

Signs of Safety in Minnesota

Early indicators of successful implementation in Child Protection Agencies

Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-focused Child Protection intervention strategy developed by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in Western Australia during the 1990s. The Signs of Safety approach was designed to give child protection practitioners a framework for engaging all persons involved in a child protection case; including professionals, family members and children. The primary goal for Signs of Safety work is the safety of children.

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Signs of Safety is one of several family engagement strategies being implemented in Minnesota. The first child protection agencies in Minnesota to implement Signs of Safety were Olmsted County and Carver County, in 1999 and 2004 respectively. In 2009, the Minnesota Department of Human Services developed a Signs of Safety training series in response to the widespread grass roots interest expressed around the state. Counties selected to participate in the initiative were Anoka, Blue Earth, Brown, Faribault, Martin, Hubbard, Isanti, Kandiyohi, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Polk, Scott, St. Louis, Wright, and Yellow Medicine. One tribal organization, Mille Lacs Band Family Services, was also selected to participate. Monthly trainings were offered via Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) and hosted by the Department of Human Services in St. Paul. Training sessions were facilitated by staff from Carver County Social Services and Connected Families, a contracted training organization located in Carver County.

Methods

In Fall 2010, Casey Family Programs contracted with Wilder Research in St. Paul to conduct a research study of the Signs of Safety training initiative offered in Minnesota. The primary goals of this research study were:

1. To assess levels of Signs of Safety implementation among child welfare organizations participating in the training initiative.

2. To determine benchmarks of implementation for Signs of Safety work in child welfare organizations.

Wilder Research staff conducted five semi-structured interviews with key project stakeholders and 14 semi-structured interviews with child protection program managers and supervisors from counties participating in the training initiative. Wilder also completed three discussion groups with social workers who had participated in the trainings. Finally, researchers attended the October session of the VPC Signs of Safety training, and conducted a review of available documents and materials on the Signs of Safety approach.

Interview findings

While most training initiative participants had been acquainted with Signs of Safety prior to the grant, levels of implementation varied widely across counties. Nearly all counties expressed a desire for more opportunities to gather and learn from one another, and for increased assistance with on-site consultation. Nearly all supervisors discussed a need for increased training related to a key Signs of Safety strategy, Appreciative Inquiry. Many also asked for help in educating and engaging community partners.

There were many differences among child protection supervisors with regard to how they were implementing Signs of Safety in their agency. Some reported that they had mandated their child protection staff to participate in the training initiative, while others had made it a voluntary opportunity. For some counties, Signs of Safety was initiated from the “bottom up,” with workers learning about the model from colleagues in other counties, and bringing that information back to their supervisors. In other counties, supervisors became interested in Signs of Safety as a new direction of Child Protection in Minnesota, and encouraged or required their staff to participate in training.

Differences also emerged in how Signs of Safety was being interpreted and incorporated. For some, the

prospect of this practice change was exciting and fostered a renewed sense of purpose among staff. For a few other staff, the early stages of implementation have been associated with strained relationships with partners, increased fragmentation of casework, and deep divisions among staff in their support for or resistance to the approach. These and other findings are discussed in greater detail in the full report.

Benchmarks

Researchers created a list of eight benchmarks that indicate early levels of success in the implementation of the Signs of Safety approach. Benchmarks are not in sequence, as it is not evident from the researchers' review that they must be achieved in a certain order. In the full report, benchmarks are followed by a list of indicators and challenges to achieving each.

Longer term benchmarks, such as increases in family satisfaction, worker retention, and reductions in child protection placements and court involvement, should be considered when Signs of Safety has been implemented in a jurisdiction for three to five years.

However, because most of the counties participating in the Minnesota training initiative had less than two years of experience or exposure to Signs of Safety, researchers focused on early benchmarks of success. The benchmarks for implementation are:

- Evolution of child protection philosophy from “professional as expert” to “professional as partner”
- Worker confidence in Signs of Safety
- Worker buy-in
- Supervisor buy-in
- Administrative leadership buy-in
- Practice sharing
- Parallel process in supervision
- Involving and educating other partners

Issues to consider

The following themes emerged during interviews with program supervisors. Signs of Safety program leaders and developers may be interested in examining these issues further as they relate to the spread of the Signs of Safety approach in Minnesota.

- Of the counties who participated in the training initiative, researchers observed that those who were earliest along in Signs of Safety implementation were more likely to rate themselves as *further* along in their understanding and integration of

the model than those counties who had more experience and exposure to Signs of Safety. This may be attributed to the fact that while the Signs of Safety tools are relatively simple and straightforward, it is using them in practice that results in the real learning and understanding of the model. Individuals who have been practicing Signs of Safety for a longer period of time are more likely to recognize the complexity of the approach and the challenges of fully integrating it into all aspects of their practice. These practitioners and supervisors are more likely to report that they have a long way to go before Signs of Safety is fully realized in their county.

- For counties who were not far along on their implementation journey, several supervisors noted that one of the barriers to implementation was related to their uncertainty about whether and to what degree the Minnesota Department of Human Services would continue to support Signs of Safety in the future. Although some counties were comfortable moving forward in implementing Signs of Safety despite their uncertainty about DHS's level of commitment, others felt they needed a full and long-term endorsement from the state before they could fully engage in the program. At the time interviews were conducted, several respondents did not perceive the state as having made this commitment.
- Several respondents remarked about the challenges of integrating Signs of Safety approaches into existing child protection protocols and practices in Minnesota. This was especially true for counties who were still in early stages of implementation, and were looking for concrete ways of integrating the model into their current processes. While it is clear that, philosophically, the Signs of Safety approach fits well within the Minnesota Practice Model, which emphasizes safety through constructive and respectful engagement of families and communities; it may be more challenging to determine how to integrate Signs of Safety practices more deeply into existing practices. One example is related to the Structured Decision Making (SDM) System, developed by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Children's Research Center, in use in all Minnesota counties. The SDM system includes several tools to assess risk, safety, and wellbeing of children and

families. A number of states such as California and Massachusetts are currently working on ways to train workers and collect evaluation data regarding a more integrated application of Signs of Safety and SDM. Going forward, it will be important to continue to examine this issue and make sure information and lessons learned are shared with child protection practitioners and supervisors.

- There is a great deal of interest in more customized training – particularly case consultation and real-time coaching with trainers from Connected Families. Child Protection organizations that had worked with Connected Families one-on-one were very pleased with the result and were hoping for more opportunities like this. However, program leaders and developers may want to consider the capacity of organizations like Connected Families to provide the kind of direct one-to-one consultation that is needed to spread and continually reinforce the Signs of Safety approach. Some counties suggested the idea of training local practitioners who demonstrate a desired level of skill and interest to serve as case consultants for other workers. This “local practice coach” approach is being used in other states like California, and may help broaden the spread of Signs of Safety by improving and increasing access to regular case consultation.

Next steps

Casey Family Programs has agreed to continue collaborating with Minnesota child welfare and other leaders to train child protection managers and practitioners in the Signs of Safety model through 2011. Based on lessons learned from the training initiative of 2010, the Minnesota Department of Human Services has redesigned their training approach to use in-person, regional meetings held at eight different sites each quarter, followed by quarterly

statewide Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) trainings held two months later. The goal is that counties hosting the regional meetings will take on a leadership role in planning and facilitating the training days. DHS and the Signs of Safety training staff from Carver County Community Social Services and Connected Families hope that this model will be a more effective approach for learning and practicing the Signs of Safety tools and techniques. The natural setting of in person regional meetings will hopefully address practitioners’ and supervisors’ discomfort with speaking and sharing information via the VPC system. The statewide follow-up VPC meetings will allow continued learning and practice sharing across regions, which was of interest to the participating initiative counties.

As trainers plan for next year, they may wish to consider the following recommendations from child protection supervisors and social workers interviewed for this study:

- Several supervisors expressed interest in receiving additional training related to Appreciative Inquiry, as well as more opportunities to interact with program developer, Andrew Turnell. Several participants attributed their own enthusiasm and passion for Signs of Safety to encounters with Turnell.
- Counties would like to learn more about how to engage and educate other professionals in the child protection services continuum, including law enforcement, county attorneys, judges, Guardians ad Litem, etc. They also requested resources and materials to support this work.
- Remote counties are concerned about accessibility for regional trainings or other kinds of gatherings, and hope that training budgets will be allocated to the more distant counties to cover additional staff time and travel costs.

For more information

This summary presents highlights of the full report *Signs of Safety in Minnesota*. For more information about this report, contact Maggie Skrypek at Wilder Research, 651-280-2694

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