



CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE COURTS



OHIO BULLETIN

Spring 2007

Vol. 3, No. 3

Alternative Response

Carla Carpenter, Associate Director, The National Center for Adoption Law & Policy

Since 2004, the Supreme Court of Ohio's Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect and Dependency has participated in ongoing efforts to develop and implement recommendations to improve Ohio's system for accepting and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. One of the fundamental components of the Subcommittee's recommendations was initiating an Alternative Response* child protection model in Ohio. This targeted approach to intake and case management authorizes child protection agencies to provide differentiated responses to reports of child maltreatment based on the individual circumstances or risk factors presented. This issue of the *Children, Families and the Courts Ohio Bulletin* focuses on alternative response child protection models and will

- Present an overview of alternative response;
- Examine the national data on alternative response structures;
- Outline the Subcommittee's alternative response proposal; and
- Provide an update on Ohio's progress toward implementation of an alternative response model.

* *Alternative Response is also referred to as differential, dual or multiple response. For the purposes of this article, these terms will be used interchangeably.*

What is Alternative Response?

Alternative response allows child protection agencies to divert cases to different tracks or response paths in order to better address the specific circumstances and needs of each report of child maltreatment. The philosophy behind alternative response is quite straightforward – one size does *not* fit all in child protection matters. In our current child protection model, all *accepted* reports of child maltreatment *must* be investigated. Under an alternative response system, child welfare agencies have the capacity to respond to reports of maltreatment in a manner that is consistent with the level of risk and that corresponds to the severity of the presenting concern. Alternative response embodies the principles of family-centered practice by allowing for a more precise intervention. Alternative response models include two or more response paths through which families may be served, usually consisting of the following:

- A traditional child protection investigation path; and
- One or more “alternatives” to the traditional child protection investigation. (This alternative intervention often is referred to as a family assessment.)

Encouraging public children's services agencies to initiate family contact from an assessment perspective, rather than an investigative perspective, helps establish a foundation on which a more positive and productive partnership is built between the agency and family. Data on existing alternative response models have shown that for lower to moderate risk cases, a non-adversarial, non-threatening family assessment approach aids parental engagement and increases the likelihood of voluntary participation in services.¹

Scope of Alternative Response

A number of variations on alternative response have been implemented in jurisdictions across the United States and abroad over the past decade. However, because of the divergence in local system adaptation, it is difficult to pinpoint the precise number of jurisdictions currently utilizing "alternative response." In 2003, the Department of Health and Human Services' *National Study of Child Protective Services Systems and Reform Efforts* defined alternative response as "a formal response of the agency that assesses the needs of the child or family without requiring a determination that maltreatment has occurred." Under this definition, twenty states self-reported as offering an alternative response to the traditional child protection investigation.²

In 2005, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the American Humane Association (AHA) undertook efforts to further define alternative response in order to better understand the number of jurisdictions that have formally adopted alternative response systems and the structures of those systems. CWLA and AHA identified specific "core elements" to differentiate alternative response from other child protection reforms and to build consensus for an operational definition. These eight core elements of alternative or differential response structures are:³

- The inclusion of two or more differentiated response pathways or tracks.
- The availability of more than one type of response or intervention to an *accepted or screened* in report of child abuse or neglect.
- The selection of a response pathway based on various factors, typically including such factors as risk level, the number or type of previous reports, whether there may be an immediate

safety concern, the nature of the report (type of reported maltreatment), or the age of the child.

- The flexibility to change response tracks or pathways based on new information or an increase or decrease in risk level.
- The authorization for agencies to provide differentiated response tracks established in statute, policy, and/or protocol.
- The provision of *voluntary* services for families who receive a non-investigative assessment response.
- The absence of a formal determination of maltreatment (substantiation or unsubstantiation) for cases referred to a non-investigative response.
- The reservation of a state's central registry for use in those cases that receive a traditional investigative response. For cases on a non-investigative assessment track, there is no entry of an alleged perpetrator on the central registry.

CWLA and AHA conducted a national survey that found a total of fifteen states that had incorporated these core elements – Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Eleven of these states have implemented alternative response on a statewide basis, and Florida, as of 2005, was working toward statewide implementation through a "phase-in" process.⁴

In addition to the fifteen states that met all eight of the identified operational criteria of differential response, nine additional states were found to be implementing various community-based, assessment, or family-centered child protection practices closely resembling aspects of alternative response. Several of these states refer to their own systems as alternative or differential response structures, and many of these program models include one or more of the AHA/CWLA core elements. These states include California, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Additionally, Westchester County in the state of New York began implementing a differential response structure in 2004.⁵

Child welfare systems outside of the United States are also exploring the benefits of alternative response structures to better serve families. Several Canadian provinces as well as jurisdictions in England, Australia and New Zealand have implemented differential response models.

Key Policy Considerations

Examining established alternative response systems provides insight into policy considerations involved in developing an effective program model. Key considerations include (1) the number and designation of response pathways, (2) the criteria and tools used for assigning cases to a particular response path, and (3) the established mechanism for re-tracking of cases in the event that circumstances change.

Response Pathways

A key policy consideration in developing parameters for response pathways is to determine the number and scope of “tracks” that child maltreatment cases may follow.

The majority of jurisdictions implementing alternative response models have implemented dual track systems. In a dual track system, there is typically an investigatory response pathway and a family assessment response path (although the designations given to these two basic tracks may differ from state to state). Exceptions to the two-track structure include the state of Wyoming, which has implemented a three-pathway system: Prevention, Assessment, and Investigation; and the state of Hawaii, also a three-track system: Family Strengthening Services (low risk), Voluntary Case Management Services (moderate risk), and Child Welfare Services Assessment/Investigation (high risk/safety concerns).⁶

It should be noted that the described alternative response pathways are designed to serve families who have met statutory definitions of child maltreatment and do not contribute to a “net widening” effect in jurisdictions that have implemented the model. Some jurisdictions have also implemented formal “referral” response pathways to link families with preventative assessments or services in cases that do not meet statutory requirements for a child protection response.

Track Assignment

A key policy consideration in developing parameters for track assignment is establishing clear directives for the types of cases that trigger automatic investigation versus those cases that can be referred to an assessment path.

Most alternative response systems have established parameters that require specific types of reports to be assigned to the investigative track. Some of the most common examples include reports of sexual abuse, those involving serious physical injury or hospitalization of a child, and those involving a child death, or reports of institutional abuse or neglect. The types of reports that trigger automatic investigation vary widely from state to state. Other examples that are not as consistent from jurisdiction to jurisdiction include reports of abandonment, medical neglect, or drug-exposed infants.⁷

Several other factors may be considered when making the initial case tracking decision, including:

- The age of the child,
- The number of previous reports, and
- Whether those previous reports have been substantiated.

With a few exceptions, the majority of states utilizing alternative response have not restricted the use of the assessment path by the age of the child involved. North Carolina specifies that reports of babies under the age of one who have been shaken or corporally punished may not be referred to the assessment path. Additionally, West Virginia and Wyoming have restricted assessment path tracking to families with children age six or older. There is substantial variation in the way that previous maltreatment reports and/or substantiations are treated among alternative response jurisdictions.⁸

Re-Tracking of Cases

A key policy consideration in developing parameters for re-tracking of cases is the establishment of clear boundaries. This ensures that re-tracking does not become a coercive action that negates an alternative response system’s emphasis on voluntary engagement.

Re-tracking cases (the ability to move cases from one response path to another) is a critical “safety valve” in the system to be employed when case circumstances change or new information becomes available. Virtually all of the differential response states identified in the AHA/CWLA survey have a mechanism for re-tracking of cases from the assessment path to the investigative path built into their program models. About half of the states included in the survey also have a means to move cases from the investigative path to the assessment path as circumstances or new information warrant.⁹ However, data indicate that with effective screening procedures, the re-tracking of cases should occur infrequently. For

example, under Virginia’s differential response system, data indicate that only two percent of cases on the assessment path were re-tracked to the investigative path from 2002 through 2004.¹⁰

In most states utilizing alternative response, the assessment path response is not available to families when court-mandated services must be pursued or when children are placed in foster care. Some states will allow families to remain on the assessment path even after a court petition has been filed to require services for higher risk cases. A few states, including Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Pennsylvania and Tennessee, allow families with children placed in foster care to receive an assessment response.¹¹ This is a particularly important consideration in light of individualized family circumstances that may warrant placement as a means to address children’s mental health or developmental needs.

Outcomes of Alternative Response Research

Evaluative data on alternative response continue to emerge in jurisdictions around the country. Several states have completed comprehensive pilot studies of their alternative response systems utilizing independent researchers to evaluate systems prior to statewide implementation. California opted to implement a continuous quality improvement model — the Breakthrough Series Collaborative — to promote rapid testing of small changes and feedback sharing among counties piloting differential response. Other states and individual jurisdictions have maintained internal monitoring and evaluation efforts. Broadly, the data indicate that alternative response systems have **not** compromised child safety, and that these models have produced positive outcomes with regard to parental engagement, family satisfaction, child protection worker satisfaction, and recidivism rates. The following section examines outcome data produced by Minnesota’s pilot alternative response system—the most rigorous evaluation of alternative response to date,¹² as well as a description of some of the other outcomes being measured across the United States.

Outcomes: Minnesota

In 2001, Minnesota began pilot testing a dual track alternative response system that included both a traditional investigative track and an alternative family assessment path. Families who were eligible for the family assessment response were *randomly* assigned to receive *either* a traditional investigation (control group) *or* a family assessment (experimental group).¹³ Because the families in the control and experimental groups were similarly situated in their eligibility for the alternative response option, researchers were able to draw direct comparisons between the two groups. The Minnesota pilot evaluation included process, impact, and cost analyses. Data were gathered and analyzed with respect to how the new model was implemented, the family’s response to the new practice model, worker response, child safety and family well-being, and fiscal implications. Feedback from both child protection workers and families indicated a genuine shift in child protection culture and practice under the new model. The following is a brief summary of the family response, worker response, child safety and family well-being indicators, and the fiscal implications as reported from the findings of the Minnesota pilot study:

Family Response

When compared with similarly situated control group families who had received the traditional investigative response, the alternative response families more often reported that:

- They received friendly and fair treatment;
- Workers met with the family when everyone was present;
- They were more involved in planning and decision-making;
- They had higher levels of satisfaction with the help they received than control group families;
- They had increased positive feelings following the initial visit from a child protection worker, including feeling “relieved, reassured, hopeful, and optimistic;” and
- The family was, in fact, “better off” because of the alternative response intervention.¹⁴

Key Practice Considerations

Alternative response is intended to provide child protection agencies with the flexibility and authority to provide the best, most appropriate response to a given report of child maltreatment. In many cases, this will be the traditional investigative response. A primary goal of alternative response is to move away from a “one-size-fits-all” orientation in child protection. To replace all investigations with family assessments would be counterproductive to achieving more precise interventions with families. Within alternative response models, *all* available response paths are integral to the success of the system.

When implemented correctly, the establishment of an alternative response model involves a significant cultural and practice shift for child protection agencies. Establishment of an alternative response protocol must include a corresponding adjustment in practice. To maximize child safety, a strong alternative response system must organizationally and individually ensure that its workers:

- Thoroughly understand the multi-track system,
- Emphasize parental engagement and family strengths, and
- Prioritize early intervention and prevention efforts.

While family assessments and traditional investigations are both focused on the safety of children in the home, there are several key differences between the two approaches:

<i>Family Assessment</i>	<i>Traditional Investigation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No formal finding of maltreatment ■ Strengths-based ■ Works under the assumption that families want to address child safety concerns ■ In general, workers talk to parents prior to interviewing children or collateral contacts ■ Focus on safety through engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Substantiation or Unsubstantiation of maltreatment ■ Incident-based with fact-finding focus ■ More likely to feel adversarial to both the worker and the family ■ More forensic in nature ■ Voluntary services may or may not be offered

Worker Response

Workers utilizing the alternative response assessment approach also reported greater satisfaction with the new practice model. Worker satisfaction with the model generally increased over time as workers gained experience and became more proficient with the approach.¹⁵ Additionally, workers reported positive outcomes relative to parental cooperation. Upon initial contact with the families, both assessment and investigative workers were asked to rate the primary caregiver’s level of cooperation on Minnesota’s risk assessment instrument. Workers reported that the assessment path families were much more cooperative than the investigative path families.¹⁶

Child Safety and Family Well-Being

Child safety and family well-being indicators also showed very positive outcomes for children and families who received the assessment response. Study findings revealed that:

- Following the initial assessment or investigation, 36% of the families on the assessment path had a formal “services” case opened, as compared with only 15% of investigative path families.¹⁷ Although the families in both groups presented with similar issues and levels of risk, more than twice as many assessment path families were engaged in voluntary services following the initial intervention.

Minnesota Extended Research

Based on the positive evaluative data that emerged from the pilot study, the Minnesota legislature authorized statewide implementation of alternative response in 2004. Since that time, all of Minnesota's 87 counties have implemented alternative response. Following the initial three-year pilot study, the state elected to continue working with the Institute of Applied Research on a two-year follow-up of the original pilot study. This extension allowed the state to continue to track outcomes and costs for the families involved in the original pilot study for an additional twenty-one month period, meaning that the average total length of time families were studied was more than three and a half years. The results of this extended evaluation were published in November 2006.^a

The analyses included in the follow-up study indicated that the positive outcomes related to family well-being and child safety that were achieved during the original pilot study were, in fact, sustained over the extended research period and, in some instances, further strengthened. Compared to families who had received the traditional investigative response, alternative response families continued to have fewer new reports of child maltreatment overall. Those families who did have a recurrence continued for longer periods of time without a new report than the control group families who had received the traditional investigation. Families on the alternative response track were more likely to receive post-assessment services than their counterparts on the investigative track, reducing the recurrence of future reports. Additionally, the non-threatening, non-adversarial family assessment approach led to fewer new reports of child maltreatment, regardless of whether or not families received services following the initial assessment.^b

Study findings related to family and worker satisfaction were also sustained over the extended follow-up period.^c During the follow-up study, the percentage of experimental group (alternative response) families reporting that "they felt more able to care for their children now" increased from 42% to 62%, while the percentage of control group (traditional investigation) families reporting the same fell from 49% to 42%.^d In a survey conducted during the follow-up period, 93% of workers indicated that their practice with families had changed as a result of alternative response.^e Comments from social workers surveyed regarding the alternative response approach include:

- "It (family assessment response) really takes the blame out of the CP assessment and families are much more willing to voice their family concerns rather than minimize and hide."^f
- "For families who do accept AR Services, I think they feel supported and are more likely to ask for services in the future to assist with family issues."^g

Fiscal impact data gathered during the extended follow-up period showed continued growth in the cost effectiveness of the alternative response approach over time. Throughout the entire research period – both the initial pilot study and the extended follow-up – mean costs for families who had originally received the traditional investigative response were \$4,967, and mean costs for families who received the family assessment response were \$3,688.^h Among families who presented with similar issues and levels of risk at the time of the initial report, the state realized, on average, \$1,279 in savings per family for case management, services, placements, etc. for the alternative response families, as compared to those who had received the traditional investigative response.

^a Institute of Applied Research. *Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response Final Report* (November 2006).

^b Institute of Applied Research. *Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response Final Report* (November 2006), p. 5.

^c Ibid., p. 6 & 7.

^d Ibid., p. 65 & 66.

^e Institute of Applied Research. *Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response Final Report* (November 2006) p. 47.

^f Ibid., p. 54.

^g Ibid.

^h Ibid, p. 7.

- When compared over time, the assessment path families were less likely to have new reports of child maltreatment than their counterparts who had received a traditional investigative response.¹⁸
- Among alternative response and investigative response families that did receive services, the alternative response families reported greater satisfaction with the services they received.¹⁹
- While engagement in services was associated with a more robust outcome, families who received the assessment response had fewer new reports of child maltreatment overall, whether or not services were offered. The family assessment approach itself, apart from the provision of additional services, made a difference in reducing the recurrence of child maltreatment.²⁰
- One year after final contact with the child protection system, families who had received the alternative response approach were less likely to report substance abuse or domestic violence issues.²¹

Fiscal Implications

The Minnesota study examined the costs of serving families on the assessment path versus the traditional investigative response path over time. For purposes of the fiscal analysis, costs were broken down into two time periods: costs from the point of the initial report of abuse or neglect through the agency's final contact with the family resulting from this initial report; and costs from the point of final contact with the family after the initial report through the end of the research period.²² The findings established the following:

- Costs during the *initial* service period were significantly higher for families on the assessment path than for those on the investigative path. Because of the services offered to families on the assessment path and because many cases on the investigative path closed earlier due to an unsubstantiation, the average total cost for each assessment path family during the initial time period was \$1,132, compared to an average of \$593 per family on the investigative path.²³
- However, during the follow-up research period, this trend was reversed dramatically. The average total cost for services to each alternative

response family was \$804 during this time period, as compared to an average of \$1,538 per control group family.

- Assessment path families had fewer new reports of child maltreatment during this period, resulting in lower costs as fewer cases were opened and fewer children were subsequently removed from home.²⁴ When examining the entire research period, the additional costs of providing alternative response were ultimately more than neutralized by savings resulting from the positive outcomes achieved with this approach.

Outcomes: Missouri

Missouri began a trial demonstration of a dual track alternative response system with family assessment and investigative pathways in 1994. While the research design of the Missouri pilot study was somewhat less robust than the Minnesota evaluation study, it provided a comprehensive exploration of the impact of an alternative response protocol.²⁵ Like the Minnesota study, this evaluation focused on worker and family satisfaction, child safety and family well-being indicators. Additionally, the Missouri pilot study examined the responses of community stakeholders to the new family assessment approach. The following is a brief summary of the major findings of the study:²⁶

- Families on the assessment path experienced fewer new reports of maltreatment to county child protection hotlines than families in the comparison counties.²⁷
- Family cooperation and engagement in decision-making improved under the alternative response pathway.²⁸
- Families who received the assessment response reported greater levels of satisfaction with the way they were treated by child protection workers.²⁹
- Workers in the pilot counties reported a greater level of satisfaction with the effectiveness of the child protection system than workers in the comparison counties.³⁰
- Services were delivered to families more quickly under alternative response. In comparing data from the pilot counties and their corresponding comparison sites, researchers found that assessment path families in the pilot counties had some service activity initiated within 17 days of

the initial report, compared to 35 days for the comparison families.³¹

- Workers in the pilot counties providing alternative response engaged in greater collaboration with community service providers. More referrals were made for assessment path families for resources, including referrals for material support (such as food stamps), local community-based resources (such as churches, food pantries, mental health services, schools, etc.), and more informal support networks (such as neighbors, extended family members, etc.).³²
- Community stakeholders in the pilot counties were more likely to rate the local child protection agency as “a source of services and assistance to families” and to view the child protection agency as “more effective in protecting children at risk of physical abuse and neglect.”³³

Based on the positive findings of the alternative response demonstration project, the Missouri legislature decided to move forward with statewide implementation of the alternative response protocol in 1998. By the end of 1999, all Missouri counties had implemented the family assessment response as an alternative to the traditional child protection investigation for lower to moderate risk cases. The positive outcomes of the initial pilot evaluation were, in fact, sustained over time, as indicated in the follow-up research study. Additionally, a subsequent study out of Missouri has found that the state’s differential response protocol has strengthened the effectiveness of the traditional investigative response in cases of severe physical and sexual abuse. The availability of the family assessment response has greatly reduced the number of cases being investigated, which has resulted in more robust investigations and successful criminal prosecution of the most egregious cases of maltreatment.³⁴

Outcomes: Other Jurisdictions

Evaluative data from other states implementing alternative or differential response protocols have been consistent with the positive outcomes observed in both Minnesota and Missouri:

- The evaluation of North Carolina’s Multiple Response System (MRS) found that MRS has led to significantly increased frontloading of services to families, resulting in reduced recurrences of maltreatment.³⁵ Additionally, the evaluation found that MRS has not adversely

impacted child safety or the timeliness of agencies’ response to reports of child maltreatment in North Carolina.³⁶

- The most recent evaluation report of the Virginia Differential Response System found that the family assessment response is being utilized to an increasing degree by local child protection agencies without compromising child safety.³⁷ An earlier evaluation report of the Virginia model found that assessment path families with identified needs received services “as frequently, or more frequently,” than families with a substantiated investigation.³⁸ Program evaluators from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) indicated in their report that these data provide some evidence that the non-adversarial assessment approach facilitates engagement of families in services.³⁹
- Preliminary findings in a multi-year evaluation of the state of California’s differential response system indicate that it is having a positive impact on parental engagement and service referrals. Additionally, the implementation of differential response is resulting in the development of stronger community partnerships between child protection agencies and community service providers in pilot counties.⁴⁰
- A two-year program evaluation of differential response in Alaska found that families participating in the differential response program had lower rates of recurrent child maltreatment than families in a closely matched comparison site without differential response.⁴¹

While monitoring and evaluation efforts in relation to alternative response programs continue across all jurisdictions utilizing the approach, overall outcomes to date have been promising. Current evaluation data suggest that alternative response is helping to provide child protection agencies with the flexibility they need to realize the concept of family-centered practice. Positive outcomes with regard to family engagement, parental and worker satisfaction, community collaboration, and most importantly, child safety are strong indicators that well-implemented alternative response structures are doing exactly what they are intended to do – keeping children safer by allowing agencies to provide the most targeted and appropriate response to each report of maltreatment.

Alternative Response in Ohio

The Subcommittee's Proposal

Based on cumulative data from other jurisdictions implementing alternative response as well as feedback from Ohio child welfare professionals, the Supreme Court of Ohio's Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency included a series of recommendations for developing and pilot testing an alternative response protocol in Ohio in its *Final Report to the Advisory Committee on Children, Families and the Courts*. The entire report, along with supplementary documents, is available online at the Subcommittee's website at www.ohiochildlaw.com. The report contains several global recommendations regarding the establishment of an alternative response system in Ohio, leaving detailed planning for a pilot development and implementation phase of the project. The Subcommittee's recommendations for an alternative response model in Ohio include: (1) statutorily authorized dual investigative and family assessment tracks; (2) criteria that would mandate an investigation defined by administrative rule; (3) strong alternative response screening, risk, and safety assessment processes; (4) a provision to allow for re-tracking of cases; (5) established timeframes for initiating and completing a family assessment; and (6) a rigorously designed pilot program. The following presents an overview of the recommendations presented by the Subcommittee and details some of the "next steps" needed to ensure the success of an alternative response system in Ohio.

1. Statutorily authorized dual investigative and family assessment tracks

The creation of a dual track alternative response system in Ohio would provide public children's services agencies with the flexibility to offer a more targeted response to reports of child maltreatment and the authority to engage caretakers through a non-threatening, non-adversarial response protocol in appropriate circumstances. The option to provide a family assessment response is consistent with current best practice standards for family-centered child welfare services. To maximize the potential for parental engagement, this track should be made available through an alternative response screening process implemented *as soon as the agency has accepted* a report of child maltreatment.

It is critical to note that the proposed alternative response structure is not intended to result in greater inclusiveness in initial case screening decisions. As in the current system, when an agency receives a report of child maltreatment, the initial screening criterion is whether the report falls within the agency's jurisdiction. Do the facts of the report indicate possible child maltreatment as defined within the statute? Reports that do not meet the statutory threshold for a child protection agency response would be screened out, as they are currently. In these cases, a referral for other appropriate services *may* be made depending on agency policy and the availability of such services.

2. Criteria that would mandate an investigation defined by administrative rule

In order to maximize child safety and consistency in decision-making, there should be requirements defined by administrative rule for the specific types of child maltreatment reports that would automatically trigger a child protection investigation. Examples of these may include reports involving potential criminal child abuse, sexual abuse allegations, or reports involving maltreatment that resulted in serious physical injury or hospitalization of the child.

3. Strong alternative response screening, risk, and safety assessment processes

Effective implementation of alternative response requires comprehensive screening, safety and risk assessment protocols. Much of the work around developing the tools and procedures that will support a successful alternative response child protection structure in Ohio is already well underway through the CAPMIS pilot initiative. An additional critical element of the alternative response system design will be the development of a screening procedure for assigning accepted reports of child maltreatment to the appropriate response path. If the report does not fall within one of the pre-determined categories requiring investigation, then the next screening question is whether there are any other factors that would necessitate the investigative response in order to adequately protect the child. Carefully designed screening tools that help ensure consistent and appropriate case-tracking decisions have been developed and tested in other jurisdictions utilizing alternative response.

4. Provision to allow for re-tracking of cases

As is the case in other states, Ohio's alternative response model should include a mechanism for cases to be re-assigned from assessment to investigation or from investigation to assessment as new information becomes apparent or circumstances change to warrant a different intervention. Although the assessment path strongly emphasizes voluntary engagement of parents, the agency should have the ability to pursue court-mandated services when necessary to maintain a child safely at home, regardless of the initial case-tracking decision. Specific policies and procedures will need to be developed to ensure both consistency and fairness in the process of making a determination to move a case from one track to another.

5. Established timeframes for initiating and completing a family assessment

As there are currently for investigations, there should be designated timeframes for initiating and completing the family assessment process. Without such statutorily defined timeframes, there is a danger that there may be a presumption that cases assigned to the family assessment track are less serious and do not need as much timely attention as investigative path cases. To maximize child safety, the assessment process should be initiated as quickly as possible.

6. Rigorously designed pilot program

Prior to statewide implementation of any alternative response structure, a pilot program should be developed and subjected to the most rigorous evaluation standards. The pilot should address child safety outcomes, family and worker satisfaction, fiscal implications, and potential impact on Child and Family Service Review outcomes and/or judicial system outcomes.

Pilot Status — Ohio's Alternative Response System

Ohio Senate Bill 238, enacted on June 21, 2006, includes a provision authorizing a pilot alternative response project in the state of Ohio. The bill specifies that this pilot should be independently evaluated over an eighteen-month period in a maximum of ten Ohio counties. County participation in the pilot will be on a voluntary basis and will measure child and family well-being, fiscal impact, caseworker satisfaction, family satisfaction, and any potential impact on Child and Family Service Review or judicial system outcomes resulting from the new model. The Supreme Court of Ohio's Subcommittee on Responding to Child

Abuse, Neglect and Dependency will continue to work closely with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) throughout the process of developing, implementing, and testing the Ohio alternative response system.

In early 2007, an independent research consultant was selected to manage the design, implementation and evaluation of the alternative response protocol. (See *Ohio's Alternative Response Team* on page 11).

Next Steps

Under the direction of the Supreme Court of Ohio and ODJFS, AIM (Ohio's alternative response team) is undertaking a concentrated effort to facilitate preparations for Ohio's alternative response pilot. The initial phase of the project will be dedicated to creating a detailed implementation plan and developing a series of activities to promote implementation readiness. Pilot site selection will be a critical component of the early work on this project.

As one of its first tasks, the AIM team will convene three half-day regional forums in different locations of the state to provide an opportunity for interested Public Children Services Agencies (PCSAs), community partners, and other key stakeholders to learn more about alternative response systems and the Ohio pilot. Forums will include information on the alternative response model and family assessment approach, including implementation strategies, training needs, the evaluation process, lessons learned from other states, and requirements for participating in the Ohio pilot. During these sessions, the AIM team will also present a draft application for counties interested in becoming pilot sites and gather feedback from county stakeholders regarding the pilot site application process. Feedback from PCSAs and other child welfare stakeholders will be critical in finalizing the plan for the pilot site selection process. The ultimate goal of these sessions, however, is to provide PCSAs with the information they need to determine whether they wish to pursue pilot site status.

Once pilot sites have been selected, county-level representatives from each pilot site will join representatives of the Subcommittee, ODJFS, the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, and the AIM team on an Alternative Response Workgroup. The Workgroup and its subcommittees will be responsible for further

Ohio's Alternative Response Team

In December of 2006, the Supreme Court of Ohio released a Request for Proposals for an independent consultant to manage the design, implementation and pilot evaluation of an Ohio alternative response protocol in cooperation with the Supreme Court of Ohio and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Following a rigorous proposal review process, a team of experienced consultants headed by the American Humane Association and the Institute of Applied Research was selected for the project – the **AIM** team:

- American Humane
- Institute of Applied Research
- Minnesota leaders

The AIM team brings exceptional experience and comprehensive expertise to this project.

The **American Humane Association** is a national nonprofit organization focused on protecting both children and animals from abuse, neglect and exploitation. The AHA is currently engaged in a broad-based national initiative on differential response in child welfare. They have made significant contributions to the growing body of literature on alternative response, most recently through a national survey on differential response co-authored by the Child Welfare League of America. In 2006, the AHA hosted its first annual national Conference on Differential Response in Child Welfare with more than 400 child welfare professionals in attendance. The American Humane Association arm of the AIM team brings to this project a broad knowledge base; diverse consultation, research, and training experience; national leadership in the area of alternative response; and prior experience with Ohio's SACWIS and CAPMIS initiatives. They are an extraordinary repository for the most up-to-date research and information on alternative response.

The **Institute of Applied Research** is an independent, nonprofit research and consulting firm based in St. Louis, Missouri. IAR provides social science research and technical assistance services to state governments and other public service organizations in a wide range of social service and public policy areas. IAR is the preeminent research organization for large-scale alternative response system evaluation. Previously, they have conducted comprehensive pilot evaluations of alternative response systems in Minnesota and Missouri. Additionally, they have provided consultation services to a number of states implementing or considering alternative response models, including California, North Carolina, Utah and Wisconsin.

The AIM team also includes several consultants from the state of **Minnesota** who bring state and county level expertise in the design, implementation, and testing of alternative response. The state of Minnesota has developed a nationally-regarded alternative response protocol (see *Outcomes: Minnesota* on page 4). Through their participation in this effort, the state of Ohio will have a wealth of hands-on, practical experience to draw from in implementing alternative response in a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system.

development of the design and implementation plan for Ohio's alternative response system.

The AIM team's project proposal strongly emphasizes the need for intensive collaboration in all phases of the Ohio alternative response pilot. While the AIM team brings to the project a wealth of knowledge and experience in alternative response systems nationally, they will be looking to state and county-level stakeholders in Ohio to contribute their expertise to the development of a model designed specifically to meet Ohio's unique needs.

Concluding Remarks

Alternative response provides a family-centered system of response for child maltreatment cases. States that have successfully implemented the model and have evaluated the results have found that families benefit when approached by the agency from an assessment perspective, rather than an investigative perspective and

that it helps to foster a positive and productive partnership between the agency and family. Ohio can benefit from applying proven research methods and policy considerations as the design, implementation and pilot evaluation of an Ohio alternative response protocol is formed. This bulletin will provide regular updates as Ohio moves through this course of action.

Throughout the process of developing its recommendations, the Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect, and Dependency engaged in a comprehensive effort to elicit input from all Ohio child welfare stakeholder groups. Over the past several months, the Subcommittee has continued its efforts to educate stakeholders about the proposals contained in its *Final Report* and to gather additional stakeholder response on those recommendations. Please contribute to this process by visiting www.ohiochildlaw.com to complete an online survey and provide critical feedback on all of the proposed changes.

Endnotes

- ¹ Patricia Schene, Ph.D. "The Emergence of Differential Response," *Protecting Children: Differential Response in Child Welfare*, Volume 20, Numbers 2 & 3 (2005), p.7. 9.
- ² United States Department of Health and Human Services. *National Study of Child Protective Services Systems and Reform Efforts* (2003).
- ³ Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 10-11.
- ⁴ These states include HI, KY, MN, MO, NC, OK, PA, TN, VA, WA, and WY. LA, AK, and WV have implemented differential response in select jurisdictions. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006).
- ⁵ Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006).
- ⁶ Thirteen of the fifteen differential response states identified in the AHA/CWLA national survey implemented two-track systems for responding to accepted reports of child maltreatment. Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 16.
- ⁷ All fifteen of the identified differential response states in the AHA/CWLA survey barred certain types of cases from receiving a family assessment response. Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 18.
- ⁸ Four of the fifteen differential response states included in the AHA/CWLA survey include some limitation on the assessment path

- response based on the number of previous maltreatment reports, the period of time in which multiple reports were received, or whether prior reports were substantiated. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 21.
- ⁹ Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 14.
 - ¹⁰ Virginia Tech. for the Virginia Department of Social Services. *Evaluation of the Differential Response System*. (December 2005) p. 14.
 - ¹¹ Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 21.
 - ¹² The Institute of Applied Research completed a longitudinal evaluation of Minnesota's alternative response pilot in 2004. This three-year study gathered data from twenty pilot counties representing 70% of the state's child maltreatment reports. Carole Johnson, MSW, Erin Sullivan Sutton, JD, and David M. Thompson, MSW. "Child Welfare Reform in Minnesota," *Protecting Children: Differential Response in Child Welfare*, Volume 20, Numbers 2 & 3 (2005), p.58.
 - ¹³ In researching the outcomes of the family assessment response pathway, the Institute of Applied Research conducted a field experiment with randomly assigned control group and experimental group families in fourteen of the twenty pilot demonstration sites. L. Anthony Loman, PhD and Gary L. Siegel, PhD. Institute of Applied Research. *Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation Final Report* (November 2004).
 - ¹⁴ Ibid.
 - ¹⁵ L. Anthony Loman, PhD and Gary L. Siegel, PhD. Institute of Applied Research. *Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation Final Report* (November 2004).
 - ¹⁶ Workers rated the primary caretaker among control group (investigative path) families as uncooperative 44% of the time, as compared to less than 2% of the experimental group (assessment path) families. L. Anthony Loman, PhD, and Gary L. Siegel, PhD. "Alternative Response in Minnesota: Findings of the Program Evaluation." *Protecting Children: Differential Response in Child Welfare*, Volume 20, Numbers 2 & 3 (2005), p.82.
 - ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 84.
 - ¹⁸ L. Anthony Loman, PhD and Gary L. Siegel, PhD. Institute of Applied Research. *Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation Final Report* (November 2004).
 - ¹⁹ Ibid.
 - ²⁰ Ibid.
 - ²¹ Ibid.
 - ²² Ibid.
 - ²³ L. Anthony Loman, PhD, and Gary L. Siegel, PhD. "Alternative Response in Minnesota: Findings of the Program Evaluation." *Protecting Children: Differential Response in Child Welfare*, Volume 20, Numbers 2 & 3 (2005), p.88-89.
 - ²⁴ Ibid.
 - ²⁵ In Missouri, data from fourteen alternative response pilot counties were compared with data from fourteen demographically similar comparison counties only implementing the traditional investigative response (and selected parts of St. Louis City and County). Gary L. Siegel, Ph.D and L. Anthony Loman, PhD – The Institute of Applied Research. *The Missouri Family Assessment and Response Demonstration Impact Evaluation: Digest of Findings and Conclusions* (January 2000), p. 3.

- ²⁶ It is important to note that the alternative response pilot demonstration in Missouri was implemented on a cost-neutral basis. No additional funds were provided for expanded services to families on the assessment path, as in the Minnesota pilot [Gary L. Siegel, Ph.D and L. Anthony Loman, PhD – The Institute of Applied Research. *The Missouri Family Assessment and Response Demonstration Impact Evaluation: Digest of Findings and Conclusions* (January 2000), p. 2]. Although the findings of the study were largely positive, the researchers noted that the overall impact of the demonstration project was somewhat diminished by large worker caseloads and the limited availability of resources [L. Anthony Loman, PhD. and Gary L. Seigel, PhD. – The Institute of Applied Research. *Differential Response in Missouri after Five Years: Final Report* (February 2004) p. 2].
- ²⁷ Gary L. Siegel, Ph.D and L. Anthony Loman, PhD – The Institute of Applied Research. *The Missouri Family Assessment and Response Demonstration Impact Evaluation: Digest of Findings and Conclusions* (January 2000), p 11.
- ²⁸ Ibid. p.10.
- ²⁹ Ibid. p. 25.
- ³⁰ Ibid. p. 29.
- ³¹ Gary L. Siegel, Ph.D and L. Anthony Loman, PhD – The Institute of Applied Research. *The Missouri Family Assessment and Response Demonstration Impact Evaluation: Digest of Findings and Conclusions* (January 2000), p 16.
- ³² Ibid. p. 21.
- ³³ Ibid. p. 28.
- ³⁴ L. Anthony Loman, PhD. – The Institute of Applied Research. *Differential Response Improves Traditional Investigations: Criminal Arrests for Severe Physical and Sexual Abuse* (May 2005).
- ³⁵ The Center for Child and Family Policy, Terry Sanford Institute at Duke University. *Multiple Response System (MRS) Evaluation Report to the North Carolina Division of Social Services* (June 2005) p. 44.
- ³⁶ Ibid. p. 45.
- ³⁷ Virginia Tech. for the Virginia Department of Social Services. *Evaluation of the Differential Response System*. (December 2005) p. vi.
- ³⁸ Virginia Tech. for the Virginia Department of Social Services. *Evaluation of the Differential Response System* (December 2004) p. v.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Child and Family Policy Institute of California for the California Department of Social Services. *Child Welfare Services System Improvement 11 County Pilot Implementation Evaluation: Initial Assessment Phase* (June 2006) p. 5 & 6.
- ⁴¹ Lisa Merkel-Holguin, Caren Kaplan, and Alina Kwak - American Humane Association and The Child Welfare League of America. *National Study on Differential Response in Child Welfare* (2006) p. 27.