



Information Summit on Disproportionality

Final Report

March 24-25, 2009

Overview of Differential Response¹ and the QIC-DR

Differential response refers to a child welfare system with one or more alternatives to the traditional child welfare investigative response to reports of child maltreatment. Based on the previous work of the Children's Bureau (2003) and the American Humane Association and the Child Welfare League of America (2006), the core elements of differential response being used for this National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services (QIC-DR) are:

- Two or more discrete responses to screened in and accepted reports of maltreatment;
- Assignment to response pathways is determined by an array of factors;
- Original pathway assignments can be changed;
- Families assigned to non-investigation pathways are able to accept or refuse to participate in the non-investigation pathway or choose the traditional investigative response;
- After assessment in the non-investigation pathway, services are voluntary as long as child safety is not compromised;
- Discrete responses are established by codification in statute, policy, or protocols;
- No substantiation of alleged maltreatment (services are offered without a formal determination that maltreatment has occurred); and
- Use of the central registry is dependent on the type of response.

The QIC-DR has three primary purposes:

- 1) To improve child welfare outcomes by implementing differential response and building cutting edge, innovative, and replicable knowledge about differential response;
- 2) To enhance capacity at local levels to improve outcomes for children and families identified for suspected abuse or neglect; and
- 3) To provide guidance on best practice in differential response.

¹The term "differential response" encompasses all system approaches that have the core elements outlined in this report. The system approach may have different names in different jurisdictions including, but not limited to, multiple response system, family assessment response, or alternative response.

There are three leading organizations for the QIC-DR that work under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Children's Bureau: 1) the American Humane Association, 2) Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., and 3) Institute of Applied Research. These three organizations will work in partnership with the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Conference of State Legislatures. The QIC-DR will operate in two phases. During Phase 1 (year 1), the QIC-DR will conduct a national needs assessment to leverage existing knowledge and build new knowledge of differential response reform. It will include a literature review, information summits, focus groups, interviews of key informants, and development of an evaluation design. Phase 2 (years 2-5) will involve selection and funding of research and demonstration projects and doctoral student dissertations to create additional knowledge and scholarly evidence about differential response. Throughout the 5-year operation of the QIC-DR, there will be continuous knowledge dissemination. More information may be found at www.DifferentialResponseQIC.org.

As one of the elements of Phase 1, the QIC-DR convened an Information Summit on Disproportionality on March 24-25, 2009, in Columbus, Ohio. The objectives/goals of this information summit were:

- To expand participants' knowledge of differential response, the QIC-DR, and disproportionality and disparities in child welfare;
- To advance knowledge building to determine if differential response could have a positive or negative impact on disproportionality and disparity in child welfare systems implementing differential response;
- To advance knowledge building to determine if the design of a differential response model to provide equitable delivery of services for families of color could impact disproportionality; and
- To advance knowledge building to determine how partnering with communities of color and systems reporting to child protective services can impact either positively or negatively disproportional and disparate rates in child welfare.

Summary of Summit Activities and Key Themes

Welcome and Opening Activities

The summit opened by welcoming all participants to the QIC-DR Information Summit on Disproportionality. Participants were provided with a general overview of the purpose of the information summit, the outcomes sought, and a review of the agenda for the two-day summit. The opening activity provided participants with an opportunity to introduce themselves, network with one another, and answer the following question: If given a magic wand, what three things would you do to address disparities and disproportionality in child welfare? This activity helped stimulate creative thinking and dialogue as to what could be accomplished to address the overrepresentation of families of color in child welfare.

Below is a summary of responses from participants:

- Eliminate racism, classism, discrimination, and judgmental attitudes.
- Eradicate poverty.
- Create an atmosphere where people are comfortable talking about race, racial differences, and the reality of continued racism.
- Make services accessible and available to all children and families (get families the resources they need).

- Create equity and cultural competency in services (and service delivery).
- Ensure that the voices of birth parents and children are fully included in a redesign of the child welfare system.
- Enhance the understanding of family engagement regarding communities of color.
- Increase the level of diversity in the administrative levels of the child welfare system, and change the face of the U.S. Congress to reflect more cultural diversity.
- Make the problem of disproportionality a priority, and put funds toward efforts that address it (obtain more resources to support these efforts).
- Educate child welfare workers about the impact of their decisions regarding disproportionality in child welfare.
- Reform the school system (at every level) so that everyone learns the importance and value of cultural diversity.
- Create mechanisms for the Fostering Connections Act to be fully implemented and universally understood.
- Determine how to interpret and present disproportionality data so the broader community is informed and aware of its presence, and is able to examine it thoroughly.

Following the opening activity, three presentations were provided to establish some framework for the two days of summit discussions participants would engage in. These presentations provided foundational information for participants who did not have direct knowledge and experience with differential response and/or disparities and disproportionality.

Overview of Differential Response & QIC-DR

Caren Kaplan, American Humane's director of child protection reform and project director of QIC-DR, provided an overview of the QIC-DR project which included:

- An overview of differential response in child protection;
- Core elements, principles, and assumptions of differential response;
- The Quality Improvement Center model and activities planned for year 1 and years 2-5 of the QIC-DR; and
- The significance of family engagement in differential response.

Setting the Context on Disproportionality and Disparity

Khatib Waheed, senior fellow for the Center of Study on Social Policy, provided a presentation on the key issues of disparity and disproportionality in child welfare. Key themes from this presentation included:

- Defining the issues: What is disparity? What is disproportionality? Why are they a concern?
- A brief review of the most recent data on rates of African American, Native American, and Latino families, and an overview of related research and literature developed on disparities and disproportionality, such the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being re-analysis and the Chapin Hall study: Racial Disparity in Foster Care Admissions.
- Factors contributing to disparities and disproportionality, such as poverty, challenges in accessing supportive services, racial bias, and accessing appropriate permanent homes. In addition,

individual family level behaviors such as drug abuse and incarceration were identified, along with issues related to structural racism.

- Opportunities for change through the identification of jurisdictions such as Ramsey County, Minnesota, and Woodbury County, Iowa, that have implemented promising strategies. In addition, the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions and Federal Policy Recommendations were presented.

Disproportionality: Research and Evaluation

Fred Wulczyn, research fellow with Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, provided a presentation on a current research project regarding disproportionality. Key themes from this presentation included:

- Focusing on disparities rather than disproportionality may advance the action steps required to address disproportionality (i.e., disparity in rates of admission, pathway assignment, disparity of services, etc.).
- Addressing and responding to service arrays will benefit the entire child welfare system, not just areas where differential response is being practiced.
- Poverty and race are undoubtedly linked, but alleviating poverty may not necessarily reduce levels of disparity for African Americans. Recent research conducted by Chapin Hall found that poverty is used as an explanation of disparity, and yet, disparity is low in high-poverty areas and high in low-poverty areas. In addition, research shows that it does not matter if an African American family is rich or poor; their rates of admission and placements will still be higher than for a White family of similar economic status/class. Thus, the relationship between poverty and placement seems to be dependent upon race.

John Fluke, director of the Child Protection Research Center with American Humane, provided a presentation on research questions and findings related to disproportionality and differential response. Key themes from this presentation included:

- Differential response should be viewed as a compilation of decisions rather than as a singular decision point. This cultivates an ongoing and continued assessment of the family.
- The importance of partnering with the community in differential response models is critical to success.
- Key questions for further exploration and research:
 - In the early years of differential response implementation, there tended to be an under-representation of African Americans in the child welfare system. Why is this?
 - What service arrays are being put in place for differential response families?
 - How are services, including those provided to children who remain in their homes (and are not in placement), tied to communities of color?
 - Are there specific evaluation issues that need to be addressed when looking at differential response and issues of disparity?

Following the presentations, participants were organized into small groups to hold discussions on key topical areas. A synthesis of the key themes from the discussions follows.

Synthesis of Roundtable Discussion 1

Equity in the design and implementation of differential response in child welfare systems for families of color: How can the history, organizational culture, and systemic issues inherent in public child protection agencies either facilitate or hinder efforts to address disproportionality and disparity in the implementation of a differential response model?

Cultural History of Child Protection:

- The history of child protection is one of rescuing and saving children rather than supporting and preserving families. The emphasis child protection agencies place on this focus drives the work and contributes to how agencies approach and work with families.
- Historically, the face of the child welfare organization has been dominated by White females. The face of the organization is important, as it suggests whether the agency is culturally diverse, if the staff reflects the clients and families served, and what the leadership of the agency looks like.
- Use of the term “child in need of protective services” rather than “abuse and neglect” in legislation could help differentiate child protective services from its historical links with a punitive system such as law enforcement.

Key Considerations for Systems:

- Some workers may use a different threshold for African American, Native American, and Hispanic children than for White children in determining the removal of African American, Native American, and Hispanic children from their homes.
- The philosophy of the organization should be one of protecting children by strengthening families. Needs are not only child focused; they are also family focused. This should be reflected in the mission, values, and leadership of the organization. Leadership is critical, as it sets the tone and values for the entire organization.
- Systems should partner with culturally competent community providers to meet the service needs of those who are racially/ethnically/culturally different. Partnership at all levels is key and should include courts as one of those key partners.
- Guiding principles are needed to establish that differential response is a way of engagement that provides a different type of intervention — one that moves away from coercive voluntary or mandated interventions.
- A major community survey should be conducted every couple of years that can serve as a tool in the creation of a marketing strategy, as well as an opportunity for educational outreach.
- Sustainability is highly dependent on reasonable and doable time frames for families to engage in and complete services.
- Utilize opportunities to build and develop the array of services through a local Request for Proposal (RFP) process.
- The assessment process in determining if a case should go through the non-investigation pathway or the investigation pathway should be subjective as determined by the collective family group.

Issues of Workforce Bias and Pathway Assignment:

- In addressing bias, the question was raised as to whether the race of the family should be known at the time of the pathway assignment. The general consensus was that knowledge of race is nearly impossible not to know, as workers can make assumptions based on indicators such as first

and last names, ZIP codes, and whether the family has had a previous referral. In addition, the race of Native Americans must be identified in order to be eligible for funding.

- Participants stated that knowledge of race is a prerequisite to respecting the family's culture. Not having data on race can negatively impact family engagement; however, overtly asking about race may also be a detriment to engagement. Knowledge of race is also necessary to determine the language needs of families.
- There is no research to suggest that race is the cause of maltreatment. Therefore, when conducting an assessment, information should be gathered based on the needs of the family (which are not necessarily related to the race of the family).
- Knowledge of race is also important in terms of service types and community support systems.
- To address potential bias in pathway assignment, it is necessary to address issues relevant to the culture of racism and the culture of classism (poverty).
- Addressing bias involves becoming culturally competent and culturally proficient, which requires quality leadership, supervision, and the ability to think critically and creatively.
- Cultural competency trainings should focus on attitudes, not just knowledge building. Technical assistance is needed to advance the action steps necessary to being culturally attuned and sensitive to a family's needs. Coaching may be a better avenue than classroom training, as it is more person or situation specific.
- Institute checks and balances in the system to monitor for biased pathway assignments. The workforce may be well trained; however, how is this manifested in the work? How do we know that good, culturally responsive work is being done?
- One significant challenge of effective differential response practice is ensuring that services are responsive to every person and family involved in child welfare.
- A workforce that represents the skills and capacities needed to do the challenging work, rather than one that simply reflects the cultural "makeup" of families, will likely create successful outcomes for children and families. Similarity between workers and clients may be helpful and necessary in the beginning, but it is not sufficient in creating long-term quality outcomes for families.

Synthesis of Roundtable Discussion 2

Equity in service design and delivery of services for families of color involved in differential response: How can the design and delivery of services in a differential response model have the potential, either negatively or positively, to influence the outcomes for families of color?

Considerations in Service Design and Delivery:

- Where funding is available, evaluations of the efficacy, cultural competency, and cultural sensitivity of services should be conducted in order to set clear standards and expectations for providers. It is important to evaluate how connected the service provider is to the community. Does the service provider understand the needs of the community members? Does the service provider conduct outreach in the community in an effort to understand that specific community's specific needs? What is the service provider's reputation in the community? Does it have a history of getting things done for families in the neighborhood? Does it come recommended by neighbors?

- Implementing incentives for workers and service providers to promote follow-up, and an ongoing partnership between child protective services and community providers, could serve to motivate stakeholder involvement in differential response.
- Resources need to be in place before differential response is implemented. If services are not available or effective, then the implementation of differential response is not likely to result in the outcomes sought. In order for differential response to distinguish itself from traditional practice, services must be effective, culturally responsive, timely, and relevant to differential response.
- Services need to be neighborhood based and culturally competent. It may be appropriate to connect families with specific cultural service providers (e.g., an organization that specializes in serving undocumented families) to meet families' cultural needs. Services should be unique and individualized based on the needs of the families served. This will require flexibility on the part of the service provider.
- The family engagement principles of differential response will lead toward greater investment on the part of community providers. Principles that support the family as the expert, as well as families driving the process and taking ownership of the plan, will provide a different perspective on child protective services and promote greater collaboration. The engagement of family members needs to take place with extended kin and family supports, and should be a continuous and consistent process.

Day 2: QIC-DR Information Summit on Disproportionality

The second day of the summit opened with presentations by states currently implementing or piloting differential response. The presentations offered participants an opportunity to understand the successes and challenges that both Ohio and Missouri have experienced in the implementation of differential response. The following are key themes from those presentations.

Eric Fenner, executive director, Franklin County Children Services (Ohio), and Lara LaRoche, associate intake director, Franklin County Children Services:

Implementation – Policies, Procedures & Practice

- The passing of Senate Bill 238 in 2006 instigated alternative response implementation. (In Ohio, the term “alternative response” is used rather than differential response.)
- An internal alternative response committee was formed to include all areas of the agency and all community partners, with one of the primary goals being to improve screening practices.
- Alignment of the principles of differential response with Franklin County Children Services.
- The target population included African Americans, as they seemed to be in great need. Franklin County selected 9 ZIP codes in northeast Columbus that had experienced a high amount of referrals and a high number of children in placement (i.e., neighborhoods with an African American population).
- In 2005, a Disproportionality Task Force was formed as a countywide initiative with one key question: “What are we doing to contribute to the penetration of African American children in our child welfare system?” They found that there were no disproportionate actions on Franklin County’s part, but that did not erase the fact that three-fifths of referrals were African American children.

- Franklin County uses alternative response-like approaches in schools, hospitals, churches, prosecutor's offices, and in media opportunities.
- With the implementation of alternative response, workers are happy with what they are doing, the community is supportive, families are engaged and are identifying what they need, families are linked and matched with services, and families have the option to switch pathways.
- Early results of alternative response indicate that nearly half of all current reports are going into alternative response, and 93 percent of all alternative response cases close within 45 days.
- By raising the standards of services for *all* families and lowering the overall number of children in care, Franklin County also specifically lowered the number of African American children in care (since they made up the majority of referrals). In 2006, 54 percent of African American children were in state custody; in 2008 (after alternative response implementation), 50 percent of African American children were in state custody (a 15-year low of children in custody).

Tena Thompson, regional director, Missouri Children's Division, St. Louis City Office:

Implementation – Policies, Procedures & Practice

- In 1992-1993, Missouri's deputy director looked at Florida's differential response system and spoke with a supportive Missouri legislator ("a champion of differential response") in order to effectively begin differential response implementation.
- Differential response was piloted in five sites for 3 years before statewide implementation was approved.
- Differential response was piloted in 19 St. Louis ZIP codes (where the incidence of abuse and neglect was the highest, and community development was already occurring or in place).
- The Missouri Children's Division assigned staff to neighborhoods to get them involved in the community.
- The Missouri Children's Division also posted staff in schools, local children's hospitals, family court, and the juvenile justice division in order to have staff become part of the fabric of the community.
- Once differential response was implemented, foster care placements began to decline (more children are leaving care than coming into care).
- The Missouri Children's Division provided workers with opportunities (during work hours and in the evening) to go to community meetings in order to create and maintain partnerships.
- The Missouri Children's Division introduced family support team meetings, team decision meetings, and family group conferences.
- Other strategies included having staff go door to door to engage with families, encouraging families to link to informal supports that are naturally present in their community, and encouraging maltreatment reporters to think outside the box.
- The Missouri Children's Division took active and specific steps to address disproportionality and disparity, including talking about data and practices that may be biased, and implementing "Monday Morning Messaging" to foster staff dialogue about disproportionality information in the community, the state, and the country.

Synthesis of Roundtable Discussion 3

Community and Reporting in a Differential Response Model

Do current child protection policies, procedures, and practices facilitate or hinder the child protection agency's ability to meet the differential response requisites of collaborating and partnering with community organizations (i.e., faith based, community centers) and public institutions (i.e., schools, hospitals, law enforcement) regarding the service and cultural needs of families of color involved with the child protection agency?

Challenges:

- Participants identified confidentiality as one key challenge to engaging the community in differential response. How can we discuss cases with community agencies and members while remaining respectful of the family's right to privacy? Another issue related to territorialism, meaning that some agencies may find it difficult to relinquish or share their level of authority with other individuals, agencies, or systems involved. Accountability was also raised as a key issue. How can systems such as courts, provider agencies, and child protective services actively share responsibility for meeting the needs of the families and keep children safe?
- Solid relationships within the community can be developed by starting with a clear understanding of the roles of the stakeholders involved, along with frank and honest discussion about inadequate resources, lack of services, and the use of data to promote changes.
- Correct the perception that child protective services is aligned with law enforcement. If the community has not had a good relationship with law enforcement, this could inhibit the collaboration between child protective services and the community.
- A definition of collaboration is needed, as well as a consistent definition of community. What does it mean to collaborate? What does collaboration look like? In true collaboration, everyone shares the risks, including funding, setting policy, and sharing the outcomes. What is a community? Is a community defined by geography, race, age, or socioeconomic status?

General Strategies and Opportunities:

- Creativity and authenticity are necessary in creating mutually beneficial relationships with community partners.
- Using flex or compensatory time can encourage staff to engage with the community agencies and members. If workers sense value in their efforts to go beyond meeting minimum standards, it could promote greater efforts toward community engagement. It should be noted that unions could be an impediment to infusing flexibility in workers' schedules to meet the needs of families in the community.
- Recognize that communities have the power, the ability, and the right to shape their structural organization. They have the ability to take responsibility for community safety and well-being.
- Ensure that lower-funded community organizations and higher-funded community organizations are given equal weight, importance, and voice in the development of opportunities for families and children involved with child protective services.
- Identify disproportionality and differential response champions in the community to help support shifts in philosophy and practice, both in the child protection system and in the community.

System Specific Strategies:

- Designate an agency-specific leader in the implementation of differential response.

- Place child welfare staff in the community and link them to specific community organizations.
- Use Institutional Resource Theory and geo-mapping to identify what community resources are actually available, which ones have the most influence over the neighborhood, where they are geographically situated, and to assist in building community coalitions.
- Eliminate rigid time frames in order to nurture community partnerships and relationships, particularly with faith-based communities.
- Obtain flexible funding to invest in the community and enhance service availability. Receive waivers or identify options to convert Title IV-E funds to invest in the community's needs.
- Use the media to educate the community about differential response.
- Hold child protective services agencies accountable for setting high expectations for community engagement.
- Use community partners to monitor and evaluate the services provided to families. Remain transparent about practice — post a “report card” of community agency rankings in service delivery that will help families make informed choices. This empowers both the families and the community.

Synthesis of Moving Forward and Sustaining the Work

What is required?

- A practice model, vision and values.
- Data to be collected on disparate treatment.
- Time for paradigm shifts to occur in order to sustain the change and offer opportunities for evaluation.
- Obtain buy-in from diverse stakeholders at the beginning.
- Identify services that families need and do not receive (inclusion of another core element of differential response that addresses service array availability, accessibility, and development of services consistent with the needs of children and families).
- Safeguards need to be in place that can effectively ensure that families that do not need to be placed on an investigation pathway receive the non-investigation pathway in differential response, and also ensure that appropriate and culturally sensitive services are provided. Doing so will improve the entire child welfare system, including investigations.
- Improve services in a differential response model that respond to neglect more effectively, as African American families are often reported for neglect.
- Evidence is needed to prove that differential response works, and that its philosophy and services are key to improving outcomes and service arrays for families of color.
- Begin to collect and distribute data to show the impact that differential response has on disproportionality and disparity in the child welfare system.
- Apply for grant proposals and shape the Request for Applications (RFA) process.

Remaining Questions:

- How do we interpret or draw conclusions about the adequacy of a response if it works for some families but not for others? Was the intervention bad, or just not effective for the family's dynamics?
- If a differential response model does not have the capacity to provide adequate services, how can it change disproportionality without changing disparities?
- Are outcomes for families relevant, or is the change to the agency and how it services families more important?
- In building equity in the differential response model design, what is the yardstick that indicates that you have or have not achieved the outcomes desired?
- How do we assess the relative merit and outcomes of differential response for systemic changes that are hoped for, but may not necessarily be visible in the outcome data? How do we measure unattended consequences?
- What is the active ingredient without which none of the "hoped for" outcomes could be achieved?
- How do you begin to quantify all the different variables to get at the true essence of the initiative?
- How will differential response be sold to communities? What are the reasons a community would want differential response?
- Is it necessary to have fidelity? How does maintaining fidelity allow for flexibility and nuances in the community?
- How do you shape the "ask" to get applications that test variance in differential response models, while at the same time attempting to create some consistency in practice?

Appendix A – Participant List

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