

Family Assessment Response in New York State

Introduction

In 2007, New York State lawmakers enacted legislation that allows local departments of social services to implement Family Assessment Response (FAR). FAR, also called alternative response or differential response, is a nontraditional approach for caseworkers responding to a report to the State Central Register (SCR) alleging child maltreatment.¹ Local departments of social services may offer a FAR response to certain types of SCR reports, while a traditional investigation is required in response to reports where a child's safety is of serious concern or to reports of physical or sexual abuse. The 2007 legislation will sunset on June 1, 2011.²

Six counties originally piloted the FAR response in New York State beginning in June 2008. Now, nineteen counties offer a FAR response, another two counties have been approved to offer FAR, and eight others have expressed interest in beginning a FAR response once legislation is made permanent. To date, about 9,000 reports have been assigned to the FAR track. This work was supported by the Marguerite Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs with expertise from the American Humane Association.

Notably, the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Reauthorization Act of 2010 requires that states operate statewide a "differential response in triage procedures for the appropriate referral of a child not at risk of imminent harm to a community organization or voluntary preventive service" in order to qualify for federal CAPTA funding.³

Family Assessment Response

Family Assessment Response fundamentally changes child protective services (CPS) practice. Under the traditional investigative track, a caseworker must look into what occurred, decide whether or not a child is safe or in need of protection, determine if child abuse or



maltreatment took place, and name the person responsible for the abuse. The FAR approach is more focused on family engagement and providing assistance if needed going forward. The FAR caseworker assesses the family's situation, including understanding the family's needs, and works with family members to identify solutions and services that meet their immediate concerns. Services generally are short-term, directly provided, or through referral to agencies or others in the community. FAR allows for a response to a report of maltreatment that takes into account each family's unique needs and strengths.⁴ The FAR response, like the investigative response, requires the same contact with the family

within 24 hours and that a safety assessment be completed within seven days. With FAR, no determination of the reported allegations is made.

Out of almost 164,000 reports to the SCR in 2008, 61.9% were related to "deprivation of necessities" or "neglect" and were not reports with serious child safety concerns.^{5,6} Serious child safety cases are excluded under the law from a FAR response and must receive a full investigation. The most common reports assigned to the FAR track include "inadequate guardianship" (85%) and "physical neglect" (33.2%).^{7,8} Poverty is often a common thread in such reports, along with other factors known to be associated with child abuse and maltreatment, such as young parents, social isolation, substance abuse, maternal depression, and domestic violence.⁹

Evaluation in New York State

A FAR evaluation report was delivered to the Governor and Legislature in January 2011.¹⁰ The evaluation concludes that a FAR response leads to improved satisfaction, increased linkages to needed services, a reduced need for traditional public child welfare services, and fewer petitions filed in Family Court. Families who received a FAR response were more likely to obtain services, especially those that meet basic family needs such

as food, housing, utilities and other necessities. Surveys of families and caseworkers indicate this alternative to a traditional investigative approach is well received by both. For instance:

- Families were more likely to report their needs were met and had an overall positive experience with CPS.
- Caseworkers were more likely to believe that families saw them as a source of support and assistance and that they effectively intervened.

The evaluation also found that FAR families were less likely to have a child welfare services case opened within six months of the focal report than families who received a CPS investigation. The evaluation found no significant difference in recurrence rates.¹¹ Evaluations that extend beyond the six month time period covered in New York's evaluation may be more likely to demonstrate improvements in recurrence, since impacts on recurrence rates tend to emerge at eighteen months from intake.

Evaluations in Other States

Evaluations of other states' alternative response in child welfare demonstrate that a FAR-type response does not compromise short- or long-term safety and can improve safety when family members are involved in decision making.¹² Evaluations of programs in Missouri and Minnesota found that families were less likely to have subsequent child maltreatment reports, experience financial stress, or have problems with drug abuse and domestic violence.^{13,14} Although initially FAR can be

more expensive due to increased staff time spent with families and cost of services, FAR can save public funds in the long-term. When all staff and services costs are considered, the average FAR intervention cost \$3,688 per family, compared with the average investigation cost of \$4,967 per case.¹⁶ Each time a foster care placement is appropriately avoided without harm to a child, savings accrue.

A Bright Smile

For one young girl, the FAR approach led to a new smile. She had significant dental problems that had gone unattended, leading to considerable embarrassment at school and a lack of confidence. The caseworker worked with the mother to enroll the child in Medicaid and found a provider to treat her. Next year, she will be smiling in her school picture.

Recommendations Regarding 2011 FAR Legislation

FAR fundamentally changes child protective services practice and is an important option for local social services districts to better respond to the needs of families while keeping children safe. With FAR, child welfare workers are able to better engage families with an effective and less judgmental response, link them to a broader array of services and community supports, and keep children safe.

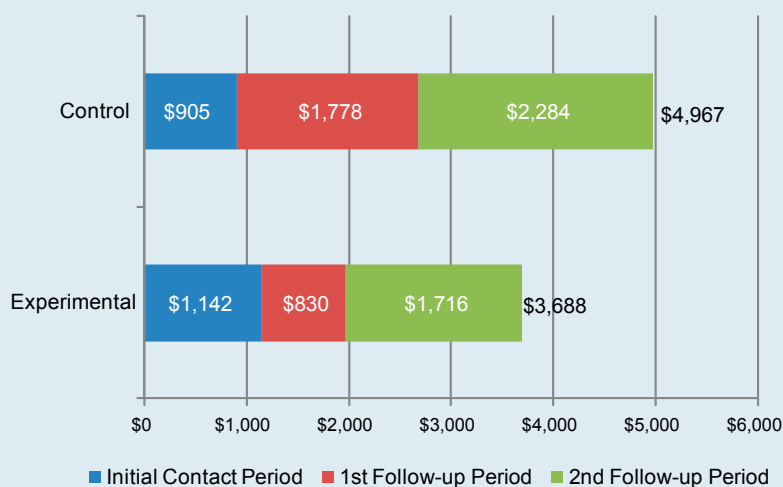
In New York State, FAR implementation is optional for local districts and there is growing interest. Close to 50% of New York's counties have either expressed interest in or are implementing a FAR response, just three years after enabling legislation was signed into law. It is essential that the law be renewed before its sunset date of June 1, 2011.

If New York State is to remain eligible to draw down federal funds (\$1.4 million) through CAPTA, 2011 legislation should extend the FAR option to New York City and make FAR permanent.¹⁷

Recommendation: Make FAR permanent

Legislation is needed this year to continue this important option. Legislation should not just reauthorize FAR but should make it permanent. County commissioners of social services seek a guarantee that the law will offer this option for the foreseeable future before they make the needed investments in training and practice change.

Mean Costs Associated with Families Assigned to Investigation Approach (Control Group) Compared with Costs Associated with Families Assigned to FAR (Experimental Group)



Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response, Final Report
Mean Initial and Follow-up Costs of Experiment and Control Families¹⁵

Recommendation: Remove language that precludes New York City from implementing FAR

As noted above, implementation of the FAR approach is optional for local departments of social services and it should remain optional. However, the 2007 legislation precludes New York City from offering a FAR response. New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has expressed interest in offering FAR and should be given the opportunity to do so. Legislation making FAR permanent should remove the exclusion for a city with a population over two million so that the ACS can consider offering the FAR response at a future date.

Additional Considerations

Ensure availability of flexible funds

Caseworker access to flexible funding to meet the immediate, concrete needs of families is key to the successful implementation of FAR. Such needs are often poverty-related and not easily addressed through traditional, somewhat rigid, funding sources. Attending to food, shelter, furniture, and other needs is a major factor

"When CPS workers are permitted to use funding flexibly, they begin to assist families with basic, poverty-related needs: food, clothing, utilities, rent, housing, transportation, etc. These are the needs that CPS families assign the highest priority."¹⁸

in ameliorating the immediate crisis and engaging family members to work on long-term issues. Pilot programs have used flexible funds for cleaning supplies, appliance repairs, car repairs, gas cards, bus passes and household items. These small investments of funds can bridge a crisis and lead to long-term self-sufficiency for families. The state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) will use child

welfare preventive funding for this purpose. Caseworkers should have streamlined access to these funds for FAR-associated purchases.

Fully incorporate FAR as an integral component of child welfare practice in New York State

The FAR approach entails a significant shift in the perspective and practice of many CPS managers, supervisors and caseworkers. Support for FAR policies, practices and protocols should be fully embedded in OCFS' training, oversight, resource supports, technical assistance, and reporting in order to develop long-term sustainability of this family engagement and solution-focused practice. New York State has benefitted from national expertise on differential response from the American Humane Association over the past three years. OCFS now has a strategic plan to build capacity within the state to support statewide implementation of FAR through training and coaching. Casey Family Programs continues to be an important strategic partner in this work.



Endnotes

- ¹ The State Central Register is also known as the Hotline. The SCR receives calls alleging child abuse or maltreatment, relays information from the calls to a county's child protective services department, monitors the response, and identifies any prior child abuse or maltreatment reports. Retrieved from <http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/cps/>.
- ² Chapter 452 of the Laws of New York, 2007.
- ³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (2011). Memorandum ACYF-CB-IM-11-02. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/laws_policies/policy/im/2011/im1102.htm.
- ⁴ "Maltreatment occurs when a parent or other person legally responsible for the care of a child harms a child, or places a child in imminent danger of harm by failing to exercise the minimum degree of care in providing the child with any of the following: food, clothing, shelter, education or medical care when financially able to do so. Maltreatment can also result from abandonment of a child or from not providing adequate supervision for the child. Further, a child may be maltreated if a parent engages in excessive use of drugs or alcohol such that it interferes with the parent's ability to adequately supervise the child." Retrieved from <http://ocfs.ny.gov/main/cps/critical.asp>.
- ⁵ OCFS (2010). *New York State Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement: Safety and Permanency Data Guide*.
- ⁶ Deprivation of Necessities or Neglect includes inadequate guardianship, inadequate food, clothing or shelter, educational neglect, malnutrition or failure to thrive, and lack of supervision. OCFS (2010). *New York State Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Program Improvement: Safety and Permanency Data Guide*.
- ⁷ Ruppel, J. Huang, Y, and Haulenbeek, G. (2011). *Differential Response in Child Protective Services in New York State: Implementation, Initial Outcomes and Impacts of Pilot Project. Report to the Governor and Legislature*. Retrieved

- from New York State Office of Children and Family Services: [http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/reports/CPS%20Differential%20Response%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report %20Jan%202011.pdf](http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/reports/CPS%20Differential%20Response%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report%20Jan%202011.pdf)
- ⁸ Although not synonymous, the terms neglect and maltreatment are used interchangeably, per OCFS practice.
- ⁹ New York State Citizen Review Panels for Child Protective Services (2009). *Root Causes of Child Maltreatment, 2009 Annual Report and Recommendations, 2-4.*
- ¹⁰ Ruppel, J. Huang, Y, and Haulenbeek, G. (2011). *Differential Response in Child Protective Services in New York State: Implementation, Initial Outcomes and Impacts of Pilot Project. Report to the Governor and Legislature.* Retrieved from New York State Office of Children and Family Services: <http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us/main/reports/CPS%20Differential%20Response%20Evaluation%20Final%20Report %20Jan%202011.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Recurrence is a measure of subsequent reports accepted by the SCR after a child abuse or maltreatment report has been accepted. States report to the federal government on recurrence rates within six months of another report.
- ¹² Loman, L. Anthony. (2006). *Families Frequently Encountered by Child Protection Services: A Report on Chronic Child Abuse and Neglect.* Retrieved from the Institute of Applied Research: <Http://www.iarstl.org/papers/FEfamiliesChronicCan.pdf>.
- ¹³ Siegel, G. L. and Loman, T. (2006) *Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response, Final Report.* Retrieved from Institute of Applied Research: <http://www.iarstl.org/papers/FinalMNFARReport.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Waldfogel, Jane. (2009). Prevention and the Child Protection System. *Future of Children*, (19) 2 195-210.
- ¹⁵ Siegel, G. L. and Loman, T. (2006). *Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response, Final Report.* Retrieved from Institute of Applied Research: <http://www.iarstl.org/papers/FinalMNFARReport.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Siegel, G. L. and Loman, T. (2006).
- ¹⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (2011).
- ¹⁸ Loman, T. (2007). *Poverty, Child Neglect and Differential Response.* Presentation made at the Differential Response Conference. Retrieved from the Institute of Applied Research: <http://www.iarstl.org/papers/NeglectPovertyDRconferenceNov07.pdf>.



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