

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES Implementing the Family Preservation and Support Services Program: An Opportunity for Child Welfare System Improvement

—by Joan Levy Zlotnik

In the Spring of 1995, throughout the United States, groups of professionals, parents, and advocates met with state child welfare officials leaders to develop a plan for the use of funds states will receive from the Family Preservation and Support Services (FPSS) Program (created as part of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1993). The Department of Health and Human Services had encouraged states to use this opportunity to establish “a continuum of coordinated and integrated, culturally relevant, family-focused services for children and families regardless of the funding stream” (Federal Register 1994: 50648). Since the actual funding for this new capped entitlement program is small (only \$930 million over five years for all 50 states), the bill’s supporters hoped that the planning process required for receiving the funds would be one of the bill’s greatest benefits, serving as a catalyst to devise comprehensive and integrated services for children and families. A broad coalition of child welfare, mental health and juvenile justice groups worked many long hours with Congress to develop this legislation. As it nears its second anniversary, valuable lessons can be gleaned from assessing its actual and potential impact.

Background

The FPSS legislation brought together two types of programs that have some similar features, but have developed in different ways and under different auspices. Although both family support and family preservation programs are meant to help states offer a broader array of services to vulnerable children and families, they have developed from different roots. Family support programs are frequently developed by grass roots, community-based organizations when a need is identified. The family support movement is based in parent education efforts, self-help groups, and settlement houses. Family support programs often have universal access and are voluntary. Some fear that providing federal dollars for family support programs will bureaucratize them, reducing their flexibility and neighborhood control.

On the other hand, family preservation programs often developed within the public child welfare sector, to help keep children from out-of-home care and to assist in returning children in foster care to their families. While family support programs have often been funded through

religious organizations, parent organizations, or by piecing together a variety of federal, state, local, public and private sources, family preservation programs have usually been funded through a variety of federal and state resources. Family support and family preservation programs can be viewed as parallel and separate, or as sequential along a continuum of intensity of intervention; often their ser-

vices are provided simultaneously to families (Allen, Zalenski, Day & Gruenewald 1994).

The different focuses of these two types of programs correspond roughly to the distinction between “residual” and “developmental” approaches to child welfare services. The definition most dominant over the past half century was a residual one, which focused child welfare services on family breakdown. In the residual view, child welfare services are “social services to children and youth whose parents are unable or need help to carry out their child-rearing responsibilities” (CWLA 1982). In contrast, the developmental view defines child welfare as services directed to meeting the needs of all children, recognizing that no family is entirely self-sufficient to meet all of their children’s needs (Kadushin and Martin 1988). A more recent definition (CWLA 1993) incorporates both the developmental and residual perspectives. It defines child welfare as “those areas of social service designed to protect children from abuse and neglect, improve opportunities for optimal child development, help establish and fortify family structures, and improve the level of family functioning.” This contemporary perspective views the child within the context of the family and authorizes the provision of services focused both on the child and the family.

It is hoped that the planning and implementation process for FPSS funds will help move the child welfare system from being residual to developmental. The development of community-based family support and family preservation services envisioned in the FPSS legislation incorporates the developmental and residual perspectives by combining services that all can access with services that are directed toward children and families that have specifically been identified as needing help. States are encouraged to use a substantial portion of their first year FPSS funds for planning. Because each type of program develops its own constituencies, making the integration of services difficult, the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders in the first year’s planning process at the state and community level is critical.

Federal guidance and support

The Children’s Bureau, within the Administration on Children and Families (ACF) is working strategically to implement the FPSS program. The Bureau is working closely with the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Center for Mental Health Services, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, and other federal agencies, to model the collaboration and coordination they hope to see at the state and local level. They sought extensive advice from the field and held a series of focus groups to provide guidance on the development of the Program Instruction and the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. Severally federally-funded resource centers (on Permanency Planning, Organizational

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Implementing the Family Preservation and Support Services Program

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Improvement, Court Improvement and Legal Issues, Youth Development, and Family-Centered Practice) were established to provide technical assistance to the states, communities, and Indian Tribes in the planning process. In addition, the National Training and Technical Assistance Coordination Center was created to coordinate technical assistance, to provide regional conferences in 1995 and 1996, and to provide training and technical assistance to regional ACF offices. The Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information also received additional funding to strengthen its child welfare related activities.

Results

Since the legislation is barely two years old, evaluation is in its earliest stages. However, three evaluations have been mandated: James Bell Associates is studying the implementation of family preservation and family support services program in states and communities; Abt Associates is evaluating family support programs; and Westat is undertaking an extensive evaluation of family preservation programs.

Federal guidance appears to have been successful in encouraging states to think broadly about how the needs assessment and planning processes can help create improved services for children and families. Several states have incorporated this new initiative into broader system reform or service integration efforts.

For those states which have directed funds toward service delivery, approximately one half of the first year FPSS funds were directed to family preservation and one half toward family support. It appears that states that already have strong family support programs are putting the majority of their resources toward family preservation programs. States with well-established family preservation programs are placing more emphasis on the development of family support programs. Of the 22 states funding family support services, 14 have directed this money to community-based organizations (James Bell Associates 1995). States are working to meet the challenge of creating a comprehensive array of services that are focused on the safety of the child within the family.

To make their plans, states needed to gather current data about the status of children and families in their state and in communities. By undertaking community needs assessments and reviewing existing data (i.e., child abuse reports, Kids Count data, census data), community and state level providers developed a better picture of the needs of children and families. By using community mapping tech-

niques, some states targeted their planning and services toward communities that are critically in need (James Bell Associates 1995). Gathering and reviewing this information is helpful to the states in planning programs in addition to FPSS.

The FPSS legislation requires states to develop measurable objectives for improving the safety and well-being of children and families. This requirement (as well as class action suits, the implementation of the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, and the creation of the State Automated Child Welfare Information Systems) has created a great deal of interest in developing child welfare outcome measures. A recent report by the American Humane Association (AHA) indicates that only 12 states reported the use of outcome initiatives in 1993. By 1995, 23 states and five county child welfare agencies were involved in outcome measure initiatives (American Humane Association 1995).

Summary

National advocates and front-line workers alike have high expectations for the family preservation and support program to improve child welfare services. While the financial resources available are not huge, the comprehensive planning process provides an important opportunity to create system reform rather than just providing additional categorical programs. States can take the time to look holistically at prevention, child abuse intervention, foster care, adoption, independent living, family preservation, children's mental health, maternal and child health, and family support programs. Will the vision and goals of FPSS be translated into services which ensure safety and provide better outcomes for children and families? That is a question which remains to be answered. For the response to be positive, everyone responsible for implementing the legislation will have to work together in earnest.

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Defining and Differentiating Child Neglect

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nitions and CPS policies regarding neglect vary greatly across states, and there is little consistency in conceptual or operational definitions across studies of neglect, many of which fail to differentiate between neglect and other forms of maltreatment. These inconsistencies significantly hamper attempts to gain greater understanding of the problem and to intervene effectively.

No single definition of neglect meets all needs. Zuravin (1991) has argued that the definition of neglect should be specific to the purpose for which it is to be used: research, legal action, authoritative intervention, or prevention. Zuravin proposes a research definition of neglect that focuses on the parents, clearly identifying specific behaviors or omissions of the parent or caretaker which endanger the child's future physical, cognitive, or emotional health. Others (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993) argue from a preventive and practice perspective for a broader definition of neglect that focuses on the condition of the child, regardless of the cause.

However, operational definitions of neglect must also take into account legitimate cultural differences in child care practices. The predominant Eurocentric models for normal child development and family functioning merit critical examination and adjustments for children of color (Korbin, 1994). Polansky et al. (1981) found high levels of agreement about indicators of neglect among working class and upper middle class women, and one study revealed substantial agreement on basic indicators of neglect between African-American and White groups (Polansky, Ammons, & Weathersby, 1985). However, another study (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979) indicated some significant differences in ratings of the severity of specific indicators of neglect among Hispanic, African-American, and White groups. For instance, Hispanic respondents rated vignettes depicting

Child neglect continues to receive limited attention from researchers, professional journals, and from beleaguered child protective services (CPS) agencies, which are overwhelmed with investigating reports of sexual abuse and severe physical abuse.

sexual abuse, physical abuse, and drug or alcohol abuse as more serious than did African-Americans or Whites. African-Americans rated descriptions that reflect neglect (i.e., failure to provide adequate nutrition, medical care, supervision, cleanliness, education, clothing, and housing) more seriously than did White or Hispanic respondents. Overall, Whites rated the vignettes describing abuse and neglect less seriously than did either of the other two ethnic groups. Although there is general agreement across ethnic groups about basic needs of children, operational definitions of neglect must acknowledge legitimate differences among ethnic groups on norms for child care, while maintaining standards that assure that children's basic needs are met.

Differentiating types of neglect

Neglect is often over-simplified and stereotyped; it is not a unitary phenomenon, nor does it typically occur alone. Neglect is often accompanied by physical abuse and sexual abuse. Data from a recent longitudinal study revealed significant correlations between adolescents' reports of physical neglect and sexual abuse and between severe emotional neglect and physical and verbal abuse (Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). There is growing evidence as well that a significant portion of neglectful mothers suffer from symptoms of depression (Nelson, et al., 1993; Gaudin et al., 1993; Zuravin and Grief, 1989). Substance abuse is involved in an increasingly higher percentage of neglect cases, with estimates varying from 30% to 90%. Even non-organic failure to thrive (NOFT), a unique, often life-threatening type of neglect, is a heterogeneous condition that is differentiated by a variety of causal conditions ranging from poverty of family resources, parents' lack of knowledge of child care and nutrition, to severe family crises or conflicts that interfere with parents' ability to nurture their young children (Drotar, 1992). Precision of definition in research is critical for longitudinal studies which seek to identify outcomes of various types of maltreatment on children. Differentiating subtypes of

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