



## Duval County Common Knowledge Visit March 25-26, 2009

### Common Knowledge Project

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Common Knowledge is a Casey Family Programs project aimed at learning what is working on a broad or systemic level towards achieving better outcomes for children, in particular:

- How jurisdictions have achieved safe reduction of the number of children in the child welfare system.
- If/how jurisdictions have used fiscal savings when the foster care population has been reduced.

In 2008, the Common Knowledge team had the privilege of visiting Utah, Alleghany County, and Illinois child welfare systems. These jurisdictions have all demonstrated significant reductions in the number of children in foster care. While these 3 jurisdictions had different approaches to achieving reduction, each has had an intentional change process in place that tied strategies together and utilized effective continuous quality improvement efforts. In addition, the jurisdictions had common elements and strategies they identified as key parts, or “building blocks,” of the efforts that led to reduction.

**Driver of Reform** - high profile child injuries/deaths, consent decrees and general lack of public confidence in the systems led to the development and implementation of reform packages.

**Strong Leadership** - leaders were consistent over time, mission and value driven, innovative, effective communicators, mobilized community support, improved collaboration, built management teams that could sustain the efforts, and managed towards clear, measureable outcomes.

**Values to Practice** - all 3 jurisdictions focused on shifting values related to practice. The shift in values led to changes in desired outcomes, practice, policy and measurement.

**Building the Will/Influencing Policy** - there was a strong commitment to building internal and external public will in support of the outcomes.

**Data Driven** - jurisdictions made access to accurate, real time data a priority; desired outcomes were identified, measured, reported on, and the course was changed depending on achievement of outcomes.

**Financing** - jurisdictions made upfront investments in reform efforts which ultimately led to reduced caseloads and the opportunity to capture savings for reinvestment; funding innovations were also a common strategy.

**Maintaining and Refocusing Momentum** - through strong alliances with community and support of internal staff who subscribe to the vision of change, it seems the reform efforts have been maintained in spite of crisis, competing priorities, and leadership changes.

## **Duval County DCF Background**

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Duval County is located in the northeast corner of Florida and includes Jacksonville, the largest metropolitan area in the state. As of 2008, the total county population was about 850,000, with a population of 212,000 children under 18 years old.

### ***Statewide Privatization***

A 1996 state statute mandated the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) to privatize foster care and all related services throughout the state by 2003. It was decided that services would be contracted out to private agencies while child protection investigations would remain in the public sector to be managed either by the DCF or a county sheriff. The lead agency model was adopted statewide, referred to as Community Based Care (CBC) in Florida. In this model, DCF contracts with one lead agency, which then sub-contracts with other agencies to provide services within a certain geographic area. The lead agencies are non-profit agencies responsible for overall case management for all child welfare cases from point of intake until case closure.

As of March 2005, the statewide transition to privatization was complete, with 20 lead agencies providing child welfare services in the state's 67 counties. Lead agencies manage 500 sub-contracts with community providers and serve an estimated 20,000 children in Florida. Family Support Services (FSS) of North Florida, which serves the children of Duval and Nassau County, became the lead CBC agency in 2002. They currently provide direct client services in Nassau County and through five neighborhood providers in Duval County.

### ***Duval County System Redesign***

In the mid 2000s, Duval County struggled with the systemic issues common to many child welfare agencies: high profile child deaths, a negative public perception, caseloads of 25-30 children, and a lack of consolidated resources for case investigators. This led to a culture that defined safety by removal, to the extent that by 2006, the children in northeast Florida were placed in foster care at a rate double that of the rest of the state and workers were quickly running out of homes in which to place them.

By October 2007, the Duval County DCF and Family Support Services (FSS) recognized the need for drastic change and partnered to launch the ambitious Foster Care Redesign Project. The Duval County Foster Care Redesign Project has 4 main goals:

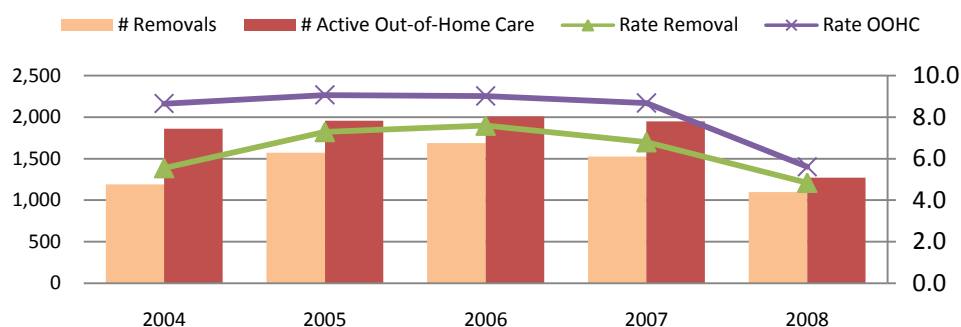
- Safely reduce the number of children in foster care through intensive family support.
- Meet or exceed Florida's goal of a 50% reduction of children in care by 2012.
- Assure a safe and permanent home for every child who comes to the attention of the child welfare system.
- Align results with the Casey Family Programs 2020 Vision on foster care reduction and addressing disproportionality.

Since the launch of the redesign project less than two years ago, Duval County has made significant progress. As of May 2009, they have achieved the highest reduction rate in the state of Florida. Between December 2006 and May 2009, Duval County reduced their foster care population by 50%. Adoptions have increased dramatically to a record high of 576 in 2007-2008. Where they were once experiencing a shortage of foster placements, they now have a

surplus of homes. The reduction has also led to lower caseloads and a decrease in staff turnover.

Since the reduction occurred so recently, current data is not yet available on re-entry and recurrence of maltreatment rates for the children of Duval County. The rate of children who re-entered care within 12 months of being discharged from foster care to reunification from October 2006 - October 2007 was 11.5%. It will be important to track the re-entry and recurrence of maltreatment rate during the initial reduction phase, October 2007 - October 2009, to measure the safety of those children reunified with their families as well as those families that were diverted to prevention services.

**Figure 1: Duval County:  
Removals and Active Out-of-Home**



Source: Casey Florida 2020 Data Briefs

## Partnerships

Ms. Dreicer and Mr. Adams stressed that the involvement of Casey Family Programs is critical to the success of the redesign project and that they play an instrumental role in providing concrete direction for the project. In addition to financial support, Casey Family Programs has provided technical assistance on a wide array of subjects, including a peer session where experts from other states assisted in the development a community care center model. They have also given the team access to best practices in the areas of domestic violence and substance abuse, assessment tools, and data collection. Aligning with Casey's goal to reduce disparate outcomes for children of color in out of home care, Casey and the redesign team have begun a conversation around addressing disproportionality in Duval County. Casey continues to provide resources and assistance to the team as needed.

## Building Blocks of Demonstrated Reduction

Each jurisdiction visited in the Common Knowledge Project has had a formal change/improvement process in place. The process is different for each jurisdiction, and the fundamental building blocks of this transformation, while similar, continue to emerge. Duval County's formal process encompasses a corporate approach through the practice of change management.

A pivotal innovation in Duval County is the use of this process as the framework of the redesign project. Rather than being reactionary in their decision making process, change management guides them through an intentional approach to developing strategies, creating detailed action

plans, and then systematically gathering and analyzing feedback, diagnosing gaps, and celebrating success.

In addition to change management, the privatization of services and the IV-E waiver serve as other key components to Duval County's successful reduction effort. These policies have allowed flexibility in both the type of services that they offer to families, and also in the funding of those programs.

### ***Building Blocks***

#### **➤ Driver of Reform**

A complete system redesign typically does not happen without an impetus to drive the change. In the other jurisdictions visited through Common Knowledge, this driver has been a high profile child death, agency compliance with a consent decree, or a mandate from the legislature to fix the system. In the case of Duval County, there were multiple factors that contributed to the launch of the redesign project. Most importantly, it was the realization that children and youth in the system were not thriving that was the driver of the reform. The political climate at the time was supportive of major system reform, given Secretary Bob Butterworth's new emphasis and leadership around the urgency of permanency for all children. There was also the newly released evidence-based research concluding that children that remain with their families and receive appropriate supports have better life outcomes than those placed in foster care. All of these factors shaped the new values and mission of the redesign project.

#### **➤ Strong Leadership**

One of the common elements apparent during the Common Knowledge visits is the presence of strong leader to guide systems change. This is true in the case of Duval County, as well. Nancy Dreicer inherited a broken system dependent on removals and quickly transformed it to one with a clearly articulated vision, expectations, and outcomes focused on keeping families together. She used her corporate sector expertise to frame the redesign through a change management process, while keeping the focus on good social work practice.

Strong leadership is also evident in the partnership between Nancy Dreicer and Jim Adams, CEO Family Support Services (FSS). There is a synergy between the two agencies that has been critical to their success. Most importantly, they view themselves as one agency and work closely with one another to provide seamless service delivery to their clients. They ensure that their messaging is aligned and that while the CPI Unit and FSS work closely together, roles between the two are clearly defined. In addition, the agencies have weekly meetings and on-going collaboration about the progress of the redesign.

Consistent and clear messaging is another key component to Ms. Dreicer and Mr. Adam's leadership. They immediately recognized the need for a culture shift within the agency. To accomplish culture change, Ms. Dreicer believes, the type of messaging conveyed to staff is critical. Too often agencies attempt to force a shift in values through training on a particular set of policies or practices, rather than finding an ideological point of agreement and then developing the policies and practices around that point. In this case, Ms. Dreicer and Mr. Adams did not promote the new mission as reducing the number of kids in care, but rather as safely keeping families together.

## ➤ Values to Practice

Prior to the redesign, child protection workers lacked alternatives to removal once an investigation was completed. The county did not have the capacity to offer the type of support that families needed in order to remain intact; often case workers saw removing children from their homes as their only option. The new mission of the agency became one of *safely keeping families together*, to help strengthen families by providing supports and services that address the underlying issues that have contributed to child abuse or neglect. While safety was still the top priority, the leaders sought to modify the definition of safety to one that emphasized that “safety is important but *how to deal with safety is the issue.*”

Another value paramount to the redesign is the urgency around quickly moving children to permanency, especially for those youth that have been in care the longest. There is a new expectation that if a family is ready for reunification, it should happen immediately rather than waiting until the next hearing. Another main tenet of the redesign is that all children are adoptable and that those adoptions should happen swiftly.

Leadership in Duval County also emphasized that “culture change is a constant process” and that people will revert back to old habits if leadership is not diligent about staying the course. Although the redesign was developed by upper management, feedback from staff was solicited along the way and systematically used towards modifications. In addition, all DCF and FSS staff received training on the redesign. DCF and FSS expected some resistance at first, especially from the most experienced caseworkers. What they encountered, rather, was that the social workers already believed in the values and were invested in the redesign from the beginning.

Once the new values were communicated to staff, DCF and FSS swiftly implemented new programs to put them into practice. Some of the prevention programs that focused on family support include:

### *Strengthening Ties and Empowering Parents (STEP)*

This prevention program was born from a 2003 grant, expanded through 2007, and is now run by Family Support Services with a staff of 20 workers. STEP is co-located with the Child Protection Investigation (CPI) Unit, who refer the family once a decision is made not to detain the child. The program provides in-home intervention to prevent families from entering the foster care system and work towards stabilization.

The STEP workers have 5 days to contact the family and complete an assessment. Depending on their risk level, families receive between 1 and 3 visits per month, with the worker’s time in the home averaging 4 months. The whole community of Duval County is eligible for STEP, but DCF cases have the first priority. The program currently serves 60 families.

### *Expedited In-Home Protective Services (FAST)*

FAST is another diversion program for families, but involves cases that are at higher risk than STEP cases. This program is for cases where there is legal sufficiency for detainment, but the caseworker and supervisor believe that the child can be diverted from entering the system. The case is immediately transferred to the prevention specialist who provides a certified FAST worker to conduct a joint investigation with CPI *within 24 hours*. Immediately following, there is a family team meeting where the assessment and case plan are developed; this must happen

within 15 days. There is a full time therapist on staff and all FAST workers are certified within child protection.

### Cassat Neighborhood House

Cassat House is a model neighborhood center operated by FSS and funded by the IV-E waiver. It provides access to a full array of services and support for families in their community. The location was chosen to be in the community of the clients so that the center would be accessible and convenient for them. It was placed in the heart of Jacksonville, in the zip code from which the majority of the DCF reports are received.

The goal was to make the center friendly and comfortable for the families that it serves and offset the intimidation that many families feel when visiting government agencies. It is designed to be a “one-stop shop” for families; there is a laptop for families to use to apply for benefits, employment or housing. In addition, many other agencies such as substance abuse treatment providers, support groups, and housing specialists also use the center.

### Co-Location of Services

Another practice innovation in Duval County is the co-location of field staff. An ACCESS (Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency) worker, Florida’s cash assistance program, was placed in the Child Protective Investigation office to help reduce the barriers that kinship caregivers encounter when a relative child is placed with them. These workers help relatives expedite the access to services they need, such as Medicaid and child support assistance.

There were also innovative strategies implemented to reduce the time a child spends in care:

### Integrated Practice Team:

Duval County has implemented significant changes in their review of high-risk investigations and case plans. The Integrated Practice Team was designed for complex cases with a potential removal or where a child has been removed that requires a team of individuals to determine the best case direction. The team also serves the unique needs of gay and lesbian youth and disabled youth if needed. The purpose is to identify the needs and resources for the families and establish creative safety plans.

The Integrated Practice Team has a core standing membership, including a team lead (MSW); mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence advocates; housing and education specialists; ACCESS worker; medical services nurse; and a family advocate from CPI. Decision Team Consultants are now integrated into these team processes to provide leadership and facilitate the teams. These team staffing occur from 9-12 Monday-Thursday, with each case lasting about one hour. Funding is provided from multiple funding streams.

### Rocket Docket

The purpose of expedited hearings, or “Rocket Docket,” is to review and explore a specific issue affecting a child’s permanent plan in a timely manner. There were many cases identified in Duval County that could have been closed by the court, however, the pending hearings were often many months away. In Duval County, Rocket Dockets are used to expedite reunification with families immediately, rather than waiting until the next court hearing.

### Collaboration with Courts

When reunification is not possible, permanent placement through adoption is immediately pursued. Driven by Judge David Gooding, the courts and DCF collaborated to significantly increase the number of completed adoptions. In an effort to speed up the adoption process, the courts have:

- Increased the frequency of hearings
- Set staffing for adoptions on specific days
- Required more detailed and comprehensive case files from caseworkers
- Hosted mass finalization days which motivates case workers and parents to work towards a hard deadline

This collaboration, along with targeted recruitment and diligent use of family finding within FSS, has resulted in an increase of adoptions from 100 in 2005-06 to 576 in 2007-08. Adoption disruptions have been minimal.

#### ➤ **Building the Will**

Nancy Dreicer and Jim Adams believe that a systems transformation can only be achieved if the community as a whole is invested in the change. A communications plan was carefully developed, and included how to inform stakeholders and mobilize community support. The first order of business was to change the community dialogue from one that focused on the negative aspects of the child welfare system to a conversation about helping families safely stay together. DCF and FSS were transparent in every step of the redesign project and phased in the changes incrementally in order to prove their commitment.

Since the inception of the redesign project, the team has met with 80 “opinion leaders” to solicit feedback, communicated with editorial boards, and sent out quarterly newsletter updates to over 700 community members. The redesign team also met regularly with the media to educate them about the agency’s new mission and work. The media was very supportive of the diversion programs and NPR featured a segment on the redesign project. Community meetings were held that were professionally facilitated by a 3<sup>rd</sup> party.

DCF and FSS experienced many unanticipated benefits by engaging the community in this way. There were a multitude of community supporters that identified themselves as allies to the system. Many others weighed in with suggestions for improvement. The redesign team took the time to listen to those skeptical of the new mission and clarified the reasoning behind the efforts.

#### ➤ **Data Driven**

Data was the initial impetus behind Duval County’s redesign project and management uses it to inform them through every step of the redesign process. While DCF does consider itself to be data driven, the goal is not to use the data primarily to reduce their numbers of youth in out of home care. Rather, it tells the story of what is happening in the system. They analyze data to identify why certain youth languish in the system and to identify any gaps in existing services along the way. The project manager efficiently packages the data so that it is accessible and consistent for all staff. Work units use data more strategically, so it is less about benchmarks and numbers of children in care, and more about performance of the unit. FSS now utilizes data from their sub contractors to be more outcomes oriented.

## ➤ **Financing**

When asked about the key component to successful reduction, the number one response is the IV- E waiver. The waiver allows federal foster care funds to be used for any child welfare purpose rather than being restricted to out-of-home care as generally required under federal law. As a result, Duval County is able to flexibly move the money in the way that they determine is best for the children; simply put, the money follows the child and not the placement. It allows them to identify a need and then respond to that need directly. For example, funding for prevention programs, the core of their reduction strategy, has been increased from hundreds of thousands of dollars to 2 million dollars. In addition, Duval County is able to use resources to fund domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health experts for support in the most difficult and complex cases. DCF will continue to receive funding from the IV-E waiver through 2011.

## ➤ **Maintaining and Refocusing the Momentum**

Since the reduction in Duval County has happened so recently, it is too soon to know if the improved outcomes will be maintained in spite of changes in leadership, a shift in political will, or a child crisis. DCF and FSS are taking steps, however, to ensure that they are actively engaged in assessing the outcomes of their decisions and directly responding to any gaps in performance. There is a CQI process in place for the first phase of the redesign; the workgroup will make improvements for the next phase based on the outcomes of that assessment.

## **Challenges**

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As can be expected, the redesign design team encountered some challenges throughout the implementation of the project. One challenge highlighted during the visit was that, although there is accurate data for children that have entered the foster care system, most of their services occur outside of the system through their various diversion programs. To date there are no mechanisms in place to validate whether a child has been through a diversion program unless it is done manually. Ideally, every youth entering into a diversion program would be tracked so that their outcomes can be used to measure the effectiveness of the programs. FSS is currently working towards capturing the data on those children and then integrating this front end data with the state SACWIS system.

Another unanticipated challenge was the foster parent's resistance to accept the agency's new focus on keeping families together. They expressed concern over the safety of the children and the ability of the parents to properly care for them. Ms. Dreicer and Mr. Adams welcomed input from those skeptical of the new mission, since their concerns ensure balance in the decision making process. There has been open communication with the foster parents about the ideology behind the family centered practice model.

One consequence of implementing multiple system changes concurrently is that it becomes difficult to isolate the effects of each intervention; the improved outcomes may be a result of one program or a combination of programs. Since Duval County depends on a CQI process to inform them of the areas needing improvement, this creates a challenge to effectively assess and evaluate the projects' impact.

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Duval County has made significant changes in the system that serves children and families touched by the child welfare system. Through strong leadership, innovation, collaboration, and continuous quality improvement they have developed a comprehensive and nimble system that has led to an increase in the number of children who are able to stay safely at home or achieve permanency more quickly.