

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS IN THE EVALUATION

The third year of the ProtectOhio evaluation has offered many important insights into the experiences of the demonstration and comparison counties. Evaluation team members have spent significant amounts of time in conversation with PCSA administrative staff, learning about changes they have made in PCSA operations and clarifying the meaning behind secondary data on fiscal activities and child and family outcomes.

Overall, the third year analysis of process, outcome, and fiscal data highlights three major contrasts between the demonstration counties and the comparison counties:

- ☞ *First*, the demonstration counties continue to experiment with internal reforms, especially using managed care strategies, more than the comparison counties, although the comparison counties have become more active in the past year.
- ☞ *Second*, on average, demonstration counties reduced paid placement days during the first year of the Waiver, while average comparison county placement day purchases went up. Since then, the differences in placement day utilization between the demonstration and comparison county groups were less definitive. Nevertheless, eight demonstration counties reduced their use of placement days since the beginning of the Waiver, while only five comparison counties made similar reductions.
- ☞ *Third*, overall, length of stay in foster care is significantly influenced by size of county and by selected child characteristics; but a Waiver effect on length of stay is observable only in the large demonstration counties where it was found to have decreased.

Data limitations continue to be a serious issue for the evaluation team. Insufficient reliable data at the state level has forced the evaluation team to turn to the PCSAs themselves for considerable fiscal information, as well as service delivery data which will be used to supplement FACSIS files. The evaluation team will continue to work closely with ODJFS and the participating counties, to assure that as complete data as possible are included in the evaluation.

6.1 MAJOR FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The follow section highlights the major themes and trends that have emerged from evaluation data gathered thus far.

6.1.1 Findings from the Process Evaluation

During the third year of the ProtectOhio evaluation, the evaluation team continued to explore the implementation of the Title IV-E Waiver in the 14 demonstration counties, as well as system reform efforts in the 14 comparison counties. The team examined three broad issues pursued in previous years of the evaluation: use of managed care strategies, the impact of factors external to the PCSA that are likely to influence PCSA caseloads, and the effect of system reform efforts on the broader community.

Managed Care

A primary focus of the Process Implementation Study in Year 3 is an examination of the 28 counties' use of managed care strategies, in particular, the impact of the Waiver on demonstration counties' ability to implement these types of strategies. Findings reveal substantial activity in most of the areas of managed care activity:

- *Service Array:* Overall, service availability appears to be improving, with little difference between demonstration and comparison counties in terms of sufficiency of services. In general, counties most often reported placement and mental health services to be least sufficient, and substance abuse services most sufficient, with non-placement and other services close behind. In the last year, both demonstration and comparison have actively developed new services, often with a preventive focus (e.g. home-based and support services).
- *Financing:* Demonstration counties are using IV-E Waiver flexibility to develop capitated contracts to a greater extent than comparison counties. This year, four of the demonstration counties have capitated or case rate contracts in place (a decrease from six counties last year). Demonstration counties are still in the process of determining the extent of capitation and risk that works best for them and adjusting existing contracts accordingly. At the time of the Year 3 interviews, no comparison counties had implemented these types of capitated contracting arrangements.

Similarly, demonstration counties have made greater use of flexible funds to purchase services to decrease placement. These funds are used to increase staff positions, develop preventive programming, create discretionary spending pots, etc. However, it is interesting to note that comparison counties are also now accessing non-Waiver flexible funds and using them in very similar ways, due to the availability of TANF and other flexible funding sources.

- *Competition:* Both demonstration and comparison counties are offering incentives to enhance their own foster care networks, most often by increasing per diem rates, but also providing other perks to entice families in the community to become foster families. This year, comparison counties appeared more likely to adopt such strategies, helping them to “catch up” to demonstration counties who had already done so in the past. Only two counties (one demonstration and one comparison county) are exploring the use of preferred provider networks.
- *Utilization Review:* Demonstration counties using more utilization review strategies, including more often having in place pre-placement and periodic review processes, although comparison counties are increasingly active in this area. Both demonstration and comparison counties are trying to develop MIS systems to improve decision making processes, with comparison counties beginning to catch up to demonstration counties this year. Caseload Analysis (CLA) is being used in seven demonstration and two comparison counties to monitor use of child welfare resources.

- *Quality Assurance:* This area showed significant growth in the last year. While demonstration counties engaged in more quality assurance activities in Year 2 than did comparison counties, this year less difference is evident between the counties. In certain areas, however, demonstration counties remain more focused than comparison counties: more demonstration counties have designated staff who focus on quality assurance, and they make greater use outcomes in management decisions.

Some interesting changes have occurred in the last year in counties' overall use of managed care strategies. Demonstration counties continue to incorporate managed care strategies into their system reform efforts to a greater extent than comparison counties, but comparison counties are now beginning to close the gap. The greatest growth from Year 2 to Year 3, for both demonstration and comparison counties, occurred in the areas of service array and quality assurance. Counties overall are most active in these two areas and in utilization review, while the areas of least activity include competition, case management, and MIS. Not surprisingly, managed care financing remains the area of largest contrast between demonstration and comparison counties.

External Factors Influencing Caseload

While the Title IV-E Waiver enables ProtectOhio counties to experiment with ways to reduce caseload or alter caseload mix, other factors may have equal or greater impact on PCSA caseloads both in Waiver and non-Waiver counties in Ohio. Among such factors explored during the third year of the evaluation were (1) the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), known as HB484 in Ohio; (2) referrals from Juvenile Court; and (3) Ohio Works First (OWF). Not surprisingly, little differentiation in these areas exists between demonstration and comparison counties.

- ✓ ASFA has impacted both demonstration and comparison counties, often in a positive way, encouraging PCSAs to develop their own systems to more quickly move cases to permanency.
- ✓ Inappropriate referrals from the juvenile court continue to be more of an issue for comparison counties than for demonstration counties, although in the past year several comparison counties have adopted specific strategies which have improved the situation.
- ✓ OWF sanctions have had a relatively minor impact on PCSA caseloads, although both demonstration and comparison counties have been proactive in developing responses to potential new cases where clients have been sanctioned. The increase in availability of flexible funds through TANF has enabled comparison counties to keep pace with the demonstration counties, developing new ways to address family needs before they reach crisis.

In general, while a number of factors in the state of Ohio have the potential to impact PCSA caseloads, these factors are thus far influencing demonstration and comparison counties' caseloads in similar manners.

Impact on Community

The evaluation team also explored how the system reform efforts of demonstration counties are affecting the broader community. In general, when asked how they expect their child welfare reform activities to impact the larger human services community in their county, demonstration PCSAs identified five main arenas of change: increased accountability to the public, better support of PCSA workers, improved provision of PCSA services, enhanced relationships among child serving entities, and strengthened relationships with the public. Most counties perceive that progress has been made in these areas, especially in the area of accountability.

The evaluation team is also monitoring the even broader impact of system reform efforts on county-level social indicators such as teen high school dropout rates and teen pregnancy. Thus far, while counties report improved interagency collaboration and community relations, no parallel changes are evident in the broader social indicators.

6.1.2 Findings Concerning Caseload Trends

Caseload counts are useful to identify differences in PCSAs' use of FACSIS, the relative size of PCSA workloads, and changes in the volume of children served through the baseline and waiver periods. While changes in caseload indicators do not offer insight into why workload volume has changed, it is nonetheless a familiar statistic for PCSA staff, suggesting that some external or internal systemic change is coming to the surface

Caseload data is presented for a baseline period and the first three years of the Waiver period. The baseline data provide a statistical description of child welfare performance indicators and caseloads prior to the beginning of the project. By comparing baseline data and waiver data, the study team can identify and analyze the effects and changes that may have occurred due to changes in service delivery related to implementation of ProtectOhio. The Participant Outcomes study includes all children and all cases recorded on FACSIS as being served during the two periods by the 28 participating PCSAs. Caseload sizes are presented in four areas: (1) child abuse/neglect reports (incidents), (2) ongoing caseloads, (3) custody, and (4) placement.

Child Abuse/Neglect Reports The number of incidents fell in the demonstration counties between the two years of the baseline period, while the number remained about the same in the comparison counties over the same period. During the three years of the Waiver period, the number of incidents slowly fell for both the demonstration and comparison counties

At the individual county level, nine demonstration counties and 10 comparison counties showed decreases in the number of incidents per year, between the end of the baseline period and the end of the third year of the Waiver period. While no initiatives have been specifically directed at reducing the number of reports, several counties reported organizational efforts to increase the “screening out” of cases.

Has the seriousness of the cases changed? In most jurisdictions, the indication rate would be monitored over time as one indicator. As Ohio has converted to a risk

assessment system, this tracking is currently more difficult. The study team designed a method to identify as “targeted” cases all those classified as either indicated/substantiated or having a higher risk level under the case resolution rubric. Between the last year of the baseline period and the third year of the Waiver period, the percentage of children who are targeted has increased in the demonstration counties (by 5%) and decreased in the comparison counties (by 10%).

County-specific data, however, shows a less dramatic contrast: The counties in the demonstration group were split, with seven experiencing increases in the percentage of targeted children and six experiencing decreases over the Waiver period. Similar variability is evident among the comparison counties, with eight counties experiencing an increase in the percentage of targeted children, four a decrease, and two remaining the same.

Ongoing Caseloads: Since the Waiver began, a majority of the demonstration counties (11) and half of the comparison counties experienced increases in the number of children in ongoing cases. During the Waiver period, the overall number of children in ongoing cases increased by 19 percent in the demonstration counties and decreased by 10 percent in the comparison counties. This has some cost and administrative implications, as each child and case must be managed by a caseworker.

Custody Caseloads: Counties have legal responsibility for children in their custody. Each child in custody requires procedural actions by caseworkers and court personnel. Looking at point-in-time counts provides a snapshot of the custody workload level. From the baseline period through the end of the third program year of the Waiver, the number of children in custody increased overall, for both demonstration and comparison counties. Like the aggregate performance, most individual demonstration and comparison counties (8 and 10, respectively) experienced an increase in the number of children in custody.

Placement Caseloads: The count of children in placement at a particular point in time is a familiar caseload count. During the three years of the Waiver period, both demonstration and comparison counties experienced growth in the number of children in placement.

Use of relatives: In an effort to find permanent settings quickly for children in PCSA custody, both demonstration and comparison counties are using different approaches to place children with relatives. Finding a relative home for a child is viewed as supporting the best interest of the child, as well as enabling the county to become less involved in the case and ultimately reducing placement days.

Overall, the number of children in relative care increased by 15 percent between the end of the second year of the baseline period and the end of the third year of the Waiver period, in both the demonstration and comparison counties. In the demonstration group, nine counties experienced increases in the number of children in relative care. In contrast, only six counties in the comparison group experienced a growth in the number of children in relative care.

Use of group care: One objective of ProtectOhio is to reduce the use of group care, simply because it is the most restrictive and most expensive setting for children. The number of children in group homes and CRCs at a point in time is a good volume indicator. It shows how many beds for these high-need children each PCSA needs.

Both the demonstration and comparison counties showed similar increases in their use of group care. The aggregate increase in group home use is reflected in most comparison counties (8) and in many demonstration counties (6).

6.1.3 Findings on Participant Outcomes

In the Year 1 Report, the Participant Outcome Team identified an extensive list of outcome measures using available FACSIS data. In the Year 2 Report, outcome data was presented on the seven priority outcomes. These outcomes focus on the three important areas of permanency, placement stability and safety. Using three years of waiver data, this report focuses on analysis of safety and permanency.

Is the Waiver successful for children in the demonstration counties? Counties answered this question in many ways. The common themes described by the fourteen demonstration counties are two of the areas mentioned above: safety and permanency. Are children not being harmed by the initiative? Are children staying home or achieving permanency faster if they are removed?

Safety: Using recidivism rates as a measure, children are not being hurt by the Waiver. Changes in the recidivism rate of abuse/neglect appear similar for the demonstration and comparison groups. Eleven of 14 demonstration groups maintained or decreased the recidivism rates of all “targeted” or high risk cases. Similarly, ten of 14 comparison counties also maintained or decreased their recidivism rate. While both groups showed a recidivism rate of 4 percent during the third year of the Waiver, the comparison group dropped from 7 percent during FFY 97 prior to the Waiver and the demonstration group reduced only slightly from 5 percent.

As to safety after cases are closed, overall, the demonstration counties maintained an 8 percent recidivism rate from the baseline to the third year of the Waiver period. The comparison group showed an overall drop from 10 percent to 6 percent.

Permanency: Improving permanency for children through the Waiver is still showing mixed outcomes after the third year of the Waiver. The demonstration counties are seeing more children as clients, resulting primarily from the increase in non-abuse neglect cases, which are likely court or service referrals. Most of the comparison counties are seeing fewer children and fewer in placement.

Are there more children in completed adoptions? For children in placement, the push for permanency by counties was expected to increase the number of completed adoptions. In fact, 10 of the demonstration counties and 9 of the comparison counties increased their number of new adoptions over the three years of the Waiver period. Similarly for children in permanent commitment, mainly children whose parental custody had been terminated, the number has increased in nine demonstration counties and eight

comparison counties over the same period. If homes are not found for these children, this could spiral into increased long-term placement caseloads.

Are there fewer children in long-term foster care? Most demonstration counties hoped to decrease the number of children in long-term foster care, now called planned permanent living arrangements. In fact, 11 of the 14 demonstration counties decreased these populations over the three years of the Waiver, while only six of the 14 comparison counties showed decreases.

Case duration: Taking a look at the characteristics of children and how it affects case and placement duration shows several important relationships. For in-home cases, being in a comparison county appears to decrease the duration during the Waiver period, a turnaround of what was happening prior to the Waiver. Urbanicity, age of the child and several of the reform indices, reflecting service delivery changes, also appear significant for duration of in-home cases.

Foster care length of stay: For foster care (placement) duration, overall there has been no observable significant impact of the Waiver on placement duration.

For the two large demonstration counties, there has been a significant Waiver effect, resulting in shorter duration for first placement episodes, when compared to the large comparison counties. The duration of foster care stays increased in the large comparison groups after the Waiver period began. For smaller counties, there was no effect observed.

These trends in safety and permanency should continue to unfold, as the Waiver reaches its fourth and fifth years of activity and the new data can be incorporated.

6.1.4 Findings from the Fiscal Analysis

This year, the fiscal evaluation team continued to use state reporting mechanisms to develop general expenditure and foster care utilization information about all 14 demonstration counties and 14 comparison counties. The team also gathered information about trends in foster care and non-board and maintenance expenditures from five comparison and five demonstration counties from county fiscal years 1996-2000. These data provide the most comprehensive view to date of county expenditure patterns before and during the Waiver period, though only for ten counties at this point.

State level SS-RMS data revealed that all counties are increasing direct county expenditures (county spending on staff and related expenses, not including county-operated residential facilities), with more demonstration sites than comparison sites seeing increases of 25% or more over four years. Direct county spending on non-foster care activities appears to be growing more rapidly in demonstration counties than in comparison counties.

Trends in the third year of state-level FACSIS placement day data did not show conclusive differences between demonstration and comparison counties. However, eight demonstration counties purchased fewer placement days in 2000 than in the year before the Waiver (1997), while only five comparison counties made similar reductions. Demonstration and comparison counties purchased a similar mix of types of foster care placement (foster home, group care, residential treatment), both before and after the Waiver. As a group, neither demonstration nor comparison counties appear to be changing the mix of placement days purchased before and after the Waiver.

The aggregate case studies conducted to date show that both demonstration counties and comparison counties are increasing child welfare expenditures, but demonstration counties are increasing them faster than comparison counties. Growth in foster care board and maintenance expenditures is similar across both groups, but demonstration counties are investing more money in the administration of foster care programs and, to a lesser extent, in more preventive/non-foster care services. These larger investments, relative to comparison counties, should result in fewer paid placement days, lower placement unit costs, and more county staff activities directed toward non-foster care activities. Such changes have not yet been observed in the fiscal data, either among demonstration counties or comparison counties. However, these investments are unlikely to have an immediate effect that is large enough to be observed in the same year the investments were made. The analysis of additional years of data will reveal whether or not the increased investment has the intended effect, in both demonstration and comparison counties.

6.2 NEXT STEPS IN THE EVALUATION

In the fourth year of the ProtectOhio evaluation, the staff of HSRI, Westat, Chapin Hall, and IHSM will continue to explore how Ohio's Title IV-E Waiver is being implemented in the 14 demonstration counties compared to the comparison counties, analyzing how system reform efforts are impacting outcomes and expenditures for families and children. This will include further data collection and analysis of outcome and fiscal data, as well as a more in-depth and qualitative investigation of the overall impact of the ProtectOhio initiative on child welfare agencies and their local communities.

Over the next year, the evaluation team will continue to have ongoing contact with staff at ODJFS and in the evaluation counties. Members of the evaluation team will also continue to attend ProtectOhio Consortium meetings on a regular basis, learning about

activities related to the initiative as well as sharing the progress and finding of the evaluation with these key players.

6.2.1 Process Implementation Study

In the fourth year of the evaluation, the process implementation study will continue to collect information from the 28 evaluation counties, building on information collected in prior years. Specifically, efforts include:

County Debriefing: Many of the 28 evaluation counties have expressed a strong desire to be kept informed about the findings of this evaluation as they become available. For this reason, the team has developed “county debriefings” which were viewed as very successful last year. The study team plans to conduct a similar forum to present the evaluation findings from Year 3. In October 2001, staff from HSRI and Westat will conduct a single ProtectOhio Evaluation debriefing in Columbus for both the demonstration and comparison counties. This debriefing will provide the team with an opportunity to share findings from all three years of the evaluation, as well as receive feedback from county staff. PCSA staff of all levels will be invited to attend, enabling line staff and supervisors as well as administrators to learn about Waiver efforts in other counties.

Site Visits and Focus Groups: In the fourth year of the evaluation, the Process Implementation team will conduct a site visit to each of the 28 evaluation counties. These visits will take place from Fall of 2001 through Spring of 2002 and will be conducted by two-person teams from HSRI and IHSM. Prior to these visits, the team will assemble to determine which areas of interest should be pursued during the visits. From these discussions, the team will develop a detailed interview guide to consistently gather information in all 28 counties.

In Year 4, the site visits will include key informant interviews as well as community forums. The site visit teams will interview PCSA managers and administrators, as well as representatives from other agencies that interact with the child serving agencies (e.g. the agencies traditionally involved in Families and Children First). In these interviews, the team will continue to explore many of the issues that have been pursued throughout the course of the evaluation (e.g. changes in case flow, use of managed care strategies, other system reform efforts). In addition, this year the team will also conduct a series of community focus groups. Separate focus groups will be held for PCSA line staff, service recipients, and provider staff. The purpose of these focus groups is to gain an understanding of how the Waiver is impacting people who are delivering and receiving child welfare-related services. The site visit team will use the information gathered in these interviews and focus groups to develop an understanding of the impact that the Title IV-E Waiver has had on the community as a whole.

Community Impact Study: The next year of the evaluation will focus on expanding efforts on the Community Impact Study. In Year 2, the team developed an SPSS database of county-level statistics that may affect, or be affected by, the IV-E Waiver in

Ohio; in Year 3, additional data was compiled into this database. In Year 4, a major focus of the site visits will be to gather qualitative information about how the Waiver has impacted those in the community, supplementing the social indicator data. This information will be gathered through the key stakeholder interviews and focus groups discussed above. The team will also continue to gather social indicator data to build the community impact database.

6.2.2 Participant Outcomes Study

Westat and other study team members will conduct several ongoing and new activities during this next year. They include collection and analysis of local case registration data, update of FACSIS data, refinement of outcome analysis; and the development and completion of caseworker survey.

Collection and Analysis of Local Case Registration Data: The ODJFS provided us this year with a sample of data available for local micro-FACSIS data for case registration (case category in FACSIS). The data provides information on the original reason why the child /case came to the attention of the PCSA. We will work with ODJFS to determine if data from all 28 counties can be obtained along with the 2002 FACSIS update.

Update of FACSIS Data: An update of FACSIS information will be requested from ODJFS for March 1, 2002. This will expand the data set available to cover full four years of the Waiver period and all available pre-Waiver FACSIS data.

Refinement of Outcome Analysis: Additional analysis using survival analysis and proportional hazards modeling will be conducted to look the relationship of case duration, length of stay in placement and recidivism with county child and system characteristics.

Caseworker Survey: Many questions still remain about the services provided by PCSAs to families. Collecting information from caseworkers will help break into this “black box”. The caseworker survey will provide detailed information on service delivery, use of in-home and placement services, and permanency decisions

The caseworker survey will examine the activities and opinions of caseworkers from the 28 counties participating in the evaluation. Caseworkers from both Waiver and comparison counties will be participating in a brief, self-administered survey in order to examine the impact of “Protect Ohio” on the children and families served by the child welfare system and the caseworker decisions made within the system.

Within each of the 28¹ selected counties, the entire population of approximately 1400 caseworkers will be selected. According to information collected during the process evaluation there are 860 caseworkers in the demonstration counties and 706 in the 12 participating comparison counties. Each county will provide a list of caseworkers with caseloads from administrative records. The appropriate number of survey instruments

¹ Two comparison counties have temporarily decided not to participate in the fiscal analysis.

(one per caseworker) will then be sent to a central contact at each county child welfare agency with instructions for how to administer the survey. Each of these contacts will then distribute the survey instruments to caseworkers with attached envelopes. Caseworkers will be instructed to complete the survey and seal it in the attached envelope. The surveys will then be collected by the central contact and returned to Westat in a packet via Federal Express.

We anticipate that the survey instrument will be administered to caseworkers in January and February of 2002. The survey will address the following research questions:

1. Are families in the demonstration group receiving more services?
2. Is the demonstration impacting delivery of services?
3. Is the demonstration impacting training of workers?
4. Is the demonstration impacting decision-making for the placement of children?
5. Is the demonstration impacting permanency decisions?
6. Is the demonstration impacting the use of in-home versus placement services?
7. Is the demonstration impacting the court-referred caseload?
8. Is the demonstration impacting the worker environment?
9. Is the demonstration impacting the use of relatives by counties?

The research plan and activity dates will be reviewed with ODJFS staff and the ProtectOhio Consortium in October 2001. A final plan will be distributed in October 2001.

6.2.3 Fiscal Outcomes Study

During the fourth year of the evaluation, the fiscal study team will continue to implement the aggregate expenditure data collection plan developed during the third year of the evaluation, described in Section 1.2.4. The team will update the expenditure information collected from the ten counties to date with 2001 expenditure data and will collect expenditure data from 1996-2001 from as many remaining counties as possible.