
Beginning Implementation of the Family Violence Option: Six Pilot Counties

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Introduction

North Carolina adopted the Family Violence Option and started implementing the policy through a pilot program. Pilot counties were picked by the state on the basis of county size (for variety) and willingness to participate in the program. In addition, some of the pilot counties were chosen because they expressed concern about family violence in their Work First plans or they had a good relationship with their local domestic violence agency. Pilot counties did not receive additional funding for the activities described below.

In order to find out more about the pilot program and learn what the counties gained from participation, the Jordan Institute for Families, under contract with the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS), conducted interviews with all six of the pilot counties. This report details the results of those interviews.

Durham County

Durham County began meetings about the pilot during the summer of 1999. State representatives hosted a training session for all of the pilot counties during the same period. The state had various experts in the field of domestic and family violence present on policy issues and implications, requirements of federal guidelines, information for families, and confidentiality issues.

Durham County was interested in providing training for their staff, and holding regular training on family/domestic violence for new staff members as they joined the agency. The desire was to have a domestic violence expert on-site at the Work First office. Because of their close working relationship with the local domestic violence shelter, the two agencies were able to collaborate. The domestic violence agency

provided a staff member 15 hours per week on-site at Durham County DSS. This is the first time they've had a formal relationship with DSS.

According to Durham County representatives, the pilot counties met for several months and came up with a central notification form. The screening form has some variation due to counties with differing circumstances. In Durham County, Work First staff and the domestic violence professional met to come up with a form that would meet both the needs of screening and assessment in one form.

Workers notify clients of the option while the domestic violence counselor conducts the screening and assessment. Staff members in the agency receive training on the family violence option from the local domestic violence agency. (Durham County is currently in the process of revising their training). When a referral is made, clients talk to the domestic violence counselor about their situation in order to determine who the violence is between. (The local agency only deals with violence between intimate partners.) The domestic violence professional recommends whether or not an applicant should receive a waiver of work requirements. In addition, the domestic violence professional introduces herself to Work First applicants before orientation letting them know that she is on-site. She is also becoming a more formal participant in the orientation.

Work First applicants see many people during the first visit, including the family violence counselor. Unfortunately, only those applicants who apply on the days that the family violence worker is in the building get to do this all in one visit – others have to come back. Some clients decline waivers when they are offered.

Jones County

Jones County strives to provide a one-stop shop for Work First applicants. Their goal is to give clients an opportunity to talk privately with a social worker. During the entry interview, three questions are designed to get at domestic violence issues. The intake worker or interviewer doesn't discuss domestic violence with the applicant, but outlines the option. The current social worker in Jones county has a professional background of working with domestic violence survivors. Jones DSS has a strong relationship with local domestic violence provider. The agency does the assessment and works with DSS to formulate goals for the mutual responsibility agreement. The role of the domestic violence provider is to make recommendations regarding the type and length of a waiver, and what types of special programming applicants need to undergo as part of the Mutual Responsibility Agreement. Cases are reevaluated on a case-by-case basis, but cases receiving a full waiver need approval from the DSS board. In two years, no cases have been identified as needing a full waiver.

All Jones county staff have participated in the state-provided training sessions on domestic violence, including segments of the training done by a mental health domestic violence trainer and one from the local domestic violence shelter. Approximately 33 staff have been trained.

Participating in the pilot heightened employees' awareness of the problem and increased their knowledge of available services. The pilot provided the county with an organized approach to domestic violence issues. The local sheriff's department helped develop a system for handling domestic violence situations by educating and helping DSS create a written protocol. The pilot stimulated this process as did a training in New

Hanover county during which information on developing a protocol was disseminated. In addition, the community child protection team developed a domestic violence project. Other programmatic changes include a new system in which all domestic violence calls with children involved are routed to Child Protective Service. The process of getting people into shelters was formalized and improved by working out regular transportation to New Bern where the local shelter is located.

Most significantly, the Work First component of the Nurturing Program was developed by the Department of Mental Health and DSS. Through this program families experiencing domestic violence receive positive parenting education and help with domestic violence issues. The Nurturing Program is a nine week program in which children and parents deal with family conflict. There is a domestic violence specific support group for those participating in the program. Eleven families participated in the first session. The families were recruited through the Work First social worker. Some clients use participation in the program to fulfill their work requirements. The program has been well received and this year they will use their \$30,000 grant for programming. This program operates in conjunction with Smart Start and mental health.

Jones County has a small caseload thus, waivers are not common. In addition, the Work First caseworker has an extensive background in domestic violence and may be handling issues as they arise without doing formal referrals.

Forsyth County

Forsyth County partners extensively with the Family Services agency in their community and has done so throughout the pilot process. Family Services operates the

local domestic violence shelter, as well as running programs for abusers and providing individual and group counseling.

Forsyth County describes its pilot as a set of procedures, not a program. One peculiarity to this county is that the DSS office is in several locations throughout the city, with the intake office being separate from the social worker staff office. The intake workers are under a great deal of pressure to get all the appropriate forms filled out. This limits the amount of discussion that can take place about domestic violence during the intake process. Intake workers fill out forms with the applicants, then if there is an interest in talking with a social worker they are instructed where to go. Another barrier to seamless services is that Family Services is also in a separate location. Clients used to get an orientation where they were presented with the opportunity to hear about domestic violence and services available to them. The agency no longer does a formal orientation.

If an applicant is identified as experiencing domestic violence they are referred to Family Services where further assessment is done. Family Services makes recommendations about treatment and work plans, then suggests a date for reevaluation. Family Services advises DSS during the waiver process and gives DSS an estimate of how long a waiver is needed and whether or not the applicant is able to work part-time. Disagreements between DSS workers and Family Services recommendations have not been a problem.

The most significant stumbling block in Forsyth county is that applicants must travel to another location to receive a full assessment and waiver recommendation by the domestic violence service provider. This situation should change in the next few years, as

DSS moves to a new, more spacious building. The hope is that Family Services will be able to place a domestic violence professional in the building.

One of the most creative policy changes has taken place in conjunction with TANF housing grants. These grants “really gave us the option to spend a significant amount of resources on someone.” The TANF housing project director in this county was the first to recognize that there were issues with paying back rent or coming up with a deposit for a rental in order for a victim to move out on her own. The director modified the housing grant proposal so that it focuses more on domestic violence because the Family Violence Option made administrators aware of housing needs.

Pasquotank County

Pasquotank County DSS volunteered to participate in the domestic violence pilot projects because they see domestic violence as a widespread problem in the county. They were involved in discussions with the state from the beginning, and saw their role as helping to develop and implement policy.

A training was held for staff from employment services, family assistance, and Hopeline (a local non-profit providing services to domestic violence victims) in order to familiarize them with the new policy and educate DSS staff about domestic violence in general. The new policy put into place the following process: during application an intake worker explains what domestic violence is, and asks if the client has experienced it, and if they want to talk to someone further about it. If they do, the intake worker sets up an appointment for them at Hopeline, and the therapist at Hopeline recommends a waiver.

Three clients in Pasquotank county have used the waiver. They feel the numbers are low because most clients want to start work or school when they apply. Initially, there

was some concern that clients would abuse the waiver, but this has not been the case. All clients who used the waiver were in a shelter with a plan in place.

Pasquotank appreciated the opportunity to participate in the development and implementation of the new policy. They felt involved, as though they were having some impact on how information was developed. In terms of new services as a result of the policy, the Family Violence Option waiver is the only additional program.

Henderson County

In Henderson County, the main activity associated with the pilot was a training for DSS staff given by the state. This training consisted of talking about domestic violence and how to approach the subject with clients. Thirty-eight staff from income maintenance and 15-20 from adult services and Medicaid participated. The main benefit of the pilot has been that staff now feel more knowledgeable which makes them more comfortable discussing abuse with clients.

Unfortunately, income maintenance workers haven't benefited as much as others in terms of their ability to do their job. For the most part, clients do not disclose to intake workers. On the whole, the staff seem better educated as a result of the pilot and the training but there is a need for the training, or at least the materials from the training, to be available for workers who join DSS after the pilot.

Referrals have not increased following the pilot probably because DSS had a good relationship with their local domestic violence agency prior to the pilot. However, referrals are more informed, both with regard to victims' needs and available services. Additionally, the concept of elder abuse was somewhat new to many of the staff, and

although no referrals have been made yet, the staff is now alert to the possibility of elder abuse.

Burke County

Burke County saw the pilots as an opportunity to volunteer and continue their existing services to victims of abuse. Through the training they learned more about how to talk to victims about abuse, and how to use the new policy. Initially, there was some resistance from intake workers, but because the training made them more comfortable with the subject of domestic violence, they feel better about bringing the subject up and making referrals.

At the start of the pilot, the county had a full time Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) on staff to work with the domestic violence population. However, when that person left a new LCSW was not hired. Instead, DSS contracted with a local domestic violence agency. Originally, program managers thought it would be better to have a specialist in-house since so many clients fail to follow through on referrals. Yet, they found that it did not seem to make much of a difference.

Clients are required to attend weekly meeting to receive their benefits, and since the training DSS has had someone from the local domestic violence agency speak to clients about abuse and available services. This seems effective since clients often follow the presenter out at the end of the meeting to talk about their situation.

Summary

State Training Module

The state training raised caseworker awareness of the fact that domestic violence can be a serious barrier to family self-sufficiency. Staff learned how to make referrals and

recognize that domestic violence issues sometimes need to be resolved before a person is ready to go to work. Staff members are still working on learning to deal with situations where long-term patterns of violence are evident.

The training was developed as a “Domestic Violence 101” module, so for people who already had extensive training in domestic violence, it was not as useful. However, it was the first time some caseworkers had thought about domestic violence as an issue in terms of success in Work First. One county expressed a need for more interaction in the training (less lecture style). In several counties, supervisors reported that workers liked the presentation by the local domestic violence provider or other community organizations.

Expectations Regarding Waivers

Initially, there were not large numbers applying for the Family Violence Option waiver; staff had anticipated more requests. Durham County believes that this has been a process and that beginning the notification process and raising awareness, as well as having a domestic violence professional on-site, is beginning to have an impact in terms of referrals and waivers.

In fact, there have been fewer recommendations for full waivers than anticipated, and indeed very few referrals altogether. This does not seem to be because of lack of staff recommendations, but because people are resistant to it. The domestic violence provider suggests that this phenomena may be due to the difficulty in getting people to seek the intensive treatment they need, clients frequently do not see the need. According to Jones county officials, “people were willing to say they had domestic violence issues, but were not willing to say in any way that it was keeping them from working.”

Other concerns

Some counties noted concern over privacy issues due to referral and assessment forms being in the client's general file. Additionally, some felt that the waiver option was skipped over too quickly and not fully explained during the application process because intake workers have a lot of required forms to complete. Finally, there was some mention that staff may have domestic violence issues which may impede their abilities to help clients with similar problems.

Conclusion

Overall, it appears that the pilot counties were integral to the process of implementing the Family Violence Option. Obviously, certain counties have more extensive programs than others and this seems dependent on their relationship with the local domestic violence agency. Counties that have concerns about how well they are identifying victims of domestic violence may want to further cultivate these associations. This does not necessarily mean that more waivers will be offered since it seems that identification of victims does not necessarily mean more waivers. The waivers are a useful tool for times when work is difficult because of abuse and its repercussions but some victims may not want to use this option.