NORTH CAROLINA FAMILY-CENTERED MEETINGS PROJECT

ANNUAL REPORT TO THE NORTH CAROLINA DIVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES
FISCAL YEAR 2003 – 2004

SUMMARY AND PROJECTIONS

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SUMMARY AND PROJECTIONS

The North Carolina Family-Centered Meetings (NC-FCM) Project commenced July 2002 and now has completed its second year of operations. The Project is mandated to provide training in family-centered meetings to North Carolina counties that are part of the state’s Multiple Response System (MRS). This year 42 counties joined MRS, bringing the total of participating counties to 52, a majority of North Carolina’s 100 counties. Over the next year or two, it is likely that the remaining 48 counties will join MRS.

Child and Family Services Review and the Multiple Response System

The Multiple Response System (MRS) is integrated into the state’s Program Improvement Plan generated in response to the federal Child and Family Services Review. MRS builds on the strengths identified in the federal review and addresses the areas for improvement. MRS is a child welfare reform that permits county Departments of Social Services to respond in a more flexible manner to reports of children in need of protection. MRS has gained momentum across the United States and has been called alternative response, dual track, and differential response in various states. As an alternative to forensic investigations, MRS counties in North Carolina can use a family assessment response to support and stabilize selected cases of neglect or dependency. The aim is to reduce adversarial relations between child welfare and families, to create plans tailored to individual families, and to utilize the families’ strengths and community supports. A key MRS component is including families in formulating service plans. This component addresses one of the areas requiring improvement as identified in the Child and Family Services Review: the need to increase the involvement of parents and children in case planning.

Family-Centered Meetings

To increase the involvement of families in child welfare service planning, MRS specifies two types of family-centered meetings. These are (a) Child & Family Team Meetings (CFTs) which include the family, extended family, and community in service planning and (b) Shared Parenting Meetings which bring together the biological parents, foster parents, and worker to partner on meeting the needs of children placed in care. In regards to high/intensive or moderate risk cases, the MRS policy stipulates that the worker have an initial discussion with the parents about holding a CFT within seven days after a case decision and that the worker schedule the meeting no later than 30 days after the case decision. This means that workers are expected to invite a large number of families and their community services to attend CFTs.

A family-centered approach to meetings is to be used across a range of intervention points in child welfare. For this reason, the NC-FCM Project does not offer training in one specific model but instead provides training in practices that widen the circle in child welfare decision making. The Project draws on the philosophy of family group conferencing because of its attention to promoting the leadership of the family in service planning, creating culturally safe forums for decision making, and fostering partnerships among family, community, and public agencies.
In order to promote the participation of families across the spectrum of child welfare involvement, the Project offers training in family-centered meetings that takes into account the situation of the children and their family and the stage of child welfare work. The Project orients Social Services and their community partners to family-centered meetings and provides training to workers making referrals for family-centered meetings and to facilitators who organize and convene the meetings.

**State-Level MRS Evaluations**

The MRS legislation stipulated that an evaluation of the outcomes of the original 10 pilots be submitted to the General Assembly. This year two state-level evaluations of MRS were carried out: one by the North Carolina Division of Social Services on MRS activities and the other by Duke University’s Center for Child and Family Policy on MRS outcomes.

Based on the findings from the original pilot counties, the two reports made the following points on Child & Family Team (CFT) Meetings:

- CFTs create a respectful setting in which families can shape their service plan.
- CFTs promote collaboration between Social Services and their community partners.
- CFTs require time to organize, and their facilitation poses challenges for some counties.
- More training on CFTs needs to be provided to Social Services workers and their community partners.
- Additional funding is required to secure an adequate level of facilitators.

**County Training Assessments**

The NC-FCM Project carried out two training assessments with the original set of pilot counties in the late summer/early fall of 2002 and 2003. The intent of these assessments was to orient the training toward the interests and experiences of the participating counties.

As summarized in last year’s annual report, the county participants who took part in the 2002 training assessment primarily highlighted the challenges that they faced in order to carry out MRS. In regards to the CFTs, they worried about their lack of resources and facilitators and wondered if the meetings’ benefits would outweigh their time requirements.

The following year in the 2003 assessments, the areas of focus had shifted now that the counties had begun or were well into implementing CFTs. Although, counties each developed their own approach to holding CFTs, a number of themes emerged across these assessment interviews. The county feedback corroborates and extends the CFT findings reported by NC Division of Social Services and the Center for Child and Family Policy.

- The extent of CFT implementation varied widely among the pilot counties. Nevertheless, making CFTs a mandatory service for MRS counties appears to have prompted participating Departments of Social Services (DSSs) to initiate this service.
This meant that counties needed to offer the service to family members who could accept or decline the invitation to attend.

- In compliance with MRS policy, counties used various strategies to secure independent facilitator who did not carry the family on their caseload. Some counties had designated facilitator positions, others rotated the role of facilitator among workers, others contracted out this role, and yet others were considering securing community-based volunteers or staff from other units.

- The counties reported that securing independent facilitators, who did not carry the family on their caseload, made for better meetings. Their capacity to designate independent facilitators depended on their resources. They recognized that an independent facilitator was needed not only for higher risk cases but also for those with greater worker-family tensions, larger meeting groups, and in general more complexity.

- The counties had limited facilitator time and, thus, opted to divide the work between the referring social worker who carried out the majority of preparations and the facilitator who convened and facilitated the meeting.

- Holding CFTs outside of DSS offices helped to defuse tensions and led to families requesting further meetings. This practice made it all the more important to assess how to organize meetings so as to safeguard both family and worker participants.

- Counties asked for training on how to handle domestic-violence situations and wanted clear state policies on CFTs in these cases.

- Counties found that they needed some time to build a relationship with families prior to convening a CFT. This helped to clarify the purpose of the meeting and engage both family and community in the process.

- To engage community partners effectively in CFTs, DSSs needed to offer a clear purpose for holding the meeting and community education on the process. Involving community partners enhanced coordination among services, enlarged available community resources for families, and at times led to earlier DSS case closures when other services could support families.

- CFTs helped families feel affirmed and centralized their role in making service plans. The result was more creative and supported plans, enhanced family-community-agency relationships, and a clearer demonstration of a reasonable effort to keep children with their families or kin.

- The counties wanted to develop their skills in both facilitating CFTs and coordinating them. They also wanted their community partners to be oriented to the process.

- For the most part, tracking and evaluation of CFTs was limited to counties’ completing the MRS form distributed by NC DSS.

- To new counties starting CFTs, the pilot counties advised them to create a facilitator position likely to attract and retain the people most likely to succeed at facilitating and to make sure that they give themselves and others enough time to learn about how to take part in CFTs.

**Emerging Themes in Training**

The Project’s capacity to track issues emerging about CFTs was further enhanced by culling themes from training sessions. The themes reflect both contextual issues affecting CFT
delivery and training issues affecting the engagement of the participants. The following themes concern issues raised by training participants for the most part in the spring of 2004:

- Training participants viewed CFTs as getting back to the “roots” of social work and creating a collaborative approach to intervention.
- County participants were critical of state policies which they viewed as impeding good CFT practice.
- Initially, counties focused on how staffing limited their capacity to carry out CFTs. With experience and training, their focus shifted to how they could best facilitate the meetings.
- Community partners at the trainings broadened the focus beyond narrow CPS concerns and challenged the child welfare workers to explain why CFTs would enrich practice. This raised the commitment of both the community partners and the social workers.
- Over the sessions, the trainers enriched the curricula by broadening the perspective beyond DSS, fostering interaction and practice, and encouraging expression of both frustrations and successes.
- County participants were critical of some state policies which they viewed as impeding good CFT practice. This was particularly the case for MRS timeframes that they saw as compelling them to hold more meetings than they had the capacity to handle, according to times set by policy rather than the needs of the family, and prior to adequate preparation of the family and community partners.

**Development of Practice Guidance**

The training assessments in 2002 and 2003 found that the counties were confused about MRS policies and how these applied to CFTs. It should be noted that NC DSS held regular meetings with the original pilot counties to clarify and strengthen MRS policies. In addition, the NC-FCM Project in conjunction with NC DSS formulated practice guidelines on family-centered meetings. The guidelines include (a) MRS policy worked out by NC DSS with the original pilot counties and (b) a family-centered approach to carrying out meetings with families receiving child welfare services.

**Training Development**

Utilizing principles of adult learning, the curricula were developed so as exemplify learner-centered training; this served to parallel and reinforce principles of family-centered practice. Input from training participants was used to refine the curricula and aid transfer of learning to work settings. The training team developed the training plan on the basis of the county assessments, consultation with the NC Division of Social services, and feedback from county Department of Social Services (DSS) training liaisons and participants. This year, the three original curricula were enhanced and two of these on facilitation were combined into one. Two other curricula were added to the offerings.
Training Curricula

Four formal trainings were offered as well as more informal training at the request of the counties. The training sessions were delivered in various regions of the state.

Setting the Stage for Family-Centered Meetings: An Agency and Community Orientation. This one-day training was designed to provide an overview of the family-centered meetings process, emphasizing family involvement in decision making. The primary audience consisted of county DSS personnel, although some registrants from partnering community agencies such as mental health, schools, and domestic violence treatment and prevention were also able to attend.

Caution: Family Meeting Ahead! A Guide for Social Workers Attending Family Meetings. This one-day skills-based training for the case-carrying social worker grew out of concerns from both workers and managers that workers needed support and training for their roles in the family meetings process beyond basic orientation. Topics at this training included preparing families and community members for the meetings, volatility assessments to ensure safety in the process, and guidance for how to participate in the meetings themselves. This training was delivered to DSS workers and supervisors.

Anchors Away! How to Navigate Family Meetings: The Role of the Facilitator. Facilitation training was expanded to four days based on the training evaluation from last year. Participants were usually DSS workers and supervisors who had been designated as facilitators, at least on an interim basis, as counties moved forward with MRS planning. Emphasis was placed on the facilitator’s neutral role and managing difficult group dynamics.

The ABCs of Including Children in Family-Centered Meetings. Advanced training in child inclusion was also a response to requests from training participants. Participants were interested in learning ways to involve children in the process while ensuring their safety and giving them a stronger voice in planning and decision making. This one-day training was delivered to both workers and supervisors.

By-Request Training. Informal training provided on-going reinforcement and further development of facilitation skills. It included facilitating CFTs with DSS personnel, email and phone consultation, and the NC-FCM listserv.

Training Events, Participants, and County Representation

During the year, training events were held for each of the four curricula. The large majority of sessions were held in the new calendar year when the 42 new counties began training. For each training curriculum are given below the number of training events, the participants that attended, and the number of counties represented.
### Number of Events, Participants, and Counties Represented for Each Training Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Curricula</th>
<th>No. of Events</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>No. of Counties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting the Stage (orientation)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caution (referring worker training)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchors Away (facilitator training)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABCs (inclusion of children)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
<td><strong>893</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
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### Training Participant Satisfaction

In general, participants rated favorably their experience at the trainings. This was the case for each training curriculum. A total of 663 participants completed a Participant Satisfaction Form at the end of the trainings. In giving an overall rating of their training, nearly 78% checked “very high” or “high” while 22.3 checked “moderate” or “low.” The average rating was “high.”

#### Overall Perception of Training for All Sessions (N = 663)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Very High (1)</th>
<th>High (2)</th>
<th>Moderate (3)</th>
<th>Low (4)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall rating of training experience</td>
<td>642</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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</table>

Note. Only includes Participant Satisfaction Forms through May 6, 2004.
When asked about whether the training significantly increased their understanding of the topic, 86% agreed. A notable finding was that prior to attending the training, nearly 32% disagreed that they had been eager to come; after the training was over, the percentage of those disagreeing had more than halved to 15.1%. Thus, a large proportion of the participants started the sessions as unwilling participants often worried about the pile-up of work on their desks; by the time the course was over, many of these involuntary attendees had become interested participants.

Feedback on Training for All Sessions (\(N = 663\))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (1)</th>
<th>Agree (2)</th>
<th>Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (4)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My understanding of the topic(s) has significantly increased</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>53.7%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to attending the training, I was eager to come</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>47.9%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now that the training is over, I’m glad I attended</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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</table>

Note. Only includes Participant Satisfaction Forms through May 6, 2004.

Dissemination of Learning

The NC FCM Project has disseminated its learning about family-centered meetings through a number of avenues:

- **Video.** A video was created with facilitators about their experiences with CFTs. It was a way of sharing what they have learned about facilitating meetings with training participants.

- **Presentations and Publications.** Project staff in conjunction with others from North Carolina made conference presentations on family-centered meetings. In addition, they shared their findings through professional publication and on the Project’s webpage.

Recommendations for Expanding Training Curricula

In addition to maintaining the current four curricula and the by-request training, the training team identified some areas for expansion of the training.

*Facilitator Forums. The role of the facilitator is unique and sometimes isolating, as there are often only one or two people in an agency setting working in this capacity. By sponsoring facilitator forums, informal gatherings for sharing case experiences and dilemmas across*
county lines, the Project can assist in the ongoing professional development of both new and experienced facilitators.

**Strengthen Transfer-of-Learning (TOL) Activities and Technical Assistance.** Although the training events are solid in and of themselves, more can be done in the way of non-classroom oriented coaching and pre/post training event learning. Sending materials prior to training events, homework assignments between training events, and other TOL techniques need more development.

**Add New Training Event.** A core training event to add to the menu of existing events is a day-long planning session for managers and administrators. The current classroom training events are geared toward practice and are often not attended by managers and administrators. Training participants (including the few managers and administrators in attendance) repeatedly raised programmatic concerns that need to be sorted out at the local level. Program development challenges such as staffing, funding, system of referrals, integration within existing services, training and technical assistance, and getting community buy-in can inhibit good practice if not planned for and managed. This training day would be structured as in-depth consultation and shared learning in which administrators and managers would leave with their own written plans for local implementation and program development.

**NC DSS Needs Assessment and Training Plan for 2004-2005**

In May 2004, NC DSS distributed to the 52 MRS counties a survey regarding their needs for training in the fall of 2004. In regards to family-centered meetings, the survey found that counties reported high levels of staff requiring the four training modules. The total number of staff reported to require training was 2845. The highest demand at 995 training participants was for the ABCs, a new offering that was only being piloted in June 2004, and, thus, not available previously. It is geared toward those who had already received the prior trainings and want to advance their skills on including children at CFTs. Because facilitators often wish to keep their skills honed and remain connected with each other and the NC-FCM Project, the demand for this session is likely to remain firm. The second highest at 804 participants was for Caution, which is oriented to the referring social workers and given the turn-over among child protection staff, is likely to stay chronically in demand. The third highest at 721 was for Setting the Stage, the orientation to family-centered meetings and the prerequisite for the other training modules. Its demand should stay high with new workers and community partners requiring orientation. And Anchors Away was understandably the module with the lowest reported need at 325. This training is geared toward those who will facilitate CFTs and, thus, its audience is substantially smaller than for either Setting the Stage or Caution. Its need should remain strong in order to prepare those designated to serve as facilitators now and in the future.

Given its commitment to promoting family meetings, NC DSS has requested that the fall training set readying facilitators as the priority. This means utilizing the available trainer hours to deliver Setting the Stage (the prerequisite for Anchors Away) and Anchors Away (facilitator training) and delaying delivery of Caution (for referring workers) and ABCs (advanced facilitation training). In response, the NC FCM Project will integrate components of Caution into Setting the Stage and Anchors Away.
Funding for Facilitators

The need for facilitator training is likely to grow by the new calendar year. Currently NC DSS is asking counties to bid for Title IV-E Waiver status. A prime possibility for use of these funds is hiring facilitators. This is a positive development given the need for increased facilitator funding as documented in the reports by the NC Division of Social Services and Duke University’s Center for Child and Family Policy and in the county assessments and trainer summaries by the NC-FCM Project.

Conclusions and Projections

In summary, over the past two years the demand for training in family-centered meetings has steadily grown. This is for multiple reasons: (a) the expansion of MRS counties in North Carolina, (b) the importance that the federal Child and Family Service Reviews place on including families in child welfare service planning, (c) the MRS timeframes on holding CFTs, (d) the rising support for CFTs by social workers and community partners, and (e) the identified benefits for families. Another reason is the favorable response of counties to the NC-FCM Project trainings. Over the next years, the demand for training should continue to rise once the remaining 48 counties enter MRS and counties are able to access Title IV-E moneys for funding facilitators.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This year another 42 counties joined the Multiple Response System (MRS), bringing the total of participating counties to 52. This means that over half of North Carolina’s 100 counties entered MRS. We wish to congratulate the North Carolina Division of Social Services for moving forward this major child welfare reform and the participating counties for taking on this challenge. We agree that responding flexibly to families and including them and community organizations in service planning will make for safer children and stronger families. We are honored to have been invited by NC Division of Social Services to provide the training on family-centered meetings, and we respect the effort that so many families, county Social Services, and community partners have put into making MRS work.

At the NC Division of Social Services, we must especially recognize the contributions of Rebecca Brigham, Ruth Harrison, JoAnn Lamm, and Tony Troop. At the county Social Services, we extend thanks to the county liaisons who helped us develop the training schedule and locate training sites and to the meeting facilitators who so willingly shared their expertise and enthusiasm in our video on family-centered meetings. Over the course of the year, our work was sustained and invigorated by the many training participants who at times reluctantly signed up for training but then threw themselves wholeheartedly into the learning process.

At NC State University, we extend a note of appreciation to Dean Linda Brady for her unswerving commitment to community engagement, our college’s Office of Research for guiding us through the contract process, and Jim Alchediak for so willingly sharing his technical expertise on making our video.

In the NC Family-Centered Meetings Project, we are extremely fortunate to have such competent, dedicated, and good-willed staff. Our training coordinator, Cherie Spehar, always offers a brightness of spirit that engages staff and training participants alike; our training developer, Teresa Turner, skillfully molds our trainings so that they are informative, fun, and sensitive to county dynamics; our project coordinator, Amy Coppedge, is renown across the state for tactfully straightening out confused training registrants and keeping us all on track; our trainer Kara Allen-Eckard diplomatically translates her prior experience in Washington State into the context of North Carolina; our trainer Billy Poindexter has one story or another up his sleeve and helps us roll with the punches; our project assistants, Melissa McCurry and Stacy Gunter, ensured that we kept our heads afloat as we dealt with a wave of new counties, and our research assistant, Craig Stone, made it possible for us to get the data analyzed for this report, enhance our website, and complete our video. Thank you!

We have listed below so many of you who have supported us throughout this year. Acknowledgments are never fully complete so we ask your indulgence in forgiving us for our oversights.

Dr. Joan Pennell
Principal Investigator and Project Director
June 2004
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Pheon Beal
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Tony Troop
Sara Anderson Mims
Hope Hunt
Korri Mosley
Gail McClain
Sandra Sink
Clarence Lamb

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Social Work
Rebecca Brigham

NC State University
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Dean Linda Brady
Dr. Matthew Zingraff
Dr. Joan Pennell
Cherie Spehar
Amy Coppedge
Teresa Turner
Billy Poindexter
Kara Allen Eckard
Craig Stone
Stacy Gunter
Melissa McCurry
James Alchediak
Linda “Elsie” Curtis
Amanda Tueting
Carolyn Phillips

Catawba County DSS
Cyndy Benson
Billy Poindexter
Melissa Riddle
Beth Brandes
Bobby Boyd

Chatham County DSS
Milile Enos

Cherokee County DSS
Lisa Davis

Clay County DSS
Barbara Ford

Cleveland County DSS
Jane Shooter

Craven County DSS
Hannah French

Currituck County DSS
Vickie Moore
Davidson County DSS
Paula Sink Harrison

Davie County DSS
Marcheta Williams

Duplin County DSS
Susan Sanderson

Durham County DSS
Diane Wright
Chuck Harris

Franklin County DSS
Patrick Betancourt

Gates County DSS
Colleen K. Turner

Graham County DSS
Bobby Cagle

Guilford County DSS
Joyce White
Kimberly Miley-Hughey
Marc Morgan
Dan Reppert

Halifax County DSS
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Harnett County DSS
Cindy Minton

Haywood County DSS
Theresa Phillips

Henderson County DSS
Karen Couch

Iredell County DSS
Lisa York

Jackson County DSS
Robert Cochran

Johnston County DSS
Joe Lansinger

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Kelly Smith

Lincoln County DSS
Susan McCracken

Macon County DSS
Wesley Price

Martin County DSS
Vickee M. Manning

Mecklenburg County DSS
Donna Fayko

Moore County DSS
Debbie L. Brigman

Nash County DSS
Lynn Wilson
Teresa Baker
Brenda Matthews

New Hanover County DSS
Wanda Neidig

Orange County DSS
Denise C. Shaffer

Pamlico County DSS
Debbie S. Green

Pasquotank County DSS
Kathy Ford

Person County DSS
Carole Thomas

Polk County DSS
Lou Parton

Scotland County DSS
Sandy Skamperle
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