

Conflict Resolution Services And Community Partnerships

by Hank Ostwald

Agencies in four northwest Iowa counties *have* been collaborating to provide new approaches and new services for children and families. These new approaches — consisting of Family Unity Meetings, Family Team Meetings, and Family Mediation Services — all focus on the safety, permanency, and well being of children. The core theme in these approaches is the development of an effective relationship with a family to try and ensure its active participation in case planning and decision making.

Local county planning groups meet monthly in Clay, Dickinson, Osceola and O'Brien Counties to assess the needs, concerns, strengths and gaps in the community. Participants include human service providers, citizens, parents, local government, the Iowa Department of Human Services, juvenile court services, schools, area education associations, faith community, business and health. These county groups work with the Decategorization/Empowerment Board to plan programs and services to meet the needs of children and families.

In January 1999, the nine-member Spencer Cluster Decategorization Board merged with the Local Empowerment Board creating a seamless community planning initiative known as the Lakes Area Decategorization/Empowerment Board. The process of community collaboration, planning, and program implementation is an extensive, ongoing initiative that strives to meet the needs of children and families. Gaps in services for children and families have led the drive to seek funding for Family Unity Meetings, Family Team Meetings and Family Mediation Services.

Community collaboration teams in the community pilot site assist in designing a continuum of alternative dispute resolution methods to expedite permanency for children. Community teams are composed of representatives of juvenile court, the Iowa Department of Human Services, CASA, attorneys, the school system, the faith community, private agencies, foster/adoptive parents, and substance abuse treatment agencies. Our pilot site also has two primary juvenile judges who are a part of the community collaboration team.

Family Unity and Family Team Meetings are gatherings of family members, friends, community specialists and other interested people who join together to strengthen the family and protect its children. The community has several trained facilitators and co-facilitators that assist the referring worker and the family in planning for and then facilitating their meeting. Referrals come from the Iowa Department of Human Services, juvenile court services, schools or virtually anyone in the community. A specific purpose for the meeting is identified and may include:

- Keeping a child safely at home;
- Returning a child safely to the home;
- Helping a family become self-sufficient;

- · Resolving disruptive behaviors;
- · Helping students become more successful in school;
- · Resolving concerns of suspension or expulsion from school;
- · Substance abuse issues; and
- · Mental health issues.

The meetings form a natural helping system to meet the identified concerns by utilizing family strengths. Data is being collected to measure short and long-term outcomes for families that participate in these services. Initial data indicate that families have been strengthened when participating and are engaged in a meaningful way to reach their goals.

Funding for these services comes from a variety of resources. One of those resources is the Edna McConnell Clark Community Partnership Initiative. As a Community Partnership Site, the area has benefited from training opportunities and funding to implement family meetings. The Family Unity and Family Team Meetings assist in:

- · Increasing safety for children and families;
- · Engaging families and communities in the helping process;
- · Resolving concerns and strengthens families; and
- · Creating an attitude of hope for families and those who work with families.

The community believes in offering a “continuum of services” to families. Not all families will choose the option of participating in Family Unity or Family Team Meetings. In order to meet those families needs, mediation services are now offered. Trained mediators facilitate sessions with parents, relatives, attorneys, social workers and other involved professionals. The child welfare mediator serves as a neutral party who facilitates “a non-adversarial joint resolution to concerns about a child’s welfare to provide him or her with the utmost safety and stability, preferably at home, with or without third-party or court intervention.”

When juvenile court has a matter pending, it may refer the case to mediation. Individuals through their attorneys may request a referral, or the judge may order a family to mediation. Once referred, each case will be assessed, and if appropriate, will be assigned a mediator. Next, a mediation date, time, and place will be scheduled and notice sent to all parties. If the parties are able to successfully mediate their issues, a memorandum of understanding is drafted. The memorandum is then filed with the court for the judge’s approval. If the parties are unable to reach an agreement, the mediator refers the matter back to court for a hearing. The information discussed during the mediation sessions are confidential and will not be revealed to the court.

Mediation is funded through participation with the Iowa Court Improvement Project. ICIP offers training opportunities and funding for mediation for visitation, permanency, adoption, and foster care issues for children and families. One objective of the Expediting Permanency through Community Decision-Making Project is to

institutionalize demonstrated successful alternative dispute options in achieving timely and effective permanency.

These services are offered to families as opportunities for change and as conflict resolution methods. The community is excited about the change in philosophy that is starting to occur throughout the four counties. We believe that policy and practice is beginning to change collaterally with and within Iowa's Department of Human Services, Department of Public Health, Department of Education, Juvenile Court Services, Early Childhood Programs, communities, agencies, service providers and business. The hope the community has to offer families various opportunities for change has become a reality.

For more information contact Lauri Carlson, community collaboration coordinator, at 1710 Gary Avenue, Spirit Lake, IA 51360; phone 712-336-2555. Carlson can also be reached by email: lcarlso@dhs.state.ia.us.

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