it helped the staff see how they aligned and, if they did not, gave the leadership an opportunity to create a forum for conversation so that values and beliefs could be explored and influenced.
- The training and discussion about adaptive and technical change helped the change leaders structure the process, which helped gain staff support for the effort.
- Ms. Houtte's role as a change leader for the statewide change effort was bolstered by her ability to focus on the process and take initiative.
- The development of a comprehensive training and support plan helped contribute to the success of the statewide transformation process.



- The Easter Seals team did not have many restrictions on their scope of work, which, along with their openness for change and the alignment of their values and beliefs, helped ease the transition to FGC.

## OUTCOMES

The University of Vermont (UVM) is conducting an evaluation of family group conferencing (FGC) across the State. It provides voluntary evaluation forms to all attendees of the conferences and conducts interviews with some participants. As of March 22, 2010, UVM had collected evaluation forms from 276 individuals, including adult and child family members, family friends and support people, service providers, and social workers. The evaluation focuses on implementation data for FGC, and UVM hopes to soon collect outcome data as well.

The following are statewide (including St. Johnsbury and other areas of the State) FGC data forms reported by UVM from the evaluation:

- 92.3 percent reported getting the help/preparation needed to be ready for the meeting.
- 90.8 percent indicated that the right people attended the meeting.
- 93.6 percent were satisfied with the way the meeting was run.
- 93.6 percent felt that had the opportunity to say what they felt was important.
- 92.0 percent reported that other people really listened to what they had to say.
- 93.0 percent agreed that the plan the group made was the right one.
- 98.2 percent reported they were willing to do their part to make the group's plan work.
- 93.7 percent thought the right people helped make the plan.

Approximately two-thirds (66.5 percent) of the evaluation forms were completed by family members, 13.3 percent were completed by friends or support people, and 20.2 percent were completed by professionals.

UVM staff stated that, in general, participants reported liking the FGC process. The primary concern about FGC cited during the interviews was the follow-through on the family plans, including:

- What happens to the plan once it is agreed upon?
- How is it integrated into the case process?
- What are the expectations that the family would see the social worker more often after the conference?

St. Johnsbury District Office staff reported the following observations about FGC:

- It has helped families maintain or reestablish relationships.
- In one case, the mother, who had previous experience with the child welfare system, said this was the first time she felt that she was heard.
- In another case, one parent, who also had previous experience with the child welfare system, stated that she did not like the outcome of the conference, but that she liked the approach more than the traditional way.
- The experience helped to empower one mother.
- It helped open the lines of communication between the agency and families.
- It widened the options available to the agency and families.
- It assisted the agency in establishing kinship care arrangements.
- The number of complaints to the District Office's consumer complaint system appears to have gone down since implementing FGC.

- Positive outcomes of some FGC cases might not have been achieved using a traditional child welfare approach.

The following are general observations about the effects of the National Child Welfare Leadership Institute (NCWLI) training:

- One person attending the NCWLI training had a tremendous effect on the State's system change efforts.
- The training Ms. Houtte provided to the Family Services Division staff helped them better understand resistance to change and how to work through it.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

The following have been developed by the grantee under this priority area and are available to the public. Links are included where available. For unlinked items, contact the project director. Some items may be available through the Child Welfare Information Gateway Library, email [library@childwelfare.gov](mailto:library@childwelfare.gov).

- Transforming Services for Families ([http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/fsd/FSD\\_Transformation\\_Plan.pdf](http://dcf.vermont.gov/sites/dcf/files/pdf/fsd/FSD_Transformation_Plan.pdf)) – A plan developed by the Vermont Family Services Division to guide and explain their child welfare systems change effort