Washington State
Title IV-E Waiver Evaluation

Preliminary FAR Family Survey Report:

Pilot Phase

December, 2014
Introduction

Family engagement is a key element of the Family Assessment Response (FAR) model being implemented under Washington State’s Title IV-E Waiver.¹ Children’s Administration (CA) believes that better outcomes are achieved when families are committed, active participants in case planning, assessment, and services. As part of the evaluation of FAR implementation, we are conducting a survey of FAR families to incorporate their perspectives on the FAR process and their own outcomes into our understanding of the program and its impacts.

This brief report describes the first phase of implementing these family surveys. The main goal of this pilot effort was to create the survey, recruit “veteran parents” to administer surveys via brief in-person or telephone interviews, and to pilot test the survey content and format with a group of families participating in FAR in one of the first three FAR Offices.

The term “veteran parents” refers to individuals with previous experience with CPS. These parents have been through the child welfare system in one way or the other and now act as advocates for other parents now involved. These parents offer a unique and valuable perspective. Veteran parents were involved throughout the process in helping us identify important survey content areas, assisting in refining survey questions, and in conducting the interviews. Children’s Administration and the TriWest Group (TriWest) evaluation team see the partnership with veteran parents as important in several ways. First, it underscores the inherent respect and value with which we view families. Second, it incorporates the vital perspectives of individuals involved in Child Protective Services into the formulation of evaluation questions as well as the interpretation of findings. Finally, we hope that veteran parents conducting interviews with current families will help respondents feel safer, more comfortable and empowered when sharing their child welfare system experiences with someone who can understand their point of view.

This report summarizes findings from 20 pilot interviews regarding family satisfaction and perceptions of the FAR pathway. In addition, the document describes the process by which the survey and administration protocol were developed, as well as lessons learned in the process, including in the recruitment and training of veteran parents.

Methods

At the time they enter the FAR pathway, each participating FAR caregiver is asked to sign an agreement. As part of this agreement, families are asked for their consent to be contacted to

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¹ For more information about the FAR program, including overviews, newsletters, and quarterly project reports, please visit [http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/about/far.asp](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/ca/about/far.asp).
complete a survey following case termination. For this pilot administration of family surveys, CA compiled a list of all families that participated in the FAR pathway during June, July and August of 2014. Office caseworkers and supervisors searched the records of these families 1) to determine whether they signed the consent to be contacted and 2) to locate updated contact information. Of the 213 families that participated in FAR during this period, 161 signed the consent to be contacted for an interview. Of these 161 families, a total of 107 phone numbers were considered to be “good numbers,” meaning that they had not been disconnected or the caller did not reach someone who confirmed it to be a wrong number. Out of these, interviewers were able to make contact with 30 families. Of these, 10 declined to participate in the interview, resulting in a total sample of 20 families.

While one respondent did agree to be interviewed, she reported after the first question that she did not have time to answer all of the questions, but did want the interviewer to know “...that my caseworker was awesome, she did a great job. My case was closed right away and I was very satisfied with the program.” This interview is counted in the overall number of surveys. However, since none of the rated items was completed, the number of valid responses for each individual item wherever percentages are reported is 19, rather than 20. For a few other questions, respondents did not answer a question, decreasing the number of responses used to calculate the percentage.

The figure below shows the narrowing of potential survey respondents to the final group of 30 families who were contacted. Each phone number was called a minimum of four times at varying days and times of day in an attempt to contact potential survey respondents.
Figure 1: Pilot Interview Outreach Process

- All FAR Participants (213)
- Consent to Contact (161)
- “Good” Phone Number (107)
- Made contact (30)
- Total Interviews (20)
### Table 1: Pilot Interviews Conducted by Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Number Of Interviews</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynnwood</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spokane</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of interviews across offices does not precisely mirror the overall distribution of FAR families across the three pilot offices. Aberdeen is slightly underrepresented, accounting for 20% of the surveys completed, but 27% of all FAR cases. Lynnwood is also underrepresented, making up 25% of the total surveys, but 38% of overall FAR cases. Conversely, families in Spokane are overrepresented, at 55% of all surveys, compared with 34% of FAR cases.

In terms of race and ethnicity, the small size of the pilot sample precludes making any statements regarding race, culture or disproportionality. However, the pilot sample largely reflected the race and ethnicity of families served through FAR. White families made up 65% of all FAR families and 68% of survey respondents. Hispanics made up 9% of FAR families and 10% of the survey sample. The race/ethnicity of the remaining 25% of survey respondents (n=5) was either unknown or missing in FAMLINK. As the interview sample grows, the evaluation will work to ensure that survey responses are representative of the families being served by the FAR program.

**Family Survey Next Steps**

As the family interview process continues, TriWest will work with CA to refine the approach of identifying consenting families and reaching out to them sooner after their participation in FAR in order to increase the number of individuals that interviewers are able to contact. Given that 66% (20 of 30) of the families we were able to contact agreed to participate in an interview, we are confident that contacting families as soon as possible after FAR participation will yield significantly higher overall response rates. In addition, TriWest and CA are taking the following steps to improve the family interview process:

- Developing a routine process for discussing the survey opportunity with families at the time their cases are closed.
- Adding to the closing letter information about completing and returning a survey by mail, online, or by phone.
• Developing a module for caseworker training that includes talking to families about the interview process, encouraging them to consent to be contacted and stressing the value of their participation.
• Recruiting and training a larger group of veteran parents to conduct interviews and increase the number of contacts per phone number.

Summary of Survey Findings
Family surveys were intended to ask FAR participants about their experiences with the FAR program in three broad areas: ²
• Fidelity to the FAR model: engaging families, talking to parents prior to meeting with children, and including families in the case planning and decision making process;
• Family satisfaction with services: feelings of being respected in the process, belief that needs were being met;
• Perceived outcomes: family perceptions of improvement as a result of their participation in FAR.

Almost all of the respondents (89%) reported a high level of engagement in the FAR process.
Parents reported that the FAR caseworker listened to their input when planning for services, with more than half reporting that their caseworker listened to them “always, or almost always” when considering the need for services, the types of services that would help, and the type of concrete supports needed by the family.
All but one parent reported being either “Very Satisfied” or “Mostly Satisfied” with the way their family was treated by the caseworker and with the help they received.
Nearly two-thirds of all parents reported improvement in family dynamics, feelings about their role as a parent, and/or their ability to get support from their community after participating in FAR.

² Please see Appendix A for the Family Survey interview protocol.
**FAR Implementation Fidelity**

In order to meaningfully evaluate the FAR program, it is first necessary to understand the extent to which FAR was implemented as intended. Fidelity to the FAR model is believed to be a prerequisite for achieving desired outcomes for children and families. Two key components of fidelity were measured through the Family Survey: 1) working early in the case to engage the family in the process (including talking to parents before interviewing children), and 2) actively including parents and other family members in decisions made about family needs and goals.

*Initial Contact and Family Engagement*

**Three quarters (n=15)** of the respondents reported that FAR caseworkers discussed the allegations of child abuse or neglect with the parents prior to interviewing the child(ren) involved. Only two parents (10%) reported that they were not contacted prior to their child(ren)’s interview. One respondent did not know if their children were interviewed before they were contacted.

Nearly all respondents (90%) were actively engaged in the FAR process “always or almost always.” No respondents said that “never or almost none of the time” were they actively engaged in the process. This finding is consistent with interviews done with FAR caseworkers, in which workers stated that they believed families participating in FAR were more engaged than those they had worked with previously in the Investigation Response pathway.³

³ 62% of FAR caseworkers across the three offices reported that FAR families were either more engaged or much more engaged. Please see the first FAR Semi-Annual Report at http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/ca/about/far.asp.
The degree to which caseworkers and parents were able to reach consensus was another measure of engagement. Specifically, we asked parents about consensus regarding the family dynamics leading up to child protective services (CPS) involvement and the family’s overall strengths and needs. Most respondents experienced a high level of agreement with caseworkers in both areas. As depicted in the chart above, 79% of respondents (15 of 19) reported agreement “always or almost always” on the family’s strengths and needs, and 95% reported they agreed “very much” (58%) or at least “a little” (37%) with their caseworker in identifying what led up to the family coming to the attention of CPS.

Family engagement and involving families as active participants in case and service planning is a core component in the FAR model. Most families interviewed reported that caseworkers listened to their opinions and feedback on family needs and the types of services and concrete supports that might be helpful. Further, most respondents said that their caseworker asked about family beliefs and traditions either “always or almost always” or “some of the time.”

**Family Inclusion in Case Planning and Decision Making**

“[My caseworker] actually met my needs and listened to what we had to say.”

-- FAR parent

The FAR model stresses that family outcomes are improved when parents, children, and other family members (along with natural community supports, as appropriate) are invested in the case plan and in fully utilizing the services offered. This investment is enhanced as individuals have increased voice and choice in determining case goals and service planning.
Parents consistently reported they felt included in the decision making process around services and supports for their family. One area for possible improvement is the caseworker’s incorporation of the families’ beliefs and traditions. Fewer than half (44%) of parents said that their caseworker discussed family beliefs and traditions “always/or almost always,” while most of the remaining parents reported that this happened at least “some of the time.” Three parents (11%) reported that the caseworker discussed their family beliefs and traditions “never or almost never.” Most parents (70%) reported that their caseworker listened to their opinions about whether or not the family needed any services.
Most parents reported that caseworkers considered their opinions when deciding the specific types of services or concrete supports that the family needed. As seen in the charts above, in terms of services needed (including mental health, parenting skill building, etc.), 83% of parents reported that their caseworker listened to their opinions “always or almost always.” For concrete services (including rent assistance, transportation, etc.), 75% of parents reported that caseworkers considered their opinions “always or almost always.”

**Family Satisfaction with FAR Processes and Services**

Parents reported that they felt respected by their caseworker. The majority of those interviewed (84%) said that their caseworker showed respect to their family “always, or almost always,” while another 11% said their caseworker showed respect “some of the time.” Only one parent interviewed (5%) said that the caseworker showed respect “not very often.”

Similarly, parents reported being satisfied both with how their families were treated during their participation with FAR and with the services they received. Just over two thirds (67%) of parents reported feeling “very satisfied” with the way their family was treated by caseworkers and service providers during visits to their home. The remaining parents (33%) reported they were “mostly satisfied.” All but one respondent reported being either “very satisfied” (58%) or “mostly satisfied” (37%) with the services that were received by, or offered to, their family. One respondent (5%) reported being “very dissatisfied” with the services received.
The respondent who was dissatisfied with services had a change in caseworker during the time period, which may have contributed to issues. It is unclear whether there was a new report of abuse or neglect, or if their case was transferred from FAR to the Investigative Pathway without a new allegation.

“The first caseworker (I met with) was very helpful. Then the case was reopened, and I got a new caseworker. I felt we didn’t come to an agreement (she accused me of not taking good care of my kids). My kids miss their mother. I am waiting (for the new) caseworker to call me back right now and she hasn’t called me back yet.”

**Family Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Services**

Parents were asked to rate the degree to which there was change in how things were going for their families in three different areas after participating in FAR:

- Family Relationships
- Role as a Parent
- Ability to Get Support from Community

Nearly half of all parents (8 out of 19) reported improvements in at least two of the three areas after participation in FAR. Seven parents (37%) reported no change and one respondent reported that family relationships, satisfaction with parent roles, and ability to get support from the community declined after participation in FAR.

The bar chart below shows changes in average ratings in these three areas prior to FAR engagement and after participation. Parents rated each item, before and after, on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (“not going very well”) to 5 (“going very well”).

**Pilot Survey Results: Perceived Family Improvements After FAR**

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Before FAR</th>
<th>After FAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Family Relationships</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings about Role as Parent</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to get Community Support</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
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Nearly two-thirds (12 out of 19) of all parents reported that their overall family situation had improved following participation in FAR. Of these, 37% said that things were “much better” and 26% reported things as “somewhat better.” Another 32% of parents said there had been no change, and one parent (5%) reported things as “much worse” after participating in FAR.

### Summary and Lessons Learned

The pilot implementation of the FAR family interview process was successful in several ways. First, the evaluation was able to establish a working relationship with veteran parents upon which to build as the FAR evaluation continues over the next five years. Second, we were able to demonstrate that veteran parents were able to contact, engage and interview families involved in the child welfare system. Further, we were able to gather information regarding the experiences and perceptions of families involved in the FAR pathway.

Our initial sample is small (20 families). Therefore results should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to all families participating in FAR. However, these findings do offer encouragement. Pilot survey results suggest that Washington State’s implementation of FAR is moving in the right direction. Families reported a high level of satisfaction with the process and outcomes of their participation, and their statements suggest that FAR is being implemented with general fidelity to core aspects of the model. We cannot be sure that there is no systematic bias involved in determining which families were successfully interviewed, but the findings do tell us that those who did want to be interviewed had a generally positive experience. Findings also suggest that caseworkers could do more to incorporate family beliefs and traditions into their case and service planning process.

The primary lesson learned from this pilot is the importance of reaching out to families as soon as possible after participation in FAR so as to maximize the likelihood of successfully contacting them. As described earlier, the evaluation team and CA are working to modify practices to address this situation for following waves of family interviews, including providing mail surveys with closing letters, allowing families to complete surveys online, reaching out to caseworkers in FAR training to encourage survey participation, and reaching out to families sooner after closing.