

CHAPTER 5

FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA

This report focuses on two separate, yet related, reform efforts that were in progress in Fairfax County's CPS program during the 12 months preceding the site visit. The reforms include a locally initiated effort to make the Children, Youth and Family Division's (CYFD) programs more community-based, strength-based, and prevention-oriented, and the implementation of a State-mandated differential response system (DRS).

OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (CPS)

Virginia is a State-supervised, county-administered system. The Children, Youth, and Family Division in the Fairfax County Department of Family Services is responsible for CPS throughout the county, including Falls Church and Fairfax City.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CPS AGENCY

The CYFD is divided into four operational units, including CPS, the Family and Child Program, Foster Care and Adoption Program, and Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services.

The CPS unit screens child abuse and neglect reports, conducts investigations of child abuse and neglect, and provides support services to families in which maltreatment has occurred and there is risk for reabuse. The CPS hotline receives reports of suspected abuse and neglect, requests for guidance, and referrals to counseling, resources, and support services. In addition, staff is available after regular business hours for emergency services.

The Family and Child Program provides intensive and comprehensive assessment and case management services to families. These services are designed to prevent child abuse and neglect, keep families together, improve family functioning, and develop networks of support to sustain families within their communities. Housing assistance is also offered.

The Foster Care Services Program includes placement and supervision of abused and neglected children and youth, and those at risk—from infancy to age 21—who are temporarily separated from their parents and placed in the legal custody of the department. Independent living life-skills services are available to foster care teens. Adoption services include placement services for children with special needs; adoption counseling for birth parents; and postadoption support services for families with special needs, including older children, sibling groups, and children with emotional or behavioral difficulties.

The Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services unit supports families who are at risk of child abuse or neglect. Prevention services are offered through multiple programs, each working in partnership with other public and private organizations and community members to strengthen parental capacities. Programs include Healthy Families, the Nurturing Parent Education program, and mentoring programs for parents and children. In addition, an array of health, educational, and

peer support services are provided at three neighborhood-based family resource centers.

REFORM EFFORTS

A description of the CPS reform efforts that were in progress in Fairfax County at the time of the site visit follows.

Background of Reform Efforts

The locally initiated reform of the Fairfax County CPS program began during the mid-1990s. However, the implementation of changes in the structure and operation of the program has been incremental and was still underway when the county introduced the State-mandated DRS.

One of the original driving forces behind the CYFD's reform efforts was the recognition that the agency was one component of a community of people and service providers able to identify and assist families to keep their children safe. Moreover, the agency realized that it needed to reorganize if it were to effectively interact with these community-based resources. Prior to the reform effort, CPS and other family services were administered from a central office. This configuration led to a number of negative consequences, including difficulty in responding to the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse population. The centralized location discouraged interaction with related human service agencies. This had practical consequences on the ability of CPS and other CYFD service workers to conduct their work, because of the time and cost involved in traveling to meet with families.

The CYFD's reform effort was also driven by a desire to refocus the agency according to a social work practice model rather than the existing model that became increasingly legalistic. Within the confines of State policy, there was a desire to plan and deliver services based on the strengths and competencies of each family. This required workers to be less confrontational and more engaging during interactions with families. Ultimately, the CYFD expected a new strengths-based and collaborative approach to be more effective in preventing child abuse or neglect.

The State-mandated DRS, which was implemented in Fairfax County during May 2002, was built on many of the same principles that guided the agency's other reforms since the mid-1990s. Reports result in an investigation response when there are immediate child safety concerns or when the complaint consists of serious complaints defined by law, such as sexual abuse. Investigations conclude with a final determination as to whether the report is "founded" or "unfounded." Founded reports are entered into the State's Central Registry.

The DRS allows for a flexible response by the CYFD to allegations of child abuse based on the severity of the report, immediacy of child safety concerns, and family needs. CYFD conducts a family assessment response in lieu of an investigation when a report does not indicate immediate child safety concerns or fulfill any of the categories mandating an investigation under State law. The family assessment response shifts CPS intervention from an incident focus to a service delivery focus. Agency personnel collaborate with the family to identify family strengths, stressors, and other risk and safety factors likely to prevent or precipitate child abuse or neglect, and to develop an individualized family service plan. The family assessment does not require the agency to make a "finding" regarding abuse or neglect and no information is placed on the Central Registry.

Virginia's DRS model owes its existence, in part, to the efforts of Fairfax County personnel. During the mid-1990s, when the CYFD was developing its own reform agenda, Fairfax County personnel participated directly in the development of the DRS. For example, Fairfax County personnel traveled with State officials to examine differential response models in Florida and Missouri and they lobbied for adoption of the DRS model in Virginia. Although Fairfax was not selected as a pilot for the DRS, the county has been committed to the program's underlying concepts for several years.

Implementation of the Reform

Fairfax County's reforms were multifaceted, involving a broad-based reorganization of the CYFD as well as revisions to many of the CYFD's programs.

The reorganization of the CYFD occurred in a number of incremental steps. The first step, implemented during the mid-1990s, involved the integration of investigation and ongoing support functions. Individual staff continued to support one function; however, personnel were organized into combined teams with supervisory staff overseeing both functions. This shift was designed to facilitate the interaction between the preliminary assessment of valid complaints and ongoing family support. The teams were also divided into regional units that served particular areas of the county. This prepared the way for the future relocation of the investigation and ongoing family support units to satellite offices.

The reorganization also supports a number of functional groups that continue to operate countywide. These countywide units include a hotline, which handles intake and screening; an after-hours unit, which responds to reports after regular operating hours; and, most recently, a publications and outreach function that disseminates educational information to mandated reporters, community-based organizations with a stake in CPS, and the general public.

Since the original reorganization, three out of four regional units have been physically relocated to satellite, community-based facilities. In addition to bringing the CPS program into closer contact with the families and communities that it serves, the relocation involved colocation with other human service agencies. The regionalization of CPS, therefore, facilitates communication with other personnel directly involved with delivering services to families. The CYFD opened its first regional office in Reston during 1996 to serve the north county area. Since then, it has opened regional offices to serve the Falls Church area and, most recently, the south county area. The regional unit that serves the Fairfax area, which encompasses the central office, may be relocated in the future to underscore the importance of focusing its operations on the community.

The CYFD's most recent relocation occurred during June 2002, when the countywide Sex Abuse unit moved to a Children's Center operated by the nonprofit organization, Childhelp USA. This move places the unit in a child-friendly environment and, like the regional units, provides for colocation with a broad range of agencies. In this instance, however, the facility not only houses other human services agencies, such as the Mental Health Department and Health Department, but also houses representatives from the law enforcement agencies who are involved with the investigation of sexual abuse, including the Commonwealth Attorney's Office and Fairfax County Police. The colocation is expected to facilitate greater cooperation between these agencies and increase the opportunities to provide targeted services.

Objectives

The primary objective of the reforms implemented in Fairfax County was to more effectively prevent child abuse or neglect by implementing a service approach that works with families to build on their strengths and competencies.

Practice Components

The CYFD's reform effort and implementation of the DRS resulted in a number of changes regarding how the CPS program interacts with communities and families.

With the relocation of regional units, family services personnel participate in regional, multi-agency teams aimed at building and capitalizing on connections with the community. Staff committees at each regional office provide a forum to discuss community outreach and to empower staff to develop connections with other agencies and community groups. The results include better ongoing relations with community stakeholders (e.g. schools), as well as initiatives that respond to specific community-based issues.

In one south county neighborhood, for example, the regional CPS team determined that a particular apartment complex had been the source of an unusually high number of reports of unsupervised children. CPS personnel arranged with the complex manager to hold a community meeting to address the issue. A local restaurant contributed food and beverages to attract residents to the meeting. CPS personnel provided residents with information about the guidelines for appropriate supervision, outlined relevant community resources, and fielded residents' questions.

Fairfax County changed the way it interacted with families prior to the implementation of the DRS. In cases involving allegations of insufficient supervision, for example, the agency is able to exert additional flexibility since these cases are determined by local guidelines, not State policy. Specifically, the CYFD implemented an alternative outcome for inappropriate supervision cases, which do not present a serious level of maltreatment. This alternative designation focuses on education and supportive services, including a prioritized day care. It also permits CPS personnel to work with families to ensure that they make the necessary changes to prevent inappropriate supervision from recurring.

The CYFD recently applied this prevention-oriented model to a revision of the way the hotline handles calls that do not present a valid case. Previously, such families were referred to the Family Support Services unit to access services on a voluntary basis. Under the new Intensive Family Services model, CYFD personnel proactively contact and followup with such families. This approach was intended to ensure that families in need receive appropriate services before they present a valid case of child abuse or neglect. This approach was designed to prevent future cases requiring intervention by CPS.

The implementation of the DRS is compatible with these earlier initiatives, but it clearly is the most significant shift in the practice of CPS in Fairfax County. Under the DRS, valid reports of child abuse and neglect are assessed to determine whether they require an investigation or family assessment response. All serious allegations of abuse and neglect are investigated according to

the previously used procedures. The result of an investigation is a formal finding and substantiated cases are reported to the Central Registry. The majority of cases receive a family assessment, which differs from the investigation track in some important ways:

- The CYFD does not make a finding as to whether or not the alleged child abuse or neglect incident occurred. CPS personnel are responsible for identifying the underlying causes of the incident in question, rather than determining if a particular event did or did not occur;
- CPS personnel do not participate in the same due process procedures, such as informing families about the possible outcomes of an investigation and informing families of their rights to appeal any determination; and
- The CYFD does not report to the Central Registry families who received an assessment.

These changes have allowed CPS personnel to more easily engage families in a collaborative effort to identify and pursue solutions to address the underlying causes of maltreatment and prevent future incidents of child abuse and neglect. However, if there is a concern that a serious child abuse and neglect incident occurred, a case can be reclassified as an investigation during the course of a family assessment. It is not necessary to change the case's status to an investigation to petition the court for services. Further, if the judge determines a finding of abuse or neglect in order for parents to cooperate with CPS, then this court finding is not entered into the Central Registry.

Staffing

Another facet of the CYFD's implementation of a community-based approach to CPS was an effort to recruit a more diverse staff that more closely resembles the population being served. Fairfax County's population has become much more diverse over the last 20 years in terms of race, ethnicity, and native language. The CYFD's recruitment efforts, in particular for staff in the regional units, emphasizes building a workforce that looks like, and could effectively communicate with, the community being served.

Results

According to the CYFD personnel interviewed for this report, it was difficult to quantify the impact of the agency's earlier and ongoing reform efforts, and it was too soon to gauge the impact of the DRS. However, they discerned a number of trends or observations that suggested that the reforms have had a positive impact.

First, there has been a positive trend in terms of the CYFD's CPS-related activities. During recent years, the number of calls to the hotline and the number of people who benefited from the CYFD's outreach efforts increased; however, the number of substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect has decreased. In other words, the level of consciousness about child abuse or neglect within the Fairfax County population was rising while the incidence of abuse was falling.

Second, the ease with which the CYFD implemented the DRS was an institutional accomplishment. While there continued to be a number of personnel who were reluctant to

accept the family assessment as a valid alternative to an investigative approach, acceptance was widespread. Moreover, there was universal acceptance of the DRS among the supervisors responsible for implementing the new system.

Finally, there was a general sense among agency personnel who were interviewed for this report that the CYFD was doing a better job. Intuitively, the interviewees believed that the current CPS program was better equipped to serve Fairfax County's population and to prevent child abuse or neglect.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The following section briefly describes conditions within CYFD that have, or will, play a significant role in the department's ability to sustain its reform efforts. This section also describes a number of additional changes to the agency's organization and practice that may be undertaken.

Conditions that Sustain Reform

While the overall outcome of the CYFD's reform efforts are positive, implementation of the reforms present a number of challenges that must be resolved if the reforms are to be sustained effectively.

One challenge is to determine the appropriate degree of regionalization. Fairfax County places all of its assessment and ongoing case management personnel (except for those in the specialized sex offender unit) in four regional units. It is not yet known if this number of units is sufficient to achieve the desired connection to the communities. In a jurisdiction the size of Fairfax County, a larger number of regional units would ensure that CPS is community-based. On the other hand, the regionalization of staff has made it more difficult to balance staffing resources with the demand for services. The workload at the regional offices varies significantly; there have been times when a regional office has called in resources from other offices to handle a heavy workload and other times when an office shifted personnel resources elsewhere. If there is constant reshuffling of personnel in this manner, the benefits of community-based service may be compromised.

Another challenge from the perspective of the CPS program is the difficulty in applying the reforms successfully in other CYFD Programs. The Family and Child Program reoriented its services and focus to address the needs of a high-risk population whose situations do not rise to the level that requires a CPS response. Personnel in the Family and Child Program are accustomed to providing services to this population; therefore, the recent implementation of an Intensive Family Services model—which was designed to engage families more proactively—represents a major shift in the way that services are delivered.

There have been challenges in the Foster Care and Adoption unit's ability to apply a community-based model to the placement of children who must be removed from their homes. Due to the lack of community-based foster care resources, children frequently are placed outside of their own communities, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to benefit from extended family, friends, and other community supports. It is anticipated that the successful

implementation of a community-based model for foster care will contribute to a higher rate of return to families.

There also have been challenges in the interactions with the other agencies expected to colocate with the CPS sex offender unit at the new Children's Center. At the time of this site visit, some of the agencies expected to have a presence at the Center have not agreed to the details for a Memorandum of Understanding. There also was a concern that the additional resources available at the privately-operated Children's Center, including private funding, better facilities, and access to media, could have the potential of causing friction with other CPS units. However, the personnel interviewed for this report indicated that these problems resulted largely from the novelty of locating at a facility operated by a private agency, and they expressed confidence that the positive vision for the center will be realized.

Finally, the interviewees voiced concern about a potential adverse impact from the implementation of the DRS on the CYFD's budget, although there was some disagreement about this issue. There was concern that the new model will increase the demand for family support services and the time spent assessing and supporting each case and, therefore, increase costs. Conversely, the budgetary impact of the DRS could be minimal as Fairfax County has attempted to pursue a similar practice model for several years. Moreover, there is an expectation that CPS personnel will require much less time under the DRS to communicate with families about "findings" and to prepare for and attend appeals, possibly resulting in a net decrease in costs.

Future Plans

As described above, Fairfax County's CPS program has a long track record of implementing reforms. A number of additional changes to the agency's organization and practices are likely, including the changes listed below.

- Reduction of out-of-community foster care placement. As noted above, the lack of community-based foster care resources has prevented the CYFD from implementing a truly community-based approach to CPS. To address this issue, the agency plans an aggressive campaign to recruit community resources for placement, and increase the availability of community-based respite care.
- Diversification of CPS personnel. The CYFD will continue efforts to diversify the CPS workforce to ensure that it reflects the ever-changing diversity of the Fairfax County population.
- Implementation of new outreach efforts. With the roll out of the DRS, the CYFD plans a new campaign to educate the community about CPS and the dual track response model. This message will also be underscored in the agency's Blue Ribbon campaign which disseminates educational documents stressing that the prevention of child abuse or neglect needs to be a year-round priority.

SUMMARY

The Fairfax County CPS program has undergone a number of significant reforms over recent years. Some of these reforms date to the mid-1990s when the CYFD decided to make its

operations more community-based, strength-based, and prevention-oriented.

However, the implementation of these reforms has been incremental and was still underway during the last 12 months when the county introduced the State-mandated DRS.

The reorganization of the CPS program was the original focus of the reform effort and included the creation of regional units that were better equipped to serve a diverse and growing population. This initiative was complemented by subsequent changes in the ways in which the CYFD interacted with families and the community, such as an alternative response for cases involving insufficient supervision. In making these changes, the CYFD did everything feasible within the confines of extant State policy to increase the local program's flexibility and to make it more prevention-oriented.

As a result, although the implementation of the DRS during 2002 is the single most important reform in CFYD's practice model in recent years, it is in many respects the culmination of earlier reform efforts that already changed the culture of the Fairfax County CPS program.