The Massachusetts Family Networks Implementation Study

Susan Macisalak, MPH, Family Networks Project Manager, MA Department of Social Services and Joanna Nicholau, PhD, University of Massachusetts Medical School with Jodi Adams, MA; Barbara Gahnam, MPH; Katherine Wosley, BA; Brenda Warren, BS, UMMS

The Massachusetts Family Networks Implementation Study (Family Networks) is a comprehensive systems transformation initiative to redesign and implement a more integrated, coordinated system of care for children in placement and approximately 3,400 employees (FY2007; 3rd quarter).

The partnership between MA/DSS and UMMS is the foundation of the Family Networks Implementation Study. The benefits of active stakeholder involvement are numerous, including increased buy-in to the study process, assistance in identifying key outcomes, and the facilitation of study results (Kaufman et al., 2004).

SHARED PROJECT MANAGEMENT. The study is co-managed by MA/DSS and UMMS project leads.

CREATION OF A STUDY DESIGN TEAM (SDT). The SDT includes representatives from MA/DSS and UMMS working together to develop the study framework, sample, research measures, metrics, and analyses.

CREATION OF A STUDY ADVISORY TEAM (SAT). The SAT includes representatives from MA/DSS, family advocates, providers, and UMMS who assist in framing research questions, providing input into data collection strategies, interpreting findings, designing feedback loops, and reviewing products.

DESIGN OF FEEDBACK LOOPS. The SAT is creating strategies for feedback back study findings and products to relevant stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

To identify change domains: Concept Mapping

To create a participatory approach to frame the ideas of a large group that reflects qualitative methods, e.g., brainstorming, with quantitative methods, e.g., multivariate scaling and cluster analysis.

To identify criteria for successful change: The most significant change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring that can be used to assess the process of program implementation (Dart & Davies, 2005). Change stories are systematically collected from all MA/DSS staff and stakeholders via SurveyMonkey.

To rate the importance and feasibility of criteria: Participants rated statements on importance and feasibility from 1 = “not very…” to 5 = “extremely…” Ladder graphs were generated to show the relationship between average rating of importance and feasibility for specific clusters.

RATING IMPORTANCE AND FEASIBILITY

Participants rated statements on importance and feasibility from 1 = “not very…” to 5 = “extremely…” Ladder graphs were generated to show the relationship between average rating of importance and feasibility for specific clusters.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Findings from the Family Networks Implementation Study will inform MA/DSS strategic planning, system refinements, and the Family Networks outcomes evaluation. Continuous quality improvement strategies, drawn from study findings, will be relevant and useful to other Massachusetts EDRSS agencies with similar service delivery systems and agendas. Project activities and products will promote the Commonwealth’s participation in the national dialogues regarding systems transformation in child welfare, mental health, and juvenile justice.

BALANCING RIGOR AND RELEVANCE: Study Advisory Team Review

Study Advisory Team members met to interpret the concept mapping and statement rating data. They described findings from previous clusters and generated new insights for study activities for the next 12-18 months. Some activities are already underway. Others will benefit from increased attention.

• FAMILY INVOLVEMENT includes activities to enhance family involvement in all aspects of family networks and MA/DSS service planning and delivery.

• COMMUNITY RESOURCE ACCESS AND CAPACITY involves partnering with communities across the Commonwealth to support children and families who are at an risk of becoming involved with MA/DSS.

• ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, RELATIONSHIPS AND ROLES suggests that clear guidance is required regarding the roles and responsibilities of MA/DSS staff, Lead Agency and provider staff, and families.

• EDUCATION AND TRAINING is required to support people in their new roles.

• CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT will ensure the sustained refinement of Family Networks in response to learning, new opportunities, insights, etc.

EXAMPLES OF MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORIES

INSTRUCTIONS: From your point of view, describe a story that epitomizes the most significant change that has resulted from Family Networks in the past year.

A PROVIDER’S PERSPECTIVE:

“The most significant change that I have experienced is being able to work with the entire family…provides the opportunity to develop family plans that incorporate all members including those who may be placed outside the home…has been more successful with reuniting children with more appropriate services than those who may be placed outside the home…has been more successful with reuniting children with more appropriate services and a better understanding of family dynamics.”

A MA/DSS SOCIAL WORKER’S PERSPECTIVE:

“My most significant story would be to watch a successful experience of a child…sitting next to his mother…He was able to work with the entire family…provides the opportunity to develop family plans that incorporate all members including those who may be placed outside the home…has been more successful with reuniting children with more appropriate services and a better understanding of family dynamics.”

Susan Phillips, February 2008