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An Overview of Differential Response Models

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Child welfare services across Canada are responding to growing numbers of referrals involving an increasingly broad array of problems. In Ontario alone, the number of reports of abuse and neglect increased 44% between 1993 and 1998 and the number of substantiated investigations doubled (Trocmé et al., 2002). The increase has been driven primarily by cases involving neglect or exposure to domestic violence, with cases involving severe physical harm or sexual abuse representing an ever-smaller proportion of cases. While urgent protective response continues to be a priority in situations involving severe abuse, there is growing interest in developing alternative response models that are tailored to the diverse needs of maltreated children and support more effective collaboration with other community service providers.

What is Differential Response?

Differential response models, sometimes referred to as "alternative response models" or "multi-track systems," have been developed in a number of jurisdictions across the United States, Australia and, most recently, in Alberta. These include a range of potential response options customized to meet the diverse needs of families reported to child welfare. Differential response systems typically use multiple "tracks" or "streams" of service delivery. While some jurisdictions may initiate up to five tracks, as is the case with Michigan, most differential response systems employ two streams with the investigative track handling high-risk cases. High-risk cases include all reports of sexual abuse, serious physical or emotional harm, chronic neglect and cases in which criminal charges may be laid. Less urgent cases are shifted to an alternative "assessment" or "community" track, where the focus of intervention is on brokering and coordinating services to address the short- and long-term needs of these children and families. In some jurisdictions, such as Florida, workers in the assessment track do not have the authority to apprehend children. In such cases, responsibility for service provision is shared with community-based resources and services are provided on a voluntary basis.

What are the Initial Results?

The impact of differential response models is just starting to be systematically evaluated. Results of an early evaluation of the Missouri model indicate that 71% of referrals were assigned to the assessment stream, while 29% of all reports were determined to warrant an investigative response. Evaluation results indicate that once differential response was initiated, hotline reports were reduced by 9%, repeat referrals declined relative to comparison counties, a larger proportion of families were linked to community services and time in care decreased, although overall placement rates were not affected. Initial results from a randomized experimental evaluation in Minnesota have shown some promise: the alternative response model showed a net increase in use of community services with no increase in repeat referral rates (http://www.iarstl.org).

While these results are promising, the value of differential response is contingent upon the ability to assign cases to the most appropriate track. English et al. (2000) compared 1,263 low-risk cases diverted to community alternative response services with 537 low-risk cases receiving standard child protective services. No difference was evident in the rate of repeat referrals. An important aspect of this study was the finding that the risk level of some of the

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families referred to community-based alternative response was inappropriately high. Inappropriate referrals to the alternative track may leave high-risk children vulnerable to further maltreatment (Littlechild, 1998).

Child welfare services need to develop an effective array of intervention models that are appropriately adapted to the differing needs of children and families. Differential response models hold some promise in providing greater flexibility and may allow for more effective collaboration with other service providers and other community supports. Community collaboration and differential response models from across Canada, the United States, England and Australia will be examined in detail at the CECW's 4th National Child Welfare Symposium, an invitational forum being held in Banff, March 20–21, 2003. ***Community Collaboration and Differential Response*** will provide an opportunity for senior policy makers from across Canada to discuss the issues with researchers and service providers who have been examining these models in practice. A collection of papers from the symposium will be available in the summer of 2003.

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Web links (compiled February 2003)

Alberta Response Model on Calgary Rocky View Child and Family Services website at http://www.crv.gov.ab.ca/CRV.nsf/(Search)/Alberta+Response+Model-Overview

Call to action: Support proposal for CPS reform on the New York State Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers website at http://www.naswnys.org/new/june_2002/support_cps_reform.htm

Child abuse intervention strategic planning meeting: Background papers, Examples of state-level legislation mandating the creation of dual-track child protection systems (Florida, Missouri and Virginia) on the National Institute of Justice website at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/childabuse/app3a.html

Child abuse intervention strategic planning meeting: Background paper #3, The creation of multiple response systems on the National Institute of Justice website at http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/childabuse/bg3h.html

Child protective services reform legislative trends on the National Conference of State Legislatures website at http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/CPSRLT.htm

Child welfare project: What is community child protection? on the National Conference of State Legislatures website at http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/whatisccp.htm

Massachusetts: A state call to action: Working to end child abuse and neglect in Massachusetts on Massachusetts Citizens for Children website at http://www.masskids.org/cta/cta_iii_ch07.html

Minnesota Statutes 2002 on the Office of Revisor of Statutes, State of Minnesota website at http://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/stats/626/5551.html

Minnesota Alternative Response Project Evaluation: First Annual Report on Institute of Applied Research website at http://www.iarstl.org

Missouri Family Assessment and Response Demonstration Evaluation Report on Institute of Applied Research website at http://www.iarstl.org

The Future of Children publication website at http://www.futureofchildren.org/

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