

MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

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May 2007

Findings Requiring Involuntary Services Decrease in NC

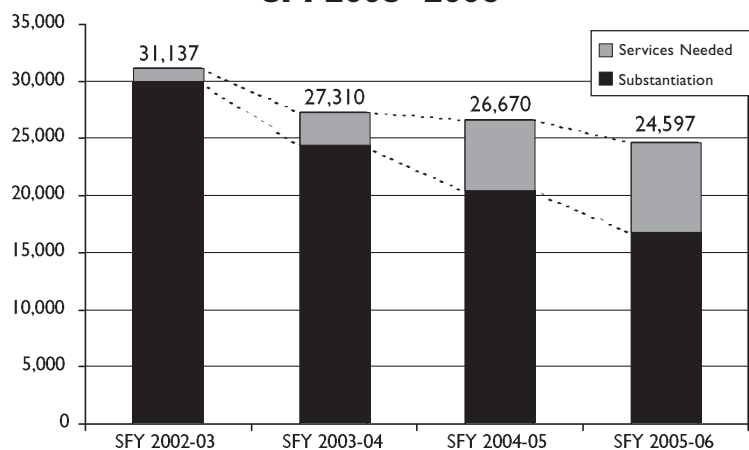
The number of CPS findings requiring children and families to receive involuntary child welfare services from North Carolina county departments of social services has steadily declined over the last several years, even though the number of child maltreatment reports has remained fairly constant.

The decline, illustrated in the figure below, may be due to a number of factors, but the implementation of the Multiple Response System (MRS) is probably a significant contributor. MRS was introduced in 10 counties in SFY 2002-03, expanded to more than half the counties in the state in SFY 2003-04 and 2004-05, and became statewide policy in SFY 2005-06.

The influence of MRS can be detected in the figure below: each year the MRS-related finding of "services needed" increases. At the same time the overall number of involuntary findings decreases, which may indicate that MRS's family-centered strategies enable child welfare agencies to serve more families in a voluntary capacity.

Additional statistical information about investigative assessments and family assessments in North Carolina can be found on the NC Division of Social Services' Web site at <<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/stats/docs/Annualtotals%202006.xls>>.

**Total NC Children Substantiated or Services Needed (Unduplicated)
 SFY 2003 - 2006**



MRS Meetings

Meetings will be held from 10 a.m. - 1:30 p.m.

Eastern

May 22
 Martin County
 Community College
 Williamston

June 28
 Wayne County DSS
 Goldsboro

Central

May 23
 Forsyth County Library
 Southside Branch
 Winston-Salem

June 20
 Randolph County DSS
 Asheboro

Western

May 25
 Black Mountain Library
 Black Mountain

June 27
 St. John's Episcopal
 Asheville

For details about meeting locations and directions, contact Holly McNeill 828/757-5672 holly.mcneill@ncmail.net

Training Dates

Shared Parenting

May 2-4
Charlotte
Contact: Bonnie English
704/395-2110
(fax) 704/395-2101

July 11-13
Kinston
Contact: Betty Williford
252/520-2413
(fax) 252/520-2417

October 31-November 2
Fayetteville
Contact: Amy Campbell
910/677-0460
(fax) 910/677-0468

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Comments?

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Online

www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs

It Takes an Engine

by Billy Poindexter, NC Family-Centered Meetings Project



You may remember a story from your childhood entitled *The Little Engine That Could*, by Watty Piper. It's about a long train that must be pulled over a high mountain. Several larger engines are asked but refuse due to the difficulty and the potential for embarrassment if they should fail. Finally, a little engine offers to pull the train. The little engine is mocked by the larger engines but sets out anyway. As it reaches a most difficult point it begins to chug, repeating the phrase: "I-think-I-can—I-think-I-can." By continuing to believe it can, it succeeds.

I've been reminded recently that there are times we all hear the voices of those bigger engines ringing in our heads. We all face trying family situations, reams of paperwork, deadlines, the ever-present call to be "family-centered" And if THAT isn't enough a co-worker is sick, or leaves. At that point we're tempted to chug, "I-think-I-can't—I-think-I-can't . . . pull the MRS train over this mountain."

On our worst days we may even give voice to those mocking big engines, transforming MRS/Child and Family Team values into something that sounds like this: *"Family-centered? Ha! I'm going to tell that family what they can/can't do. My plan is X . . . or court. Put that in your Multiple Response System/CFT Meeting engine!"*

As CFT facilitators we see signs of this frustration manifested in:

- "Cookie cutter plans" instead of options for families
- A family's ideas not being listened to
- Scrimping on or overlooking CFT meeting preparation
- Power struggles instead of creativity.

When they see these signs CFT facilitators must remember that it isn't that workers are "bad" or don't care about families. It's just that they have reached a mountain that is very difficult to get over.

So, what can we as facilitators do to help them?

1. Ask the questions. A referral form is a visual prompt to help a worker to think of good preparation. Remember, this is to help them have the best meeting possible. Poor preparation will not help the CFT process!

2. Communicate. Talk with workers about the elements that make meetings work better. I have found the more I *assume* things about a meeting, the greater the potential I'll make an *ass* of *u* and *me*. I know it's a bit crass to put it this way, but it's true.

3. Stay on track. In the meeting, "help the group to do their best thinking" (quote from Sam Kaner) by promoting participation and encouraging creativity in planning. Offer thorough summarization, encourage participa-

tion, and clarify points to avoid poor planning or poor buy-in to plans.

4. Don't surrender. It can be easy to ignore the values of the family-centered meeting process, especially in those "hot" meetings or when you have strong personalities at the table. DON'T. Your primary role as a facilitator is to ensure the process works for ALL.

5. "Braid it." Help weave ideas together. We NEVER allow a child to be unsafe, but if a family or professional offers an idea that is not "in the box" of the others, encourage discussion of why this idea should be accepted or rejected. Maybe there can be a compromise that gets buy-in and avoids unnecessary court reports or time.

These are a few of the things CFT facilitators can do. To go back to our title, *It Takes an Engine*, you may be the engine that helps a worker or a family get over that mountain.

It may sound corny, but good facilitation means BELIEVING that:

- The process can work
- Family-centered practices can work
- Providing consistently good facilitation can work
- Your reputation as a facilitator and the reputation of this agency's meeting process is important to uphold.

I think you are that engine. I think you can.

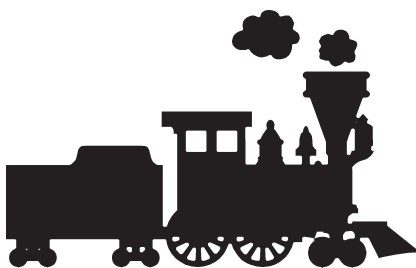
Billy Poindexter is a Training Developer with the Family-Centered Meetings Project at the NC State University Department of Social Work.

MRS Web Page Update

We are pleased to announce that the MRS web page (<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs/>) has been updated. If you can, take a minute to check it out. You will find all of the MRS newsletters to date, notes from MRS meetings, evaluation reports from North Carolina and other "differential response" states, and training resources.

One thing you *won't* find on the MRS web page is a copy of the MRS manual. Why? Because all the information from the MRS manual has been rolled into the new version of Chapter VIII of North Carolina's *Family Support and Child Welfare Services Manual*, which is also on the web at <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-60/man/>.

We hope you find both these resources helpful. Feel free to call or e-mail Holly McNeill (holly.mcneill@ncmail.net, 828/757-5672) or Patrick Betancourt (patrick.betancourt@ncmail.net, 919/733-4622) with questions.



You may be the engine that helps a family to get over that mountain.

Training Dates

Child Forensic Interviewing

To register for any of the following events, contact:

Clarence Lamb
919/733-7672
(fax) 919/733-9204

May 14-18
Kinston

June 18-22
Charlotte

August 27-31
Asheville

Responding to Families and Communities Impacted by Methamphetamine

To register for any of the following events, contact:

Vilma Gimenez
919/962-6545
(fax) 919/962-3653

May 14-15
Fayetteville Area

June 20-21
Asheville Area

Investigative and Family Assessments in Child Welfare Services

May 15-18
Fayetteville
Contact: Amy Campbell
910/677-0460
(fax) 910/677-0468

June 5-8
Kinston
Contact: Betty Williford
252/520-2413
(fax) 252/520-2417

Training Dates

Step by Step: An Introduction to Child and Family Teams

To register contact:

Ashley Duncan
919/513-0488
(fax) 919/513-7980

May 7-8
Hickory

May 9-10
Wilmington

June 12-13
Sanford

July 10-11
Asheboro

Widening the Circle: Family-Centered Meetings and Safety Issues

To register contact:

Ashley Duncan
919/513-0488
(fax) 919/513-7980

June 14-15
Fayetteville Area

August 2-3
Jacksonville

For a complete listing of the dates and locations of course offerings, consult the Division's training calendar at <www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/training/> or visit <www.ncswlearn.org>

Change in Child Welfare

by R. Patrick Betancourt

The one constant in child welfare (other than documentation) is change. For some people, change in any form can be difficult to handle. Most of us tend to be creatures of habit and routine. However, in the world of child welfare change can also provide an incredible opportunity to move us closer to our one common goal—helping others.

Back in 2001, change came to North Carolina in a big way with the first federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). At that time I was a foster care and adoptions worker in a county that just happened to be one of the three counties assessed by federal reviewers. I am not sure I understood at that time what an impact that review would have on child welfare practice in our state.

I do now. Since 2001, we have all seen North Carolina's child welfare system improve and mature. Many of the gains we have seen are due to our Multiple Response System, which challenges us to partner with families across the entire continuum of child welfare. We have even come to be regarded by other states as a leader in the area of "alternative" or "differential" response in child welfare.

And we're not through changing. In April North Carolina finished its second round of federal CFSR. Already it has begun incorporating federal feedback into our work. We know we'll have to make many changes over the next five years, including:

- Improving the consistency of our documentation
- Blending caseloads
- Improving how we work with non-custodial parents
- Strengthening our Child and Family Team meeting process
- Addressing the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the child welfare system
- Reducing the number of placements for children in foster care
- Eliminating group care for children under the age of 6.

Looking at this list can be overwhelming to the point that it might seem to be easier to ignore these issues. But of course we won't. As North Carolina chose to do in 2001, we will continue to be a leader in child welfare because we endeavor to embrace change, not ignore it.

To me, the payoff for this approach to change was summed up by a parent who was asked what she thought of MRS. She simply stated, "This social worker was much more helpful than the last one. I felt like she really believed in me and wanted me to be able to keep my kids."

