

CHAPTER 7

UNION COUNTY, FLORIDA

Public agencies and private provider organizations in Union County, Florida, collaborated with each other and a community advisory board as part of a State-initiated reform effort. Other reform efforts included separating the investigation and protective services functions within the Florida Department of Children and Families and providing workers with additional training.

OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (CPS)

In Florida, CPS is a State-supervised system, administered through district offices. The District 3 office, located in Gainesville, is responsible for the provision of services in 11 counties, including Union County.

The District 3 Department of Children and Families (DCF) office separately administers the investigative and protective services units. The CPS investigator gathers the facts of the alleged maltreatment so that a determination of maltreatment or risk may be made and services may be recommended. The family safety counselor provides ongoing monitoring and support to the family, both during and following the investigation. The counselors do not directly provide services to the family, but serve as case managers to ensure that the family receives the support that is necessary to comply with DCF and court-ordered requirements. The family safety counselor also provides feedback regarding the parents' level of cooperation with DCF, any court-ordered requirements, consistent participation with required services, and appropriate parenting behaviors.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CPS AGENCY

According to Florida law, all reports that allege child maltreatment must be investigated, and each new report requires a new investigation, typically within 24 hours. Any additional reports regarding the same child are added to the initial report and changes the response time from 24 hours to immediate. This change in response time is made when allegations indicate that the child is in immediate danger; the family might flee with the child; the abuse or neglect took place in a care giving institution (unless the institution was subsequently closed); the abuse or neglect was committed by a DCF employee; or there were other special conditions or warranting facts.

The Union County Sheriff's Office is charged with monitoring all referrals that allege child maltreatment. If the sheriff's office determines that the case is not serious, the DCF child protective investigator conducts the investigation and submits a report back to the sheriff. The sheriff's office relies on the judgment of the investigator to determine whether the support of the sheriff's office is needed as a backup to a call. The sheriff's office typically accompanies the investigator on any case that involves a child fatality, sexual abuse, or serious physical abuse. All referrals are reviewed, and the review is documented by the sheriff's office, regardless of whether the office participated in the investigation or not.

Services offered by DCF include protective investigation, protective supervision, foster care, and adoptive home supervision. The protective investigation that results from a report is closed when the case is determined to be either founded or unfounded. Once a case is determined to be founded, the child enters protective supervision and the family is either referred for non-DCF services through collaborative partners, for DCF services, or for no services in some cases. Many children in Florida with an open DCF case remain with their families. Some are placed in foster care where they receive additional services and either return to their families, remain in foster care, or enter adoptive home supervision. See Exhibit 7.1, Entry and Service Pattern Flow Charts for a graphic depiction of these services.

REFORM EFFORTS

The following sections provide an overview of the key reforms of the District 3 DCF operations that evolved from a collaborative model. These reform efforts include the separation of investigation and protective services functions, an online training system, a community advisory board (called the Alliance); and collaborative partnerships with a number of community agencies.

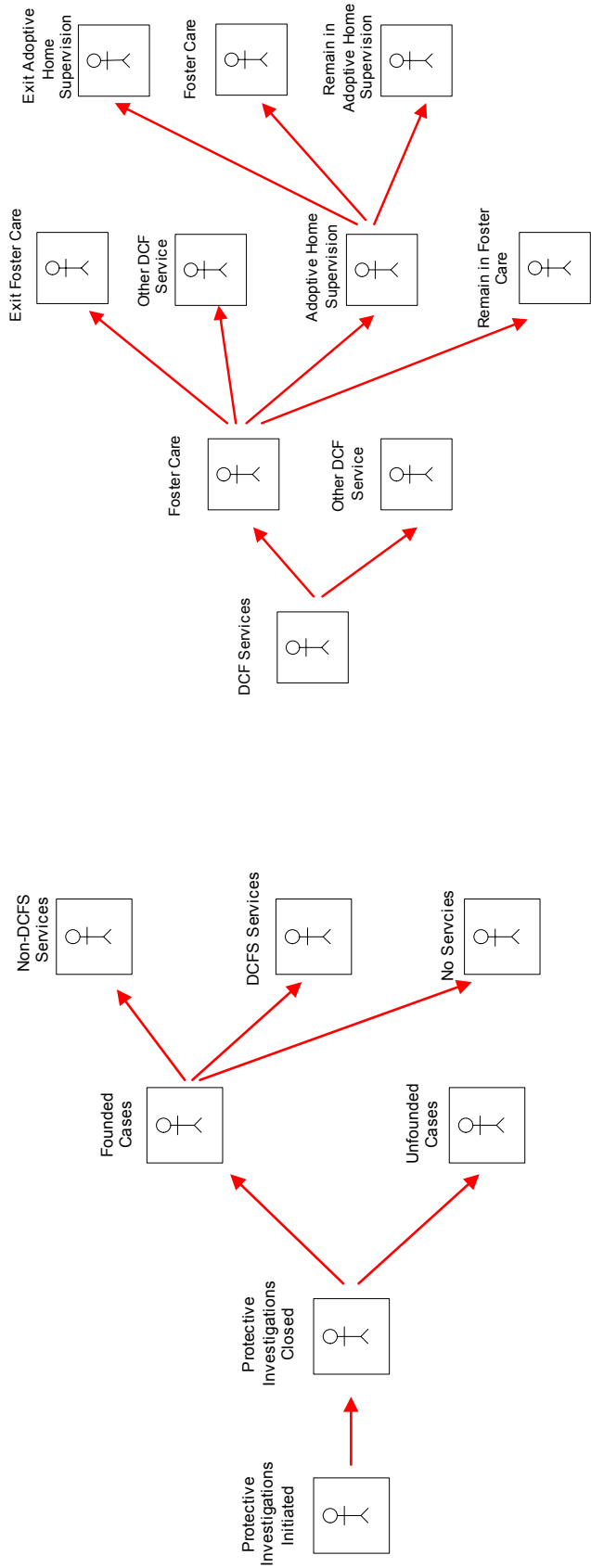
Background of Reform Efforts

Interviews with DCF administration and key representatives of their collaborative partners indicated that the reform efforts were driven by efforts to manage scarce resources to best serve 11 rural counties. In addition, the State government wanted to encourage privatization and increase accountability for DCF operations.

One of the background issues has been the privatization of DCF functions. Opinions of the benefits and costs of this reform, as well as the viability of such a change, varied widely in discussions that were held during the site visit.

- There was a common perception that privatization would result in cost savings. In fact, DCF administration suggested that privatization would likely result in higher costs.
- There was a consensus among the District 3 DCF and collaborative representatives that a cookie-cutter approach was not beneficial to the communities and was a waste of needed resources. Rather, comprehensive needs assessments were thought to be required for every child and family who entered into the system.
- It was anticipated that the private sector would be a more effective advocate for obtaining the resources. However, the funding of private service contracts has been unstable and has resulted in inconsistent service provision. This factor has been most apparent in rural communities.
- Most stakeholders agreed that direct service provision was the most appropriate function for private providers. Many stakeholders also believed that case monitoring and case management could be appropriately provided by private contractors. There was disagreement, however, regarding the ability of the private sector to properly conduct investigations. Some stakeholders believed that law enforcement was best suited for

Exhibit 7.1
Entry and Service Pattern
Flow Charts



conducting investigations, as these agencies had existing mechanisms for such activities. The use of law enforcement would enable DCF staff to function in supportive roles as social workers, as opposed to acting as legal enforcers. Under this model, the local DCF would function as contract managers and monitors. Retaining this mechanism for local contract management was considered vital, as an attempt to manage local operations at the State level could be fraught with logistical difficulties.

A second force that encouraged many of these reform initiatives was the desire of the State government to increase accountability within DCF operations for providing the appropriate protections to maltreated children and children at risk of maltreatment.

Other than the push for privatization, the Kayla legislation was the single most often mentioned reform effort. The Kayla McKean Child Protection Act was enacted during May 1999 and was named for Kayla McKean, a 6-year-old girl who was beaten to death by her father following several referrals to DCF. The purpose of the legislation was to strengthen child safety standards and require State agencies to coordinate their efforts to prevent child abuse. The statewide impact of the law was an increase in the number of calls to the hotline every year. In fact, District 3 experienced a 62 percent increase in referrals since the legislation was passed. Specific requirements of the legislation included those listed below.

- DCF must investigate all allegations referred by judges, teachers, or other school officials. It also defines judges as mandated reporters.
- DCF must assign one caseworker to investigate all referrals that involve a particular child. The department also must maintain a master file that contains information on all reports for a particular child, and this file must be made available to all DCF staff, judges, and community professionals who contribute to an investigation, to ensure proper communication and coordination among all involved parties.
- DCF must contact local law enforcement agencies with regard to all maltreatment referrals and work cooperatively with them to conduct investigations.
- Every investigation must include a face-to-face contact with the alleged victim, other siblings, parents, and other adults in the household.
- Any adult in the household who fails to report substantiated maltreatment that had taken place in the household will be charged with a third-degree felony.
- A local and State Death Review Committee must be established and operated under the Department of Health.
- An external entity must be charged with monitoring the existing State-operated abuse hotline for efficiency and effectiveness.

All of the stakeholders unequivocally agreed that the task of protecting children from harm is important and that the safety of children is assured when all parties within a community work together. Each stakeholder brought a unique perspective shaped by his particular area of expertise. DCF has the responsibility of balancing all concerns and arriving at a determination to ensure the safety of a referred child. In the perspective of some, the accountability-based reforms had the effect of diluting DCF's authority, while continuing to place the risk of a failure to provide adequate protection with DCF.

Objectives

Discussions with DCF administration, case managers, caseworkers, and a wide array of collaborative partners revealed that many program features were designed to facilitate strong collaborative networks among the local DCF office, the State DCF office, and the many local agencies and private programs that served children and families in District 3.

Practice Components

The following reform initiatives individually and collectively worked to enhance both agency partners and family empowerment in their relationships with DCF.

Separation of Investigative and Protective Services Functions

The goal of separating investigative and protective functions is to increase specialization of skills and facilitate the development of specialized relationships with the family. The intention of this initiative was to facilitate the objectivity required to effectively investigate a maltreatment allegation while also providing the support that families often require. One of the challenges of this structure has been communication between units. Home Safe Net, a computerized documentation system, was developed to help facilitate effective communication between the CPS units.

Home Safe Net

The system is a repository of case-level information for all reports of maltreatment under the jurisdiction of District 3 DCF that were referred by the State hotline for investigative or protective services provision. The first phase of the system has been operational throughout District 3. Once the system becomes fully operational, a case record will be opened by the State hotline, including details about the referral and will assign a priority status for carrying out the Child Safety Assessment. The record will be picked up by the District DCF and the agency will respond accordingly. All information regarding the case will be logged into the system on an ongoing basis by the assigned caseworker. Information about any child, caregiver, perpetrator, or other involved individual will be available through a search by name or address.

District 3 was the first in the State to pilot Home Safe Net. The data system was originally developed to meet the needs of AFCARS and included data from three legacy systems. The new system provided a central location to meet all of the information needs at the Federal, State, and local levels. The State's goal is to provide a means by which children who were served by DCF and other service providers can be tracked across the State. The goal of the local DCF is to facilitate the accountability of the agency and caseworkers to families who enter the system to receive services.

Online Training

An online training system was developed to supplement the traditional classroom training that was offered to caseworkers by DCF. This system was designed by the State DCF and has been in use for approximately 18 months. Updates to the program are instantly integrated into the system, and trainers are notified of these updates by email.

The development of the online training system occurred in conjunction with a growing need for certification of CPS caseworkers. The goal of providing online training for certain components is to reserve classroom time for those components that are best taught with face-to-face interaction.

Community-Based Advisory Board

District 3 DCF consults on a regular basis with a community board, the North Central Florida Community Alliance, for community input about issues that impact the agency's efforts to promote the welfare of children in the district. The board was mandated by the State legislature; representatives were nominated by the county commissioner's office, the school board, and the local sheriff's office. The board had 25 community representatives at the time of the site visit.

The primary purpose of the Alliance is to provide community input, in an advisory role. The objectives of the Alliance are to improve outcomes for children in foster care and to ensure that the agency meets standards as defined by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). DCF's objective for the Alliance is to develop targeted projects to support the agency in serving youth in the community.

Collaborative Partnerships

The move toward privatization, as well as the Kayla legislation, resulted in a number of collaborations among DCF and community agencies and social service programs. The following sections describe several of these partnerships that have evolved in recent years.

Law Enforcement

The purpose of the mandated law enforcement referral review is to ensure that local law enforcement agencies are made aware of serious maltreatment cases that require an immediate response to protect the child. For the most part, law enforcement officials report that this partnership works well. Occasionally, there have been differences of opinion between DCF and law enforcement regarding recommendations to the court; however, the agencies typically work in a close and cooperative partnership. The sheriff's office generally considers maltreatment cases to be the purview of DCF, unless there is a clear indication of criminal activity.

Dependency Drug Court

The Dependency Drug Court is a program offered by the 8th Judicial Circuit. This circuit covers approximately one-half of District 3, including Union County. The Dependency Drug Court is a specialty court used when a dependency petition is filed and the caregiver has experienced substance abuse. Participation in the Dependency Drug Court is a means by which a parent, after successfully completing the program, can demonstrate readiness for the return of his or her child. This option requires less time than traditional service options. In addition to substance abuse treatment, parents who participate in Dependency Drug Court attend parenting classes, anger management classes, and other services as appropriate to their particular issues. The phases of the program are listed below.

- The first, intensive phase of the program, which lasts approximately 90–120 days, requires participation for a minimum of 4 times per day, 4 times per week. This phase requires that the parent participate in treatment groups and drug testing. The parent remains in Phase I until he or she is able to maintain sobriety. During this phase,

treatment staff, DCF, and court representatives meet weekly to evaluate the participant's progress. Participants are provided with case management to aid the participant in finding employment, affordable housing, and other services as needed.

- There are three additional phases, with each phase consisting of less frequent requirements for participation in treatment over a longer duration. In the final phase, Phase IV, the children are returned to the home and the parent graduates from the program. Upon graduation, former participants can take part in a peer mentoring program to support new program entrants. Participants enter the program in cohorts and generally move through the program in groups. This format encourages the formation of strong cohesion among group members who provide support for one another and hold one another accountable for their choices.

The program was modeled after the Adult Drug Court, which was created for felons. The Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health program office within DCF provided funding to create the Dependency Drug Court. The same funds were used to create a Juvenile Drug Court. The court is funded by both Federal and State monies, primarily from an ASFA grant. The goals of the program are to support the parent in learning to live clean and sober and to help the individual to become a better parent. The program maintains the integrity of the court as a judicial body, while providing the support and encouragement for parents to make the changes necessary to resume their parenting responsibilities.

Guardian Ad Litem

The Guardian Ad Litem serves as an advocate for the best interests of a child in court dependency petitions. A small number of paid administrative staff and volunteer advocates staff the office. When DCF brings a dependency case to court, the court appoints a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL). The GAL attends all court events and mediation sessions and has contact with the child at least once per month. The GAL ensures that the child's interests are represented in the court system for all dependency cases; networks with all parties to the dependency petition and supporting agencies to gather pertinent information; and makes recommendations to the court to serve the child's best interests.

Child Protection Team

The Child Protection Team (CPT) is a medically-based, multidisciplinary group of professionals operating through the University of Florida's Department of Pediatrics. The CPT reviews all maltreatment allegations and provides medical evaluations for allegations of physical and sexual abuse, consultation to recommend services, court testimony, and psychological evaluations. All allegations that go to the State hotline are screened by the CPT. Cases that are screened out by the CPT can be referred back to the CPT by DCF for evaluation, if appropriate. The primary goal of the CPT is to provide a medical assessment of allegations of child abuse and a formalized multidisciplinary risk assessment for maltreatment referrals.

Nurturing Program

The Nurturing Program operates in an area that encompasses 16 counties and includes all of the counties in District 3. The program focuses on parenting education and offers intensive home visits. An important criterion for a family's entry into the program is low risk for maltreatment. Most referrals are received from the investigative unit of CPS; Healthy Start often refers cases

that require additional prevention services to the Nurturing Program. The average duration of service delivery is 8–18 months. A caseworker typically carries 10–12 families simultaneously and the program serves 400–600 families annually. In addition to home visiting, the Nurturing Program provides group counseling in drug treatment centers, maternal health facilities, teen pregnancy centers, and teen parenting programs in high schools.

Family Builders

Family Builders is a private program that provides targeted mental health services to DCF, other public agencies, and private individuals. The program provides counseling, emergency financial assistance, therapeutic activities, and case management.

The role of Family Builders in DCF cases follows two general trajectories. The first is to facilitate preservation for families whose child is at risk of removal from the home. The second is to facilitate reunification for families after the child has been removed from the home for more than 30 days. Family Builder's goals are three fold—to preserve the family unit when possible, to optimize family functioning for families of at-risk children, and to facilitate successful reunification following removal by DCF.

Meridian Behavioral Health Care

Meridian is a private program that provides complete behavioral health care to individuals and families through a variety of funding sources, including DCF. In addition to child and family counseling, it provides substance abuse programs and psychological assessments. It also provides comprehensive needs assessments that incorporate mental health and substance abuse assessments, home visits, and in-school observation. Previously, Meridian provided these services directly; however, services are currently contracted out to private therapists. The goal of Meridian is to provide a single source for obtaining a wide variety of mental and behavioral health services.

Peaceful Paths

Peaceful Paths is a local program that provides shelter, counseling, and service referral to victims of domestic violence. Peaceful Paths provides an emergency shelter, a transitional housing unit, victim advocacy, counseling and support groups, adult and child domestic violence assessments, and education and outreach services. Through an interagency agreement, Peaceful Paths and DCF have outlined a mutual commitment to protect the children and the nonoffending parent in cases where they shared clients. This agreement enables communication between the agencies to ensure that the children and family are served and ensures confidentiality protections required by the respective agencies. While domestic violence shelters are considered mandatory reporters with regards to child maltreatment, confidentiality agreements restrict the shelter's ability to share information regarding the nonoffending parent. The interagency agreement enables Peaceful Paths to provide information to DCF regarding the nonoffending parent's progress in the program, including information about group counseling attendance, topics covered in counseling, child care arrangements, employment, and participation in other services.

The template for the interagency agreement arose through legislative mandate. However, the final agreement required one year of negotiation between the program and DCF to establish a basis for the partnership. The final agreement clarifies the referral process between the agencies

and defines the proper channels of communication. Ultimately, both agencies have sought to support one another in facilitating the well-being of the children and families that enter their agencies seeking services.

Results

Many positive results occurred as the above reforms were implemented. The following are some highlights of this successful work.

- The separation of the investigative and protective services functions has helped to build bridges between the agency and the family by isolating the protective functions, which were often perceived as facilitative, from the investigative functions, which were often perceived as adversarial. It has also allowed for the investigative unit to remain more objective and true to its focus and mission. The separation of the investigative and protective functions facilitates more effective service to children in need of protection.
- Supervisors have benefited from the data system as they are able to verify the status of cases opened for agency response. The workers benefit from the standardized format and central location for maintaining case-level information. At the State level of DCF, the system provides a means for tracking families who moved out of the area to avoid participating in DCF services or to evade the removal of a child from the home. It also provides a means for tracking problem service providers.
- The Alliance provides a means for the community to influence governmental agencies' services to children and families in need. Participation in the Alliance has the added advantage of educating the community about DCF's role in protecting children and serving families. This awareness facilitates a strong sense of collaboration and has resulted in the community board members serving as allies of the agency to effectively carry out its mission. The families and children served by DCF also benefit from the participation of the Alliance. The Alliance maintains a strong interest in the welfare of children in foster care.
- Collaborative partnerships with other programs and agencies have also resulted in positive reforms for the CPS system in Union County. The increased involvement of law enforcement in CPS investigations has helped to ensure the safety of DCF workers. It has also provided checks and balances to ensure that seriously endangered children receive proper protection.
- Both the Dependency Drug Court and the GAL programs benefit the judicial court and DCF by acting as a resource for monitoring the children and families at risk. DCF benefits from the nonadversarial nature of the relationship between program participants and agency representatives. The program provides an effective blend of authority and structure with support and encouragement. Families benefit from the program by addressing their problems with substance abuse, as well as issues associated with low self-esteem, employability, and parenting.

DCF has received many benefits from the programs that are involved in the reform efforts. These programs include the Child Protection Team, Nurturing Program, Family Builders, Meridian, and Peaceful Paths. Benefits include professional or medical opinions, CPS worker support, monitoring of children and families who are at risk, and service provision efficiency.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While much has been accomplished since the push for privatization began, and the legal mandates of the Kayla McKean Child Protection Act were instituted, site visit participants agreed that many more improvements could be made in the future of the agency.

Conditions that Sustain Reform

Each practice change has conditions that are important to maintain a positive reform trajectory. The following practice changes were reported by DCF staff and partners.

Separation of Investigative and Protective Services Functions

Both the investigative and the protective services units would benefit from funding for additional caseworkers. The caseload is approximately three times what the CPS supervisor consider optimal to ensure that every referral receives attention and service. The agency would also function more effectively with greater availability of services, particularly in the rural areas of the district. Specific service needs include domestic violence prevention, violence intervention, substance abuse treatment, intensive crisis counseling, private therapists, parenting training, quality child care, foster care placements (particularly therapeutic foster care), and independent living.

Home Safe Net

District 3 DCF staff discovered that a thorough understanding of the computer system was acquired only through ongoing use. Rather than providing a single training session, workers should be provided the opportunity to practice, with ongoing support of the system liaison. It was further recommended that refresher training be provided to the users when newer versions of the system are introduced. Finally, system users need a means for providing feedback to improve the system interface so that it corresponds to the logical flow of case work.

Online Training

DCF training staff recommended that the administration continue its support of the online training system in order to use training resources as efficiently as possible.

Community-Based Advisory Board

DCF administrators suggested that the first requirement to support the Alliance is a reasonable budget to fund their activities. A second recommendation is to provide the Alliance with oversight authority for the privatization efforts. One possibility would be to grant the Alliance the authority to review the performance of privatized agencies in conducting traditional DCF functions. It is important to recognize that the process of involving the community in caring for its members can be more beneficial to the community than the product of that involvement.

The following conditions in DCF collaborative partnerships were identified as areas for improvement.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officials believe that children and families in Union County would best be served with increased funding for recreational programs for pre-adolescent children and parenting programs.

Dependency Drug Court

The judicial court representative suggested that communication between agency partners must remain consistent to ensure the success of the program. In addition, while the funding for this program is recurring, it is spent quickly.

Guardian Ad Litem

The child advocates in the Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program are unpaid volunteers. There has been a move toward hiring paid staff as advocates to supplement the existing volunteer staff. The GAL representative expressed some concern that a move toward paid staff advocates may be detrimental to the functioning of the GAL program. Sufficient advocates are not always available to handle all dependency cases. GAL does a thorough job of representing those children that are most in need. If the program moves toward using paid staff advocates, those advocates may likely carry heavier caseloads. This would result in more children being represented, but not necessarily receiving the in-depth advocacy that clients have previously received.

Child Protection Team

The CPT representative suggested that the program could more effectively carry out its mission with increased resources for training and education of the CPT members, CPT support staff, and cross-training with DCF child protection investigative staff. The program would also benefit by hiring team members to provide screening in specialized areas of expertise.

Nurturing Program

The Nurturing Program representative indicated that this program could improve greatly if sufficient funds were available to hire additional workers. This enhancement would eliminate the need for a waiting list for potential clients. To adequately serve the children in District 3, DCF would need to fund the program at twice the number that it currently does. Another recommendation was to resurrect the reunification program to help smooth the transition from residential placement to the child's family. In addition, a pilot program to work with both parents while the child is in foster care was suggested.

Family Builders

Family Builders would also be better equipped to achieve their mission with adequate funding. Funding for their State and local contracts has been cut every year, forcing them to provide more services with fewer resources. The program has not received an increase in funding for the past 4 years. Additional funds would also help to attract and retain qualified mental health professionals. Family Builder's inability to do this was linked to their inability to offer potential candidates competitive salary or benefits.

Meridian Behavioral Health Care

The Meridian representative indicated that the program would benefit from funds to provide good residential and day treatment for substance abuse. Increased funds could also be used to help clients locate suitable housing and provide contingency funds through Family Builders to help stabilize families in financial crisis.

Ultimately, Meridian would be best equipped to carry out their mission with flexible funding streams. Most programs operate as fee-for-service, whereas cost reimbursement facilitates

greater flexibility in the provision of a wide array of services. Under this paradigm, Meridian staff would provide case management.

Peaceful Paths

The Peaceful Paths program director recommended sending agency advocates with the CPIs on first response calls to ensure that cases involving domestic violence receive the necessary assessments and supports as early as possible in the investigation process. Additional funding would be used to provide transportation and on-site childcare for clients.

Future Plans

The Department of Families and Children in District 3 has implemented a number of reform initiatives and innovative practices in response to legislative mandates. The mandates arose from State administrative and legislative offices' interest in the privatization of DCF operations and increased accountability within the DCF system. These program features include the separation of investigative and protective services functions, the development of a computerized case record system, the development of an online training system for caseworkers, ongoing consultation with a community advisory board, and strong collaborative partnerships with a variety of community-based agencies and private service providers.

Privatization remains the greatest unknown in the future of DCF operations. Most of the stakeholders believe that it is inevitable and discussions were focused on how the transition could be implemented to ensure that children and families continue to receive quality care. Flexible funding, with sufficient mechanisms for inflationary increases, is critical to the success of any privatization effort.

SUMMARY

While challenges existed for all of these reform initiatives, benefits were also apparent for DCF, community agencies, and children and families. The consistent factor that posed limitations for every aspect of these initiatives was insufficient or unstable funding. Rural areas like Union County were hardest hit by funding limitations. The collaborative components of the DCF District 3 operations were striking, but these collaborations existed in the rural areas out of necessity. In these areas, funded services were sparse and children and families tended to best be served when all of the stakeholders in and around the community gathered their forces and worked together to ensure that their needs are accurately identified, understood, and addressed.