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Beyond Investigations: Current Innovations in Responding to Reports of Child Maltreatment

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Differential response refers to an approach that allows CPS to respond in more than one way to screened-in reports of child maltreatment, based on such factors as the type and severity of the alleged maltreatment, number and sources of previous reports, and willingness of the family to participate in services.

The purpose of this issue brief is to provide readers with a summary of front-end child protective services (CPS) system reforms that State and local CPS agencies have implemented to provide more flexibility in meeting individual families' needs and to improve their responses to at-risk children and families.

This brief could not possibly cover all formal and informal CPS system reform efforts throughout the country; therefore, its purpose is to review reforms grounded in the way in which CPS initially responds to families referred for alleged child maltreatment. Based on the extensive data gathered, this brief highlights a variety of innovative responses to child maltreatment reports that public child protection agencies are using to enhance safety, permanency, and well-being for children.

Background

More than 3 million referrals alleging child maltreatment are made to public CPS agencies across the U.S. each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2009). Approximately 62% of those referrals are "screened in," meaning they meet baseline criteria for child abuse, neglect, or dependency as defined by State law, policy, or protocol and the information in the report is assumed to be true (USDHHS). CPS is required to respond in some way to all screened-in reports. Traditionally, that response has been to investigate the allegations to determine whether the abuse or neglect occurred and to remove children from unsafe situations. That response has been used to protect children from immediate or imminent danger caused by maltreatment. However, many screened-in reports do not involve children in immediate risk of harm. In such cases, other ways of responding may allow agencies to better match their response to the families' and children's needs. As a result, CPS agencies are continuously seeking new and innovative approaches to improve systems, help families in need, and better respond to children at risk of abuse or neglect while maintaining child safety as the primary focus.

In 2008, the U.S. Children's Bureau awarded a grant to American Humane Association and its partners, Walter R. McDonald & Associates Inc. and the Institute of Applied Research, to operate the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services (QIC-DR). The QIC-DR focuses on advancements related to differential response, a CPS system reform that is being implemented in a growing number of States and countries and is described in more detail in this brief.¹ The QIC-DR's purpose is to (1) design and conduct an evaluation to rigorously study implementation, outcomes, and cost impact of differential response in selected research and demonstration sites; (2) learn if differential response is an effective approach in CPS; and (3) build cutting-edge, innovative, and replicable knowledge about differential response, including guidance on best practices.

The QIC-DR spent its first year (2008-2009) conducting a comprehensive needs assessment to identify knowledge gaps in the field of differential response to select research priorities and to construct a rigorous, multimethod evaluation design to support research on differential response. The QIC-DR used a variety of methods to collect information and diverse opinions, including a literature review; multidisciplinary summits; individual interviews of child welfare administrators, supervisors, line workers, attorneys, and judges; a web-based national survey; focus groups with a variety of stakeholders; and listening sessions to hear from families who experienced a non-investigation response. It collected information about the history of differential response and similar CPS system reforms; the strengths and challenges of developing, implementing, and sustaining these reforms; and the effects on children, families, child welfare professionals, and other stakeholders. All of these activities added to a rich knowledge base about differential response and other innovative CPS reforms.

¹ For more comprehensive reports and information on differential response, please visit www.differentialresponseqic.org.



CPS systems are implementing a range of reforms. One such system reform is differential response. Another reform measure implemented in a few States uniformly alters the traditional CPS response to screened-in reports to create a less incident-based and more holistic focus. Finally, some States have reformed their systems by adding a response option for screened-out reports where families are in need of services.

Differential Response and Other Innovative Responses

Differential Response

Differential response, also called “dual track,” “multiple response system,” “alternative response,” or “family assessment response” in various jurisdictions, refers to an approach that allows CPS to respond in more than one way to screened-in reports of child maltreatment, based on such factors as the type and severity of the alleged maltreatment, number and sources of previous reports, and willingness of the family to participate in services. The number of response options or pathways and criteria for the different pathways in a differential response organized CPS system differs based on State policies or protocols.

In 2006, American Humane and the Child Welfare League of America jointly conducted a national study of differential response models and cited the following core elements of all models (Merkel-Holguin, Kaplan, & Kwak, 2006):

- Two or more discrete response pathways are used for screened-in reports, including an investigation pathway and a non-investigation family assessment response pathway;
- The establishment of discrete response pathways is formalized in statute, policy, or protocols;
- Initial pathway assignment depends on an array of factors (e.g., presence of imminent danger, level of risk, number of previous reports, source of the report, and/or presenting case characteristics, such as type of alleged maltreatment and age of the alleged victim);

- Initial pathway assignment can change based on new information obtained by the agency, altering the risk level or safety concerns;
- Services are voluntary in a non-investigation pathway: Families can choose to receive the investigation response or accept or refuse the offered services if there are no safety concerns;
- Families are served in a non-investigation pathway without a formal determination of child maltreatment; and
- Since no determination of maltreatment is made, no one is named as a perpetrator and no names are entered into the central registry for individuals who are served through a non-investigation pathway.

Applying these criteria, approximately 17 States are either using a statewide differential response system or have implemented differential response in localities at the time of writing this brief (Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response [QIC-DR], 2009a). At least seven additional States, tribes, or jurisdictions are known to be considering or planning implementation of differential response, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico (see Appendix).

One of the primary goals of the QIC-DR is to answer the following three research questions:

1. Are children whose families participate in the non-investigation pathway as safe as or safer than children whose families participate in the investigation pathway?
2. How is the non-investigation pathway different from the investigation pathway in terms of family engagement, caseworker practice, and services provided?
3. What are the cost and funding implications to the child protection agency of implementing and maintaining a differential response approach?

During Phase II of the QIC-DR, which began in October 2009, the State of Illinois and

At least 15 States have either fully implemented DR or have implemented DR in limited localities.



selected counties in Colorado and Ohio will implement differential response systems and conduct comprehensive evaluations of those systems to seek answers to these questions. This research will complement and enhance existing differential response evaluations, which have suggested that the non-investigation pathway is effective in increasing service availability and both family and worker satisfaction without compromising child safety (QIC-DR, 2009b).

Assessment-Only Response

Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota have opted to use an assessment approach for all families involved in screened-in maltreatment reports, regardless of risk level or other factors (QIC-DR, 2009b). Like the assessment or alternate pathway in the differential response model, the assessment approach used in these States focuses on a more holistic view of family strengths and needs and the services required to support child well-being within the family. Unlike other States implementing differential response, Iowa and South Dakota require that a formal determination of child maltreatment be made in the assessment pathway (QIC-DR, 2009b). In North Dakota, a multidisciplinary team makes either a *services required* or *no services required* determination based on the assessment. If the team finds *no services required*, then no formal determination is made. All *services required* cases are automatically referred to juvenile court for intervention (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2006).

Screened-Out Report Response

A family reported to CPS after a particular incident may not meet the screened-in criteria for abuse, neglect, or dependency, but may nevertheless be in need of services or supports. To address this need, some States have added a response pathway for screened-out reports. For example, Minnesota added a pathway to its differential response system for screened-out cases, called the Parent Support Outreach Program. This program varies by county, with some counties using private contract workers to aid families and some using public child welfare workers (Loman, Shannon, Sapokaite, & Siegel, 2009). New Mexico also added a response pathway to its system for screened-out reports (QIC-DR, 2009b).

Some California counties have implemented a three-path system that is also referred to as *differential response*: Path 1 is for screened-out reports, Path 2 is for low- to moderate-risk cases, and Path 3 is for moderate- to high-risk cases in which safety is an immediate concern. Both of the paths for screened-in cases (Paths 2 and 3) result in a case disposition, and cases on Path 3 can additionally result in identification of a perpetrator on the State's central registry (Merkel-Holguin et al., 2006).

Conclusion

A growing number of States are reforming their front-end responses to child maltreatment referrals through differential response and other innovative policies and practices. States that have evaluated their systems have generally found that a less adversarial, more service-oriented front-end response to certain families has had positive outcomes without compromising child safety. However, more research is needed to determine what specific elements of these innovative responses contribute to positive outcomes, and to confirm their overall effectiveness. Phase II of the QIC-DR will provide such needed research for differential response.

Resources

The QIC-DR website (www.differentialresponseqic.org) offers numerous resources to learn more about differential response and other innovative CPS responses to reports of child maltreatment, including:

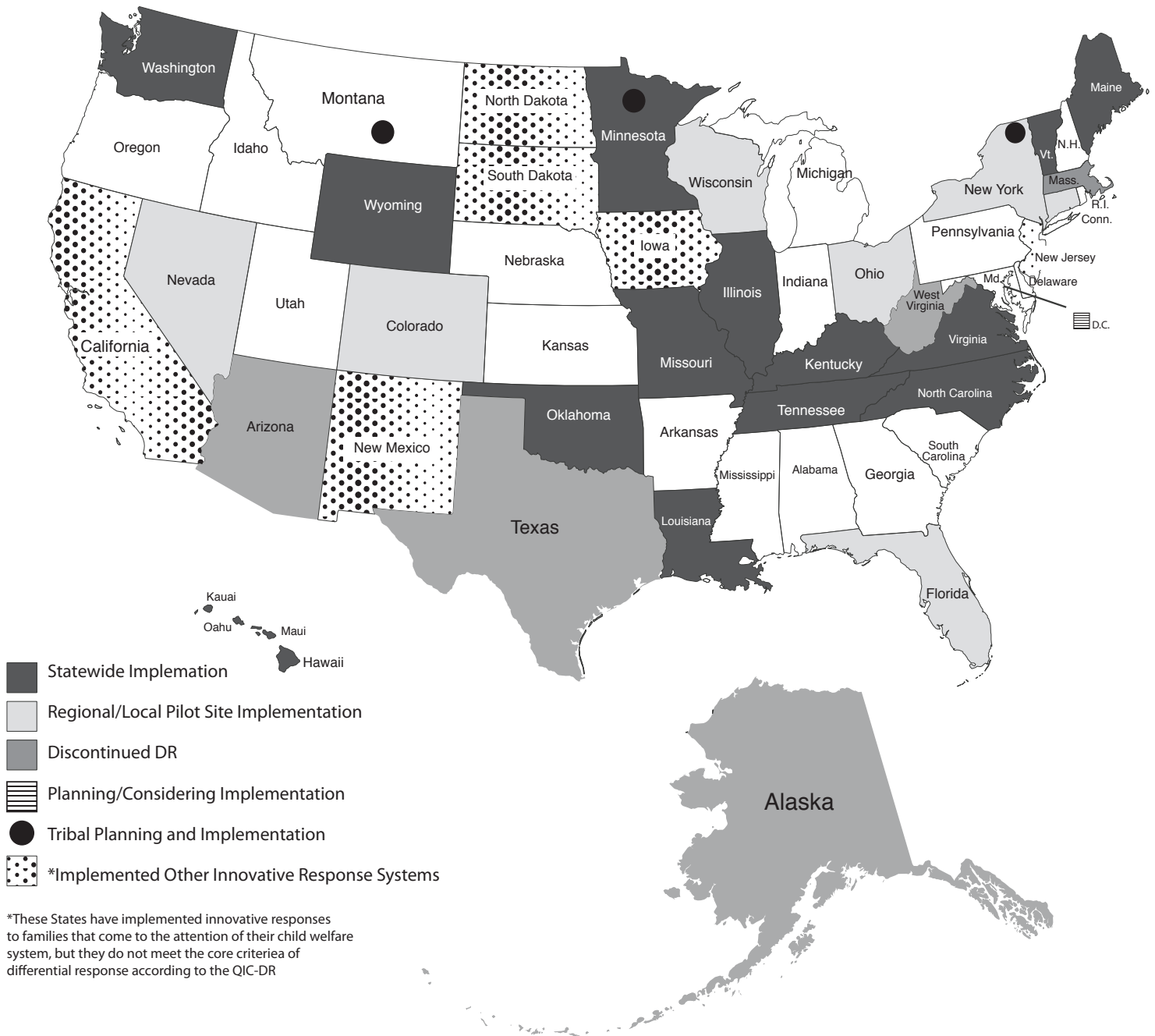
- Downloadable copies of a literature review;
- A searchable annotated bibliography;
- National survey findings;
- A legal analysis and legislation chart;
- Syntheses of QIC-DR summit proceedings; and
- A map showing differential response implementation activities by state.

References

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Appendix

Differential Response Map



U.S. States, tribes, and other jurisdictions that are implementing differential response, considering implementation, or implementing similar front-end system reforms. Last updated November 18, 2010.