ProtectOHIO: Family Team Meetings

Background of Ohio’s Title IV-E Waiver and Family Team Meetings

In October 1997, Ohio implemented ProtectOHIO, a Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration project. ProtectOHIO experiments with the flexible use of federal IV-E dollars; funds normally allowed to be spent only for foster care can be spent for a range of child welfare purposes, based on the belief that purchasing services upfront will benefit children and families. The intent of ProtectOHIO is to reduce the number of children coming into care, decrease the length of stay in care, and increase the number of children reunited with their families or placed in other permanent situations.

The first ProtectOHIO Waiver demonstration program operated for five years, from October 1, 1997 through September 30, 2002 in 14 Public Child Serving Agencies (PCSAs). The waiver was extended into a second phase through September 30, 2009, with an additional short-term extension through July 2010. The second phase had two changes: the demonstration was expanded to 18 counties, and each county would implement Family Team Meetings (FTMs).

FTMs are a method for engaging family members and other people who can support the family for shared case planning and decision-making. The ProtectOHIO FTM model includes regularly-scheduled meetings throughout the life of the case, facilitated by a trained professional, and bring together family, friends, services providers and advocates. The goal of FTM is to come up with creative and effective solutions to case challenges, ultimately to reduce the need for foster care.

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ProtectOHIO FTM model

ProtectOHIO was implemented in 1997, and since then has been expanded to 18 counties.

The three research questions that guide the FTM study include: 1) How is FTM implemented, 2) What is the demonstration counties’ level of fidelity to the ProtectOHIO model, and 3) Do children receiving ProtectOHIO FTM more often experience a positive outcome than children in the comparison sites? The evaluation involved analyses at both the county and case level, using data sources ranging from observations, site visits, and telephone interviews, to web-based surveys, SACWIS data, and a stand-alone ACCESS database.

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Implementation of FTM Across Ohio Demonstration Counties

In implementing the Protect OHIO FTM strategy, demonstration counties hired and/or trained independent FTM facilitators and provided regular FTM sessions throughout the life of an ongoing case. Since 2005, the counties have provided over 21,000 FTM sessions to nearly 14,000 children in close to 7,000 families. Through practice, the demonstration counties identified three key components of the FTM strategy: training & orientation for facilitators, workers, & community partners; family engagement in the FTM process, and facilitator-caseworker collaboration and communication.

Most children in the FTM strategy had an average of three FTM sessions during the strategy period, which were typically held during an initial planning meeting or as part of a quarterly case review. FTM sessions are intended to bring together a varied mix of people to engage in a meaningful discussion of the child’s situation. These FTM sessions had, on average, five attendees; parents and primary caregivers were in attendance at about 75% of the meetings. In addition, findings suggest that offering meetings at flexible times and locations, combined with assisting with transportation, may increase parent attendance rates at FMs. Once at the meeting, families seem to be more engaged when they are prepared prior to the meeting regarding what to expect, and encouraged to bring support people. Additionally, holding the meeting in a comfortable, family-friendly environment may assist with parent engagement.

The strategy lacked strong training, supervision and monitoring components, and retention of qualified FTM facilitators was difficult. Other challenges included managing limited resources and ensuring the attendance of relevant parties. These factors led to wide variation in practice across the demonstration counties. Nonetheless, PCSA staff were positive about FTM, saying that families build stronger relationships, natural supports, and feel empowered; families are linked to more appropriate and timely services; and there is an opportunity to educate the community and improve agency operations and image.

FTM-type services were not limited to demonstration counties; over half of the comparison counties (13 of 17) provided similar services. However, comparison counties were far less likely than demonstration counties to use an independent facilitator (38% versus 94%), to target all open cases for ongoing services (54% versus 100%), or to hold meetings over the entire course of the case (38% versus 100%). In FMs observed by the study team, facilitators, parents, and kin appear to be more highly involved in the demonstration counties than in comparison sites. Since caseworkers in the two county groups were equally involved, these findings suggest that having an independent facilitator may also strengthen parent engagement.

Outcomes for Children in the Demonstration Counties

In the outcomes analysis, the study team examined all eligible children within the demonstration counties compared to those in comparison counties, regardless of whether they actually had been served through the FTM strategy. With this approach one can potentially gain a better understanding of how a change in policy is likely to impact children and families across a system.

Even with inconsistent implementation of the Protect OHIO FTM model, numerous positive outcomes emerged for children in the demonstration counties, relative to the comparison group, clearly suggesting an impact of the Protect OHIO Waiver and the FTM strategy.

In accord with the theory of the waiver, children in the demonstration counties were less likely to go to placement, had shorter case openings, and were less likely to re-open, making them just as safe.

Please refer to the "Primary FTM Outcomes" table on the next page for more information on specific outcomes findings.

Moving Forward & Next Steps

The evaluation findings point to several areas for further study and possible enhancements to the Protect OHIO FTM strategy. At the practice level, these include: developing a statewide comprehensive FTM facilitator’s training; strengthening the facilitator’s group; and providing financial resources for ensuring a family-friendly atmosphere. At the research level, further study includes examination of the relationship between case-level FTM fidelity and child outcomes, and child outcomes based on FTM dosage, number of attendees, and inclusion of family representatives. Additionally, HSRI continues to gather case-level data through the Protect OHIO data system (PODS) and to disseminate findings in a variety of forms to all stakeholders.