

Alternative Response

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Individual Highlights

Can't Afford Not To 2
Social Worker Named
'Instructor of the Year' 3
What Families Are Saying
About the Child Protection
System 3
County Spotlight 5
AIM Presents to Subcommittee 5



Open Letter from Douglas Lumpkin

Director, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

ODJFS Will Continue to Provide Valuable Services to Ohio's Children and Families

As we continue to navigate our way through the recession, it seems like we are assaulted with troubling news almost daily. At the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS), we have a never-ending series of challenges before us, as we struggle to maintain critical safety-net services for the state's most vulnerable citizens, even as the resources for providing those services become scarcer.

In the midst of all the difficult news, however, stands at least one bright and shining beacon of hope for our children: the Alternative Response program.

I was serving as director of the Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services when Franklin County became one of the 10 AR pilot counties in Ohio. Although I left soon afterward to become director of ODJFS, from my conversations with Eric Fenner, the director of the Franklin County Public Children Services Agency, I knew how important this program was.

To me, AR simply makes good sense. As we all know, no two families are alike. What works in one situation may not work in another. In many cases, issues can be resolved much more quickly and easily — and, for children, less traumatically — by taking an alternative approach.

AR acknowledges that families have unique needs and that caseworkers need the flexibility to use a variety of tools and strategies to respond to a range of situations. It acknowledges that there is no one "right" solution for every family.

For some families, the traditional child protection approach is necessary to determine whether abuse or neglect has occurred and to ensure child safety and well-being. For many others, however, a more appropriate response involves working with families to jointly identify concerns and apply solutions that can help keep families together and give them the services and supports they need to keep their children safe. AR builds collaborative connections among the child protection agency, community agencies and families to identify issues and meet families' needs using available supports and services.

We know that times are hard for us, but they are even harder for the families we serve. We could very well see a new tier of families: families that would not have come to the attention of the agency if not for the financial stressors caused by new poverty. We know that when families lack the basics of survival, they cannot focus on issues of safety. AR is often the right response for these and many other cases.

I would like to commend all of our partners in this project — the Ohio Supreme Court, the American Humane Association, all the participating county child protection agencies and local organizations — who have been so supportive of our AR efforts.

As we eagerly await Ohio's final AR report in early 2010, in the hopes that we can make this approach standard practice statewide, I look forward to identifying ways we can strengthen our relationships even more, so that they continue to mirror the partnership of trust, respect and value that we seek in our work with families.

AIM

American Humane
Institute of Applied Research
Minnesota Consultants



THE SUPREME COURT of OHIO

Ohio

Department of
Job and Family Services



Can't Afford Not To

*Rich Bowlen and Kristi Burre,
Fairfield County*

Assisting families in overcoming adversity is one of the fundamental elements in child welfare. So what do organizations do when they themselves are faced with challenges of the greatest economic downturn since the Great Depression and demand for service reaches an all-time high? Enter AR.

AR allows child welfare agencies to intervene with families in more supportive ways, by focusing on assessing families' strengths and needs and coordinating with the community to provide necessary services. Our job is to assist families in getting to where they want to be by prioritizing child safety, and we can do that better than anyone else. It's a simple fact that the needs of families change, and if we don't change to meet those needs, we will no longer exist. Implementing AR has increased our agency's ability to adapt to our changing environment, especially in unstable fiscal times.

In May 2009, our agency experienced layoffs of 43 staff, forced restructuring and significant budget cuts. At the same time, the number of reports to child protective services and referrals to community services increased dramatically. Therefore, with a decrease in financial and human resources accompanied with an increase in demand for service, something had to change.

In analyzing our data and assessing concrete outcomes, the choice to reorganize remaining staff to expand our AR service team was obvious. For example:

- Families participating in AR experienced a recidivism rate of less than 3 percent while those in the control group had a rate of greater than 15 percent.
- Of the 140 families agreeing to participate in AR to date, only two required the need for out-of-home placement.
- Community collaborations strengthened with increased interest in sharing responsibility. Community partners have reached out to pursue grants that offer creative solutions to strengthen families.

These efforts have resulted in better outcomes for children and families and have further reduced the risk of child maltreatment.

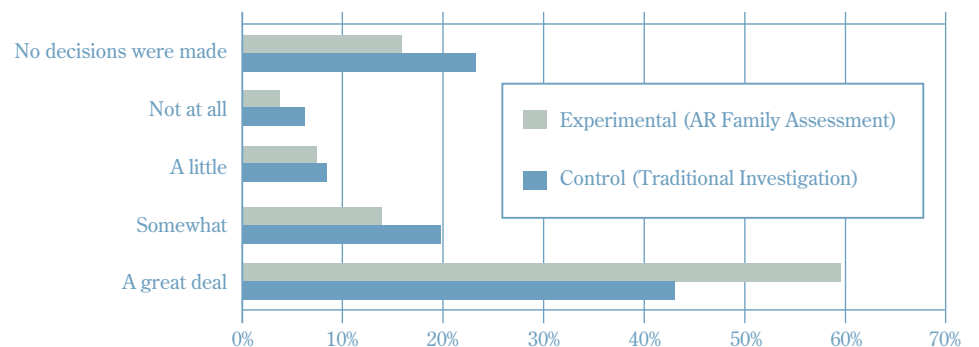
For Fairfield County, AR means our interactions with a family contains a deeper focus on acknowledging historical circumstances as a means

to assist families in looking forward rather than investing a majority of the social workers' time in gathering past incidents that verify a family's current situation. The focus is on where we're going, not where we've been. The success of AR has been built by not relying solely on the expertise of one caseworker, but through recognition of individual abilities of everyone on the team and how well we support one another. Families quickly realize they are not in this alone and begin to value the role of the community. More time is invested in effective communication about root causes as opposed to documenting that mandates have been met. As a result, engaged families report the AR approach has helped build a better understanding and sense of importance and leads to a greater sense of worth that encourages a spirit of togetherness. These efforts have helped establish trust, demonstrate commitment and show we truly care, and the result is tremendously empowering to families. Everyone faces adversity; what makes the difference is whether or not we, along with our families, choose to become stronger as a result.

Evaluation Spotlight

Direct feedback from families is a critical component of the AR evaluation. Families themselves are the best source of information about the success of the AR approach. To obtain this feedback, a sample of experimental and control families are sent a survey that asks them about their recent experience with Children's Services.

As of June 2009, about 450 families have replied. This chart displays responses to a survey question about the level of involvement the parent had in decisions made about his or her family. As this preliminary analysis shows, parents from experimental families were more likely to say they had "a great deal" of involvement in decisions, while parents from control families were more likely to say that "no decisions were made."





Franklin County Social Worker Named 'Instructor of the Year' at Ohio State

Frankie Folk and Cynthia Greenleaf, Franklin County Children Services

Amy Wood, a supervisor of an AR unit in the Intake Department of Franklin County Children Services, was recently named 2009 Bachelor of Science Instructor of the Year in the social work field by The Ohio State University. The award honors an outstanding social worker who has truly made a difference as a teacher and a mentor.

A University of Dayton alumna, Amy, who has been with Franklin County Children Services for almost 12 years, said she loves social work because it's "an opportunity to give back on a daily basis." In her role as a child welfare professional, she said she especially enjoys mentoring the five caseworkers she supervises, watching them develop new skills and sharing in their successes. Being part of the agency's groundbreaking AR pilot has been an amazing opportunity to embrace "a whole new philosophy," Amy said.

What Do Families Have to Say About the Child Protection System?

Brenda Lockwood, American Humane

Capturing the voices of families is of paramount importance in the process of improving practice and implementation of child welfare reform. To that end, on May 3, under the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services, American Humane facilitated a "family listening session" in Columbus. Families that have experienced AR were invited by their workers to participate.

Seven families and three workers participated in the session. The families were asked to share their thoughts and ideas about how the child protection system impacts families that are reported for a child maltreatment concern, and how the system could change in order to better address the needs of families. The objectives of the listening session were: 1) to listen to what families who have experienced an AR approach to a child welfare concern have to say about the experience, 2) to listen to what families have to say about what is important to them when experiencing a child protection intervention, and 3) to listen to families' perspectives on how the child

protection system can better serve families who become involved with child protection.

Throughout the session, participants were open about their experiences with their worker and with AR. During one of the activities, two questions were posed to the participants, and discussion regarding the questions followed. By far, the overwhelming message from participants was that it is important for them to have a good working relationship with their worker. They found most value in the time that the worker took to spend with them, listening to them, helping them with certain tasks. Below are the questions and a sample of responses that were part of the larger discussion:

If you are involved in the child protection system, what is most important to you in the way you are treated, services you receive and the way your worker works with you?

"Making sure you get things accomplished."

"Asking if there is anything the worker can help with and quick follow-up."

(continued on page 4)

We Want to Hear From You!

If you have an idea or would like to contribute a short article to the *Ohio Alternative Response Quarterly* newsletter, contact Amy Rohm at (303) 925-9413 or amy@americanhumane.org

(continued from page 3)

"If they show us how to use what is out there, it makes your family stronger."

"Just keep it real."

"We talked together, as a family from the beginning — this made a big difference."

"Worker attitude; the way the worker presents makes a huge difference in engagement."

"For me, Nancy (caseworker) was a stepping stone."

What would you change in the system?

"Providing opportunities for families they might not otherwise have access to."

"Hook you up with different organizations — don't just do it themselves."

"CPS has changed — notice big change from prior experiences with the system."

"Gives people hope."

"Important to establish a relationship and get to know the person."

"Talk to kids and parents together... almost like counseling."

"Workers need to be 'be straight' with families and put tough issues out in the open."

"Treat us as a loved one."

"Take every call you get as if it is a life-changing experience."

As evidenced in the list of responses above, families had a lot of positive remarks about their experience with the AR process. So much so that when the question was asked, "Could you ever have imagined speaking about

the child protection system in such a positive way?" the group responded with a resounding "No!"



American Humane's 2009 Differential Response Conference

Nov. 12-13 in Pittsburgh

American Humane's 2009 Differential Response Conference will be dedicated to administrative, managerial and supervisory considerations related to differential response implementation and sustainability. Formal and informal opportunities will abound for state, county and tribal administrators, managers and supervisors; community

partners; and multi-system partners to build skills, acquire knowledge and exchange information with the national and international differential response community. In addition, lessons from the first year of the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services will be shared.



AMERICAN HUMANE

Protecting Children & Animals Since 1877

Registration information will be available soon at www.americanhumane.org/differential.

Spotlight: Ross County

Rachel Brewer, Ross County Children's Services

On June 12, 2009, Ross County Children's Services sponsored an Alternative Response Family Day. This was a fun-filled day that brought AR families together with both agency staff and community partners.

Family Day was developed as an effort toward continued transformation of the way Children's Services is viewed in the community and as a tangible promotion of a new way of doing business — one that honors families' needs and input and values family togetherness. This event was full of interactive games and activities that were enjoyed by all who attended, including food, face painting, family photos and crafts. Community partners,

such as the YMCA, National City Bank, Westmoreland Nursing Home and Western & Southern Life, set up informational booths. Local family and child summer programs were highlighted, and child identification cards were offered to parents to promote child safety.

Event attendance was high, and families, the agency and community partners were able to gather and share in a fun and informative day. Due to the event's success, Ross County hopes to make Alternative Response Family Day an annual tradition that encourages collaboration and highlights family and community strengths.



AIM Presents Before Subcommittee: It's Not Only About Money



Caren Kaplan, AIM Team

On July 2, Tony Loman, from the Institute of Applied Research (The "I" in the AIM Team), and I conducted a presentation before the Subcommittee on Child Abuse, Neglect and Dependency. Stakeholders in attendance included representatives from Families and Children First, National Center for Adoption Law and Policy, substance abuse agencies and domestic violence agencies. Following is a summary of my presentation.

It is difficult to believe that six months from now the AIM Team will provide a final report that provides recommendations on the advisability of statewide implementation: training requirements, time frames and estimated costs. We will also propose changes to statute, changes to Ohio Administrative Code and Rules of Superintendence, and practice changes, and we will estimate the fiscal impact of these changes.

But today in Ohio, an economic downturn prevails. There is a \$3.2 billion budget shortfall and \$2.43 billion reduction in state spending — and this only captures the impacts at the state level.

In response to this reality, the stability of many families is undermined; vulnerabilities of high-risk families increase; public agencies experience staff layoffs; cutbacks occur in services; caseloads increase; and reactions to this situation include stress, trauma, malaise, anxiety and demoralization.

Recessions are not new (unfortunately). What have we learned from the past ('81-'82, '90-'91, '01)? We have learned that we must: (1) protect those who are most vulnerable — decisions are most effective when grounded in safety, permanency and well-being of children/families; (2) preserve the mission, values and fundamental goals of the child welfare system; (3) maintain open communication with stakeholders — in these situations, knowledge is power; (4) look for internal efficiencies and cross-system approaches that are win-

win strategies; (5) increase flexibility; and (6) use data to make decisions and to manage. Crisis provides opportunity for creativity and innovation.

Confronting economic downturns is not easy. Managing effectively in times of recession can be excruciatingly painful. But reforms are not necessarily contingent upon the availability of money. Actions can be taken that allow for progress even in difficult economic times.

It is prudent in these times to stay connected to the work. The AIM Team has done so with a variety of activities: worker and supervisor conference calls, in-person meetings with workers and supervisors, technical assistance check-in, training opportunities, coaching, chronicling, newsletters and Leadership Council meetings.

Viewing the Practice From Different Perspectives

From these activities, if we take an eagle's view of the 10 pilots, in aggregate, we observe the following

(continued on page 6)

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successes: families are more engaged and satisfied; workers are more satisfied with their roles and responsibilities; and there is greater community awareness, support, collaboration and participation. At the same time, the challenges are considerable. Without amendment to the SACWIS system, staff must maintain a dual documentation system. Workers are experiencing the demands of high caseloads and the desire that more families receive AR than are eligible during the pilot and, at the same time, they are concerned about how AR caseload will be managed when “randomizer” goes away. And, unfortunately, in some of the pilot counties, there remains tension between the AR and the traditional response workers. This results in additional distress to the existing economic stress.

Now if we alter the lens and take a ground-bird’s view of each pilot individually, we see successful examples of the “one family, one worker” practice model, group supervision and case consultation, dedicated AR units and AR-only workers, and resource flexibility enabling creative problem-solving. Particular counties are facing their own unique challenges — lack of model fidelity, in which the practice still resembles an investigation response; intra-agency roadblocks to accessing services for families; lack of adequate supervisory support; and the perception by workers that AR is not valued by either the county or state agency, so “why bother?”

It is important to know that what distinguishes the successful pilots from the struggling pilots is not money. From my vantage point, the essential elements of success are leadership; an unwavering, pervasive commitment to an AR approach and practice; transparency in all matters — both good and not so good; and the inclusion of, listening to and consideration of all voices.

A common “ask” by the family is: “We can reduce the risk of harm and vulnerability of our children with the provision of the concrete services.” Examples include car repair, day care, tuition payments and housing assistance. A common “ask” by the worker is “Let me do this work!” Frontline workers routinely request that AR and AR cases become and remain a priority within their agency. For the practice to be done “right,” they want to carry and maintain a reasonable caseload, minimize documentation burdens, and receive competent, supportive supervision. As mentioned previously, the importance of open communication throughout the ranks is essential.

The Importance of Child in Need of Protective Services (CHIPS) Legislation

The CHIPS legislation, once passed, will provide a revised maltreatment definition to address inconsistent application of Ohio’s current child protection statutes, and the related variance in screening decisions, investigatory practices and adjudications throughout the state. CHIPS seeks to increase emphasis on the child’s needs while decreasing the stigma and adversarial approaches characterized under the traditional categories of abuse, neglect and dependency. With this new definition, ODJFS will have greater clarity as to when state intervention is warranted to protect children. Statutory language will be developed that provides the foundation for statewide implementation of AR and details options for the rollout statewide.

What Does This Mean for Now?

The current fiscal climate may affect the speed and scope of AR implementation but need not compromise the approach. It is important to manage the scope of change but develop a plan for going to scale and commit to it. Widespread support must be cultivated and sustained in order to overcome

resistance to change. While silos will continue to exist, it is important to work both with and around them across funding, programmatic and other areas where turf issues reign. There is also a need to combat and confront the inertia that is a typical response to economic recession. And the most urgent need to sustain the AR approach is to address information system challenges creatively, practically and promptly!

What Is Most Important ... and Doesn’t Require Money?

As we begin the final six months of Ohio’s Alternative Response Pilot Project, we must be vigilant in demonstrating the following elements so that we have the commitment and will to expand this family engagement approach:

- Leadership as a change agent and champion
- A philosophical shift in what we believe about families in our communities and how we treat them when they are vulnerable
- Accountability and vigilance in making this a priority is essential
- Transparency throughout this development process — to all involved — is the sole way in which respect is deserved

And remember what this is all about: strong, capable families with safe children.

