

Alternative Response

VOLUME 2
ISSUE 2

April 2009

Quarterly

Individual Highlights

Sustaining Our Momentum:
Success Stories From the
Field 2

Disproportionality Summit..... 3

Strengths-Based Engagement
With Families 4

County Spotlight..... 5



A Note From the New Chair

Rhonda Reagh

It has been my distinct pleasure over the last five years to serve as a representative of public children services agencies to the Supreme Court Subcommittee on Responding to Child Abuse, Neglect and Dependency, first as a county director and now as the new chair of the subcommittee and an Alternative Response pilot county director. The subcommittee is the entity that was charged by the Advisory Committee on Children, Families and the Courts to examine Ohio's laws pertaining to child abuse and neglect and to see if they served children well. Through the stellar work of the National Center on Adoption Law and Policy (especially Denise St. Clair and Carla Carpenter), the review was completed and, as a result, the Ohio CHIPS proposal took shape — and along with that, the idea of embracing AR in Ohio was born. The subcommittee had its authorization extended in 2008 to move the legislative work on CHIPS forward through education and enactment efforts and to oversee the implementation of the AR Pilot Project through the final report. But much more than the completion of work products has taken place in that five-year period.

The subcommittee membership is really a microcosm of the entities that are involved in child welfare at the county level. It is composed of judges, the defense bar, prosecutors, pediatricians, child advocates, parent advocates, system representatives, school representatives, law-enforcement officers and pretty much anyone who touches the lives of the families we all are concerned about. As a result of our spirited dialogue over the years, we have forged new relationships and come to understand each other's work and perspectives on child welfare issues in a new way. And, we have all become dedicated advocates for seeing the charge of the subcommittee become a reality in order to serve Ohio's children and families more effectively.

The subcommittee's April meeting was dedicated to an update on AR, from a county and statewide perspective. They heard the success stories, the lessons learned, and the challenges and concerns of the pilot counties. They asked hard questions about what it will take in the future to make AR a statewide reality. The questions ranged from specific questions about the evaluation of AR to policy and budgetary questions. At the end of the meeting, they reaffirmed their interest as individuals in moving this work forward. The thing that strikes me about this group is their interest in hearing the stories of the counties and of the families we serve. That's what it has always been about since we first started this discussion in Ohio. Each time a presentation is made about AR, the allotted time on the agenda is never enough. If anyone ever doubted that a wholesale system change was possible, he or she only needs to observe what happens when a dedicated group of advocates hears about the work of Alternative Response. The energy is contagious and thanks to the work of many, change is coming.

AIM

THE SUPREME COURT of OHIO

Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

casey family programs.

OHIO CHILDREN'S TRUST FUND

Sustaining Our Momentum: Success Stories From the Field



Carla Carpenter, National Center for Adoption and Law Policy

In a recent series of interviews, I asked Alternative Response pilot counties to share some of their success stories. Agency staff generously shared dozens of examples from the field illustrating how AR is making a difference for families, workers and their communities. Being the fortunate collector of these stories, I had a unique opportunity to identify emerging trends and to better understand how child welfare practice is evolving through Ohio's Alternative Response System Pilot Project. One of the most frequently asked questions about this pilot initiative is, "How is AR different?" The stories shared by front-line workers, supervisors and agency administrators illustrate the tangible change effected by families, workers and agencies through AR.

Changing the Way Families View CPS

"As a supervisor, I like hearing about the hugs and positive things families have to say after their experience."

– Franklin County AR supervisor

"Traditionally, the family felt like we were authoritative and accusatory. With AR, families come to see us as their advocate. We sit down together and decide how to approach problems."

– Lucas County AR worker

Universally, counties shared stories of how AR is changing families' perceptions about CPS. Changes in the way cases are initiated, removal of labels, and family-driven service planning have contributed to families seeing CPS as a helping partner. A worker from Ross County points out, "More and more, we're working with families who are just like you and me — middle income, stable families who are struggling with economic or other stressors." In one recent situation, a family received AR services in response to an incident of domestic violence. In this instance, there were no injuries, and the family had no prior history of violence. The situation appeared to be an isolated event triggered by compounding stressors. "In the past, we typically would have substantiated, or at least indicated, physical abuse in a case where children were present during domestic violence. What would that have accomplished for this family?" Both parents are EMTs; dad works three jobs and also serves as a volunteer fireman. "Not having a disposition was a key factor in working with this family" due to the potential implications for their EMT certification. As a result of AR, the worker was able to approach the family in a wholly supportive manner and build trust without the stigma or threat of a disposition. Dad has subsequently engaged in counseling services, and the worker was able to assist and encourage both parents in creating a concrete plan to prevent future violence.

Sometimes, just the explanation of the AR philosophy and approach has literally opened doors to families who would otherwise be too fearful or reluctant to fully engage. A Lucas County worker shared a recent

experience of successfully connecting with a mother who had initially feared the agency's involvement, to the extent that she was moving her children around and actively avoiding the worker's efforts to initiate contact. This single mother with four children was involved in a car accident and is dealing with a disability and loss of income as a result of the accident. The family is in an economically fragile situation and in need of assistance with basic needs. A teacher followed up with the worker after learning that the children's mom was very afraid they might be removed by CPS. When the worker was ultimately able to establish contact with mom and explain the AR approach in a phone call, mom expressed overwhelming relief and scheduled a meeting with the worker for the next day.

Changing the Way We Serve Families

"Working a Service Plan instead of a Case Plan has been successful. Service Plans are friendlier and developed by the client."

– Licking County AR worker

Two recurring themes permeated my recent conversations with workers: 1) AR has resulted in more time spent in the field with families; and 2) AR has resulted in solution-focused, family-driven service planning. As a result of the AR approach, families have been more open regarding their needs and less guarded when workers address safety concerns, often resulting in lengthier, more frequent and more productive contacts with workers. Additionally, flexible funding has provided a much-needed vehicle for agencies to offer creative services driven by family needs, empowering families to take an active role in service planning. Here are just two of the many examples shared:

The longer timeframes of a "one worker, one family" AR structure, along with the flexibility of

pilot funds, enabled a worker in Tuscarawas County to assist a family through the time- and resource-intensive steps needed to obtain a birth certificate for ID and, ultimately, a driver's license and a car. With no public transportation options in the county, this was the most viable solution for helping dad return to work in order to maintain family stability.

In Licking County, the agency was able to assist a mom by making a final outstanding payment toward her college tuition. This payment allowed her to take the final exam that would conclude her coursework to earn a degree. Although the initial report was for unsafe living conditions in the home, domestic violence was an underlying issue for this family. The agency's course of action represented much more than simply paying a bill. As the worker indicated, "This was an important step toward empowering mom."

Changing the Way We Collaborate With Colleagues

"Our clinical consultations typically include a mix of AR and TR Intake and Ongoing staff and managers, providing a well-rounded assessment that builds on families' strengths. The use of this framework has increased communication among staff, enhanced creativity, and encourages team decision-making processes at all levels of our agency."

– Kristi Burre, Fairfield County

In addition to changing the approach with families, AR has also resulted in significant changes in the way agencies are doing business internally. In Franklin County, there has been a strong emphasis on improving collaboration between AR Intake and AR Ongoing Units. Workers are visiting families together as cases are transitioning, resulting in greater continuity of services and less confusion for families. Additionally,

some counties, including Franklin and Fairfield, are working to implement a group supervision model to support workers. This group consultation model, originally developed in Olmsted County, Minn., fosters transparency in practice, promotes a holistic understanding of families, and offers workers shared decision-making responsibility with their colleagues.

Changing Our Relationships With Community Partners

"In our community, Help Me Grow workers are more apt to make referrals now that they know about AR. Help Me Grow feels that AR interventions are less threatening to families and views AR workers as a helping entity."

– Ross County AR worker

AR is impacting community perceptions about CPS and opening new avenues for collaboration with community partners. In Tuscarawas County, the agency was able to use pilot funds to negotiate a contract with a mental health services provider that would be more responsive to families' needs for flexible evening appointments. A Licking County caseworker successfully reached out to the local YMCA and was able to negotiate a substantially reduced one-year family membership rate of \$166 for the agency's families (the regular family

membership rate is \$800). Franklin County has partnered with Nationwide Children's Hospital Behavioral Health to include a mental health assessor as a full member of its AR team.

AR workers in several counties commented on how much their knowledge of community resources and systems has increased due to their AR practice. A worker in Franklin County stated, "I'm learning a lot more about the different systems clients face." This worker shared her recent experience of going to court with a mom to seek a protection order. The worker stated that it was "eye-opening how cumbersome and confusing the process was," and she indicated that she "now has a better understanding of what clients go through when we ask them to do these types of things."

Closing Thoughts

It is a privilege to hear firsthand about the excellent work being done in the field by all 10 pilot sites. For any change effort, it is impossible to sustain momentum without recognizing accomplishments, and the examples included here are merely the tip of a very large iceberg! I genuinely appreciate everyone's time in sharing their many success stories.

Disproportionality Summit

Molly Jenkins, American Humane Association

The Disproportionality Information Summit, held last month in Columbus, Ohio, was a great success! Child welfare practitioners, supervisors, researchers and judges from all across the United States attended and were engaged in passionate and productive discussions around the racial and socioeconomic disparities that exist within the child welfare system, including what strategies can be taken to address these

disproportionate trends. Differential Response guidelines and experiences were also presented and shared during conversations, with the intent of considering how Differential Response practice could positively impact disparities for systems, families and children. For example, expanding the availability of culturally proficient service arrays — a necessary feature of Differential Response approaches — was highlighted as an important step to address resource disparities for communities of color.

Strengths-Based Engagement With Families

Amy Rohm, AIM Team

In March, Bob Bertolino, Ph.D., an assistant professor of rehabilitation counseling at Maryville University in St. Louis, Mo., and senior clinical advisor at Youth In Need, Inc., traveled around Ohio to conduct four workshops on strengths-based engagement with families. Bob has taught over 300 workshops throughout the United States and abroad, and he has authored or co-authored 10 books.

Emerging from 50 years of empirical data, a strengths-based approach provides social service workers and mental health professionals with essential principles and practices for improving effectiveness and increasing outcomes in services. Strengths-based strategies have been

applied successfully in a wide range of contexts and settings, including outpatient, residential, child protection, community-based and private sectors with at-risk children, adolescents, adults, couples and families experiencing a continuum of concerns.

Caseworkers and supervisors who participated in these workshops learned about key strategies and processes to strengthen relationships with families; identify and maximize client contributions to change; select methods of intervention; elicit, monitor and respond efficiently to families' progress; and negotiate therapeutic impasses. Evaluations from the workshops came back positively, as participants felt the information could be used to help strengthen their engagement with families.



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 amyr@americanhumane.org

Differential Response Conference

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. Come join us!

Registration information will be available in July. Watch our website at www.americanhumane.org/differential for additional information.

SAVE THE DATE

Nov. 12-13, 2009
Omni William Penn Hotel
Pittsburgh, Pa.



AMERICAN HUMANE

Protecting Children & Animals Since 1877

Spotlight: Clark County

Stefania Falke, Dorothy George, Gladys Islam, Nancy Mahoney, Christopher Schulz, Monique Timmons, Brooke Williams and Karen Wright



When we began the Alternative Response pilot in July 2008, we were hopeful — and we were scared. Now, 190 AR cases later, the response from our staff, our client families and the community has been overwhelmingly positive. As one of our AR Unit workers put it, “AR has been a positive change for our families. Once you explain the process of AR, you can see the families relax and become more open with us. Families seem to be more honest and focused on what they need to change as parents to better the lives of their children. The families seem to be more positive themselves in working with Children Services.”

The outcomes articulated by that worker are what we want and hope to see every day when we come to work. Aren't we far more interested in having parents focus on making changes to be better parents than we are in “substantiating abuse or neglect”? Now with AR, it seems that our emphasis is squarely where it ought to be.

The AR Unit in Clark County is made up of one supervisor and six workers. Early on, we could tell that we were not

going to need all six workers to handle the identified AR cases because half of the AR-eligible cases were being handled as “traditional response” for the duration of the pilot as the “control group.” The unit itself met and came up with a solution, so that four of them are currently taking the AR cases and two continue to function as traditional response workers. As need for AR workers increases, the remaining two may shift over at any time, as needed. Just as we seek to include the families in generating solutions for their problems, we modeled that same process within the AR Unit, and all seem satisfied with the solution agreed upon by the group.

If child safety is our priority, it doesn't get any better than having a member of one of our client families encourage her friend to reach out to the agency for help with her own children. It did happen that a mother we were working with was so impressed with the help she received from her AR worker that she convinced her friend to call in and ask for help for herself. And when did we ever think we would actually have

families ask us not to close their cases? That has also been our experience since we began using AR.

While we have had access to flexible funds for some time, the AR funds are a “notch above” in terms of flexibility, allowing us to be creative in helping families to assure safety and stability while sometimes enriching family life in the process. We have been able to purchase everything from automobile tires to basketball uniforms to the more typical payments for rent, utilities and home furnishings. We are currently working on a roof repair.

It appears that AR comes down to “relationship” and that the relationship of the worker and the family is a key element for positive change to occur ... and haven't we always known that? How refreshing to actually be able to practice in a way that honors that relationship.

Evaluation Spotlight

Tony Loman, AIM Team

This pie chart displays the breakdown of types of maltreatment accepted as appropriate for Alternative Response. Out of the total set of cases categorized and entered into the randomizer by the 10 pilot counties, reports of neglect made up the highest proportion of the AR intakes, followed by reports of physical abuse.

