

Key Program Findings from the Evaluation of *Hope for Children*: An Interagency Collaboration Providing Services to Children Exposed to Domestic Violence

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Description of the *Hope for Children (HFC)* Program:

To address significant service gaps in their community, three agencies joined in a collaborative effort to provide services to children whose families have been affected by domestic violence. The three collaborating agencies included an agency providing domestic violence and sexual assault services (**Interact**), an agency providing child-abuse prevention services (**SAFEchild**), and an agency providing family-focused mental health services (**Triangle Family Services**). Based on the agencies' recognition of the need for services that would not only mitigate the negative consequences of domestic violence for children but also interrupt the cycle of violence, the three agencies launched a collaborative program using a system-of-care framework.

Description of Evaluation:

Led by a university-research team, the collaborative implemented a program evaluation of *HFC*. The two-year evaluation comprised four independent, but related, data collection components that included (1) surveys with parents whose children received *HFC* services; (2) in-depth interviews with parents whose children received *HFC* services; (3) surveys with community professionals who work with *HFC* clients; and (4) in-depth interviews and focus groups with *HFC* agency staff. Overall, the evaluation findings showed that *HFC* was successfully meeting its service goals, and that parents, community professionals, and program staff were strongly satisfied with *HFC*. Each evaluation component also identified program challenges that point toward important knowledge gains from this project. The complete evaluation report, including details about the *HFC* program services, is available upon request from Dr. Rebecca J. Macy (rjmacy@email.unc.edu).

- The evaluation showed the following agency and program qualities enhanced the success of the interagency collaborative:
 - A successful **work history** among the three agencies, which had been established through prior collaboration on smaller projects.
 - **Shared service goals** for children exposed to domestic violence.
 - An organizational commitment to the collaboration that was demonstrated by the agencies' staff and leadership **willingness to compromise**.
 - *HFC's* efforts to **cooperate and coordinate** with other community agencies to meet the needs of children and families.
 - The **creativity of program staff** in finding novel ways to use available resources to meet clients' needs.

PROGRAM BRIEF

- Standardized interagency systems and protocols were valuable to the program.
 - The evaluation showed the importance of having a **single contact** for outside agencies to make program referrals (i.e., one designated telephone number, email, and website).
 - The findings showed the importance of the interagency **weekly team meetings** to review and plan client cases, facilitate care-coordination, promote interagency communication, expedite referral processes, enable staff to make coordinated treatment decisions, and minimize clients' time from referral to treatment.
 - The interagency collaboration also developed, shared, and used a **common set of screening and case management forms**. These forms served as a promising method for interagency communication and information sharing among the agencies' staffs.
 - Staff participants stated that having a **program manager** dedicated to the collaboration was essential to the success of *HFC*. The program manager led the weekly meetings and facilitated collaboration among the agencies.
- The evaluation also identified the following strategies as specific improvements to bolster the success of the interagency collaborative:
 - Leadership should increase **“buy-in” among front-line staff members** by inviting front-line staff to help with program development from the beginning.
 - **Repeated informational and training opportunities for community professionals** to create and maintain community awareness of the program. High staff turnover in key referral organizations requires consistent, repeated messaging and training to both create and maintain awareness about *HFC*.
- The findings about the program evaluation showed the importance of **hiring dedicated evaluation staff at the beginning of the project**. In the initial plan, program staff members were to conduct the evaluation and provide services. However, staff participants stated that implementing the evaluation in addition to providing services was not feasible and that the evaluation suffered.
- The findings regarding program sustainability point to recommendations for both agency leaders and grantors.
 - The agencies found it challenging to both fund the individual agencies and sustain the collaborative program. Thus, leaders need to **identify separate long-term funding strategies** for the agencies and for the collaboration.
 - Interagency collaborations need time to develop, enhance, and sustain their program services. Grantors may want to consider **funding** such collaborative efforts for **significant periods of time** (e.g., 5 years rather than 3 years).
 - Typically, grantors do not **fund leadership and/or administrative services**; however, this research showed that the program administration was vital to *HFC*'s success. Thus, agencies must make clear to grantors that leadership and administrative support is a critical component that enables interagency programs to function as successfully as possible. Similarly, grantors may want to consider funding leadership and administrative roles that help the success of collaborations.

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