

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

The fourth year of the ProtectOhio evaluation has offered many important insights into the experiences of the demonstration and comparison counties. The evaluation team has spent significant time with PCSA administrative staff to learn about changes they have made in PCSA operations, and has discussed the findings from analysis of secondary data on fiscal activities and child and family outcomes. Initial forays into overall cost effectiveness suggest possible avenues for future stages of the evaluation.

Two methodological issues continue to strongly influence study results. First, the evaluation's ability to establish statistical significance for the findings is limited by sample size. For both practice changes and fiscal outcomes, the unit of analysis is the county. With data from only 14 demonstration counties and 14 comparison counties, the study team can gain insight into patterns of behavior in one or several counties but is very unlikely to find a statistically significant difference between demonstration and comparison groups. Fortunately, this problem does not affect the Participant Outcomes study, where the availability of child-specific data gives much greater statistical power to the analysis.

The second ongoing methodological challenge is data availability. 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 Process Implementation Study Findings

Four major themes arise from the site visits findings presented in Chapter 2:

- ✓ *Use of Managed Care Strategies:* Demonstration counties continue to experiment with internal reforms, especially the use of managed care strategies, more than the comparison counties. However, as was also evident in the third year of the evaluation, comparison counties have become more active in adopting various managed care approaches, especially in expanding the service array.

In a few managed care areas, a clear difference remains between county groups. Demonstration counties continue to be more active in managed care contracting, a true “managed care” mechanism available to demonstration counties through the flexibility of IV-E Waiver funds. Demonstration counties also do notably more targeting, responding to identified population groups or particular service needs. In

addition, to a somewhat lesser degree, demonstration counties have focused more than comparison sites on fostering competition and enhancing information systems capacity; the latter includes being committed to gathering outcome data.

Overall and in each particular area, the comparison counties continue to pull closer to the demonstration counties in use of managed care strategies, at the same time as demonstration counties have slowed their growth in many managed care arenas.

- ✓ *Interagency Collaboration:* Some variation exists between demonstration and comparison counties in relationships with the local Juvenile courts and the local Mental Health systems, and similar variability is evident in the level of interagency collaborative efforts in the two groups of counties. However, these differences do not appear to be significantly related to participation in the Title IV-E Waiver. Since most counties have levies or other funds that can be used flexibly, they have been able to foster coordinated community services and programs without having to rely solely on flexible Waiver funds.
- ✓ *Systemic reform:* During the course of the Waiver, both demonstration and comparison counties have engaged in reform of their child welfare systems, to varying degrees and with varied focus. In two arenas —increasing in-home services and utilization review/ quality assurance—the demonstration counties appear to have been more active. Consistent with their focus on in-home services, most demonstration counties have capitalized on their flexibility with IV-E funds to develop preventive services and to create discretionary funding pools for one-time family needs. All of this appears to relate to the strength of PCSA leadership, which in turn contributes to staff morale. Demonstration counties seem to have stronger leadership and better workplace environment than comparison sites.
- ✓ *Overall:* On the whole, the findings from the Process Implementation Study show little systematic difference between the demonstration and comparison county groups. The Waiver has provided opportunities for all 14 demonstration counties to modify their operations in ways that might not be possible without the Waiver. Findings indicate that only some of the demonstration counties have taken full advantage of these opportunities, while others have made less significant changes in many of the areas explored in the evaluation. Further, some comparison counties have moved in directions similar to the active demonstration counties, without the benefit of the Waiver. These insights suggest that the flexibility provided by the Waiver may facilitate reform efforts where other factors are already conducive, but may not itself be robust enough to generate consistent changes across the varied set of demonstration sites.

### **6.1.2 Participant Outcomes Study Findings**

In Chapter 3, the Participant Outcomes study team reported findings on caseload trends and on differences in length of stay in foster care:

Caseload Trends: The analysis of caseload trends revealed some contrasts between the demonstration and comparison groups.

- ✓ Although the number of reported abuse and neglect incidents has decreased during the Waiver period for both demonstration and comparison counties, demonstration counties' caseloads have increased during this same period, while the caseloads in comparison counties have decreased.
- ✓ Demonstration counties saw major increases in the use of residential treatment centers, group homes, detention facilities and hospitals for first placements, along with a major decrease in the use of relatives for first placements. These patterns of change may be partly explained by the fact that the demonstration counties had a sharp increase in the proportion of first placements that were male children aged 14 to 17. In the comparison sites, the case mix shifted to children aged 5 to 13.

Participant Outcomes: Using survival analysis, the study team examined the length of stay of children exiting their first foster care placement.

- ✓ Overall, the data reveal that the Waiver has not affected the length of stay of children's first placement in foster care. However, for children in large counties, the Waiver has shortened the length of stay, especially for children first placed in a residential setting, compared to similar comparison group children.
- ✓ The study team further examined different type of exits from those first placements. The data show that, as a result of the Waiver, children entering foster care with similarly defined characteristics are being shifted between exit types, and, depending on their exit destination, they are staying different lengths of time in foster care.
- ✓ The Waiver slowed the rate at which children were reunified with parents/guardians, especially for children in the large demonstration counties. In contrast, the Waiver accelerated the rate at which custody was transferred to a relative, especially for cases without abuse or neglect. The only significant effect of the Waiver on children exiting to adoption was to slow the adoption rate for children initially placed with non-licensed non-relatives. Conversely, the Waiver greatly accelerated the runaway rate.

### **6.1.3 Fiscal Outcomes Study Findings**

Three findings emerge from the fiscal outcomes study presented in Chapter 4:

- ✓ Analysis of available foster care expenditure and related data for demonstration and comparison counties from 1996 to 2001 did not reveal significantly different growth rates for the two groups in their annual foster care board and maintenance expenditures, paid placement days purchased, or unit costs of foster care board and maintenance during the Waiver period. Both groups of counties increased foster care spending as well as overall child welfare spending.
- ✓ All but two of the demonstration counties used all of their additional Title IV-E Waiver revenue on child welfare services *other* than foster care board and

maintenance (these “additional” funds are funds which the counties received through the Waiver funding formula that they would not have received under normal Title IV-E foster care board and maintenance reimbursement rules).

- ✓ Spending on all other child welfare services (excluding foster care) increased significantly more among the group of demonstration counties than among the group of comparison counties. This category includes county staff and related costs, foster care case management costs, and family and community-based services. Much of the increased spending appears to have been in the area of foster care case management, where the demonstration sites increased spending significantly more than the comparison counties.

#### **6.1.4 Initial Insights on Cost Effectiveness**

In the face of mixed findings about differences between demonstration and comparison counties, the evaluation team prepared profiles of two demonstration counties where a fairly clear story can be told about the effects of the Waiver. Lorain and Muskingum PCSAs engaged in concrete activities to advance a reform agenda. The commitment to systemic change appears to have fostered a greater degree of success, in terms of fiscal and participant outcomes, than occurred on average for other counties in the evaluation. This exercise in examining individual counties brings into focus a crucial underlying dynamic: the substantial variability that exists across counties in both context and actions may serve to obscure the full effects of the Waiver. With only 14 counties in each group, systematic patterns of change are extremely difficult to detect. The Waiver may have a powerful effect on certain demonstration counties, but this effect will likely not be visible in the aggregate.

## **6.2 NEXT STEPS IN THE EVALUATION**

To maximize the usefulness of the study findings, the evaluation team recognizes that subsequent work will need to shift in focus. Rather than capturing dramatic effects on fiscal and participant outcomes, the evaluation will be more nuanced, involving a refinement of the original hypotheses to reflect the richness of the evaluation data at the county level. This more detailed evaluation approach would greatly benefit from a longer study period, as would occur under a federal Waiver extension.

The evaluation team will meet in October of 2002 to discuss the specific direction of evaluation activities in Year 5. During this meeting, the team will review the information and data that have been gathered in the first four years of the evaluation and prioritize topics to explore in Year 5.

The evaluation team will also maintain open and ongoing communication with staff at ODJFS and the Consortium counties. Evaluation team members will participate in monthly Consortium meetings and the Consortium retreat, sharing specific evaluation plans, progress made and challenges encountered, and reporting on interim findings from the evaluation. A representative of the evaluation team will also present the study

findings at the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO) conference in September 2002.

### **6.2.1 Process Implementation Study**

After spending four years in Ohio collecting an enormous amount of data through site visits and telephone interviews, the Process Implementation study team intends to delve into this useful information in Year 5 and form a comprehensive portrait of how the Waiver has changed PCSA practice in Ohio. In particular, the team will explore key points of connection between the Process Study information and data from the other studies, enabling the team to develop a fuller understanding of cost effectiveness. The team has just begun this process with the county profiles provided in Chapter 5, and will continue to analyze the connections between implementation of Waiver efforts and the impact on fiscal and outcomes data. With another year of data available, the team expects to be able to make better connections, as 2002 information becomes available for Fiscal Outcomes and limited Participant Outcomes analysis, thus “catching up” to the Process Implementation Study data.

The Process Implementation team has identified several possibilities that might be pursued in Year 5. These options will be discussed among the evaluation team members and with the Consortium.

1. Identify a few key policy issues or topic areas where it is hypothesized that the Waiver should have an impact. These topics might be: (a) use of relatives (especially with recent changes in legislation), (b) safety, (c) family involvement, (d) service availability, (e) relationship between mental health and child welfare (given the changing fiscal environment), (f) cuts in TANF funds, or (g) financing arrangements (e.g., comparing children served by PCSA to those served by a managed care contractor in Franklin County). The study team would conduct targeted telephone interviews to supplement the data that have already been collected to understand more about these key topics.
2. Given the insights that have emerged from a deeper understanding of two demonstration counties, the study team proposes to continue to develop individual county profiles. The evaluation team would carefully select counties to explore particular hypotheses, such as whether the Waiver has a different effect on large counties. Using existing data supplemented by targeted telephone calls, the team would explore the meaning behind changing outcomes and attempt to tie these changes to county efforts and reforms. It would be possible to prepare county profiles for several of the demonstration counties. In addition, the study team could pick a few comparison counties that have made reforms similar to the ones in demonstration counties, and explore how they were able to do these without the flexibility of the Waiver.
3. The family focus groups conducted in Year 4 raised many interesting issues about PCSA operations, especially in terms of family members’ views of PCSA strengths

and challenges. The study team could explore developing a survey to learn more about families' service experiences.

4. In the first year of the evaluation, the study team prepared a report for each county summarizing the Process Study findings. These reports could be updated to include information through Year 4 of the evaluation. The reports could also include some of the findings on fiscal and participant outcomes, but would be necessarily be more descriptive than analytic, and would offer much less detail than the proposed county profiles proposed in item 2 above.

One consideration in the choice among these options for Year 5 of the Process Implementation Study is the uncertainty of the extension of the Waiver. If the Waiver ends in June 2003, the evaluation team will focus clearly on developing conclusions from the entire study, rather than exploring new questions.

### **6.2.2 Participant Outcomes Study**

Plans for next year include both additional analyses and enhancements to previous analyses. The team will present and discuss results from this year's report to ODJFS and PCSA staff. Recommendations will be incorporated into the analysis plan for the 2003 final report. To accomplish this, future plans include enhancing the survival analysis and analyzing the Caseworker Survey data.

#### *Enhancements to Analysis*

After discussing the present analysis with other evaluation team members, the team has identified several enhancements to be considered. These include adding additional information such as IV-E eligibility, adjudication, and court disposition information to the analysis. Another way to enhance the present analysis is to study additional outcomes. Those not previously modeled separately include emancipation, death, and institutionalization. Expanding on the analysis of re-entry from reunification, re-entry would be evaluated from custody to a relative, jail, and running away. The Waiver effect on multiple placements could also be included, along with the effects for ongoing long-term placements beginning prior to the Waiver.

Further analysis of the stability of the placement, number of moves within a placement, and movement to less restricted settings might also be warranted. Recidivism of abuse and neglect could be added to allow further clarification of the effects found when studying allegations of abuse and neglect.

Additional outcome measures from the 22 outcome domains presented in the Year 2 and 3 reports will be reassessed to see if they have changed after five years of the Waiver.

The study team will review these alternatives in the Fall and create an analysis plan for the final 2003 report.

### *Caseworker Survey*

To assess the services used by families and the service decisions made by caseworkers, the study team conducted a survey of caseworkers, “*Services to Children and Families in Ohio.*” The survey was fielded during the fourth year of the evaluation, in February and March of 2002. The survey was designed to address the following research questions:

- Are families in the demonstration group receiving more services?
- Do the caseworkers in the demonstration group have greater access to services?
- Are caseworkers in the demonstration group receiving more training?
- Is the demonstration group altering the decision-making process for the placement of children?
- Do caseworkers in the demonstration group have more services to support permanency decisions?
- Are there differences in the court-referred caseload between the demonstration and comparison groups?
- Is the worker environment better in the demonstration group?

The caseworker survey examined the activities and opinions of caseworkers from the 28 counties participating in the Evaluation. Caseworkers from both demonstration and comparison counties participated in a brief, self-administered survey in order to examine the impact of “ProtectOhio” on the children and families served by the child welfare system and the caseworker decisions made within the system.

In December 2001, each of the 28 counties provided a current caseload list of each active worker and every ongoing case assigned to them. Within each of the 28 selected counties, the entire population of caseworkers with current caseloads (1,408 workers total) was selected to complete the two sections of the survey—one section on attitudes, training, and other general administrative topics, and a second section that asked questions about one of their current cases. Cases were chosen for each caseworker based on a random selection. One case was selected for each caseworker completing a survey.

The caseworker survey provides detailed information on service delivery, use of in-home and placement services, and permanency decisions. Preliminary data will be presented to the ProtectOhio Consortium in late 2002, and a complete analysis will be included in the final ProtectOhio report in June 2003.

### **6.2.3 Fiscal Outcomes Study**

During the fifth 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. The team will update the expenditure information collected from the 23 counties to date with 2002 expenditure data and will collect expenditure data from 1996-2002 from the remaining counties, to the extent available.