

FINAL COMPREHENSIVE REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the fifth year of the ProtectOhio evaluation, the evaluation team has integrated the findings from the various evaluation studies into topic areas, exploring issues from previous years in greater detail and investigating new topics of interest. In the past year, the evaluation team has spent significant time exploring service array, court referrals and interagency collaboration. In addition, the team has discussed the findings from analysis of secondary data on fiscal activities and child and family outcomes, including a counterfactual model assessing the impact of the Waiver on the performance of demonstration counties. This executive summary provides a brief overview of the findings presented in the Final Comprehensive Report of the evaluation.

OVERVIEW OF WAIVER AND EVALUATION APPROACH

In October 1997, Ohio implemented “ProtectOhio,” the Title IV-E Child Welfare Demonstration project. As one of a score of Title IV-E Waiver programs in the country, ProtectOhio experiments with flexible use of federal IV-E dollars. The underlying premise of the Title IV-E Waiver is that changes to federal child welfare eligibility and cost reimbursement rules will change purchasing decisions and service utilization patterns in ways that are favorable to children, families, and communities. ProtectOhio adopts a managed care approach to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the child welfare system, focusing on reducing use of out-of-home placement, increasing reunification and permanency, and improving family functioning, while also maintaining a cost-neutral budget.

Since the Waiver began, the local public child-serving agencies (PCSA) in fourteen Ohio counties have taken advantage of considerable flexibility in how they use Title IV-E funds. The flip side of this flexibility, however, is risk: counties participating in ProtectOhio have taken on most of the financial risk for the cost of child welfare services. These counties have traded unlimited federal participation in the costs of out-of-home care for the flexibility to spend limited funds on a range of child welfare services. Their commitment signals a desire for systemic change in the management of child welfare services, as the vehicle for improving child and family outcomes.

Because children’s services in Ohio are county-administered, much variation exists among the 88 county PCSAs. The Title IV-E Waiver provides an opportunity for PCSAs to explore innovative approaches to meeting the needs of children and families in their community. Fourteen counties chose to participate in the Title IV-E Waiver: Ashtabula, Belmont, Clark, Crawford, Fairfield, Franklin, Greene, Hamilton, Lorain, Medina, Muskingum, Portage, Richland, and Stark.

As part of its Title IV-E Waiver, Ohio committed to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the ProtectOhio demonstration. Essential to the evaluation is examination of 14 comparison counties, chosen for their similarities to demonstration counties. The selected

comparison counties include: Allen, Butler, Clermont, Columbiana, Hancock, Hocking, Mahoning, Miami, Montgomery, Scioto, Summit, Trumbull, Warren, and Wood.

Evaluation Design

In July 1998, the Ohio Department of Human Services contracted with a team of researchers led by Human Services Research Institute (HSRI), to evaluate the impact of ProtectOhio on outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. The five-year evaluation project consists of four related studies, each of which assesses the central program hypothesis from different perspectives. The various members of the evaluation team carry primary responsibility for one or more of these studies:

HSRI leads the Process Implementation Study. With support from the Institute for Human Services Management (IHSM) and a private consultant in Ohio, the study team has examined the activities that have occurred in each of the 14 demonstration counties as they have implemented their own distinctive Waiver plan. The team has also tracked contemporaneous developments in the comparison set of 14 non-Waiver counties. Through site visits and other primary data collection methods, the Process Implementation Study team has documented the evolution of Waiver-generated changes in state and local plans and explored how the varying approaches and implementation trajectories have affected the achievement of desired outcomes for children and families.

In Year 5 of the evaluation, the Process Implementation Study team targeted its new data collection efforts to a few key areas of importance: prevention initiatives, mental health services, the PCSA-juvenile court relationship, and interagency collaboration. Team members conducted telephone interviews with selected counties and fielded a survey of child-serving agencies in each county. The Process Implementation Study Team's findings are presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this report.

HSRI leads the Community Impact Study, with support from IHSM. The study team has addressed how changes in each demonstration PCSA affect the larger community's service infrastructure and dynamics, noting changes over time and between demonstration and comparison counties. In Year 5 of the evaluation, the Community Impact Study has been merged into the Process Implementation Study, through the aforementioned agency survey addressing changes in interagency collaboration during the Waiver period (See Section 2.2 Methodology).

Chapin Hall Center for Children, at the University of Chicago, has primary responsibility for the Fiscal Outcomes Study. The fiscal analysis has examined whether or not counties changed child welfare spending patterns as a result of receiving Title IV-E foster care funds as unrestricted child welfare revenue and, if so, how expenditure patterns changed. The fiscal outcomes study consists of the compilation and analysis of state and county-level aggregate expenditure information for child welfare services in each demonstration and comparison county from 1996, two years prior to the Waiver, through 2002, the fifth year of the Waiver. In Year 5 of the evaluation, the study team collected and analyzed

expenditure data for thirteen demonstration and thirteen comparison counties. Fiscal Outcome Study findings are reported in Chapter 4 of this report.

Westat bears primary responsibility for the Participant Outcomes Study. This research effort examines the impact of ProtectOhio on the children and families served by the child welfare system. The design requires defining measurable outcomes for PCSA clients. Through analysis of administrative data on all families served, the study team has compared service utilization and outcomes for participants over the five-year period of the Waiver, by county group and county size. In addition, the team conducted a survey of all active caseworkers in Year 4 about their background, attitudes, and a randomly selected open case. In Year 5 of the evaluation, the team has used survival analysis methods to examine how child and family outcomes would have differed in the absence of the Waiver, with a focus on differences in the length of first placement by specific exit outcomes. Participant Outcomes Study results are presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of this report.

MAJOR FINDINGS

In the course of the five-year evaluation, the study team explored county-level changes related to 29 “priority outcomes” of ProtectOhio. These outcomes can be seen to represent a large set of system reforms and interventions, as well as outcomes for children and families. The following section summarizes how the demonstration counties responded to the Waiver stimulus – what system reforms they put in place and what interventions they employed – compared to their own pre-Waiver behavior and the concurrent behavior of the comparison counties. The next section discusses whether and, if so, how these actions contributed to improvements in child and family outcomes.

Demonstration Counties’ Response to the Waiver

During the Waiver period, demonstration counties pursued a variety of initiatives to reform child welfare practice, some of which occurred systematically across the sites and some that were unique to one or a few sites. During the same time period, comparison counties also pursued many programmatic changes, some very similar to actions taken in the demonstration sites. As a result, a number of areas show a systematic difference between demonstration counties and comparison counties, while in other areas, expected differences did not emerge.

Process Implementation Findings

The Process Implementation Study team explored two broad areas – use of managed care strategies and interagency collaboration. With the flexibility afforded by the Waiver, demonstration counties were expected to be more active in using a broad range of managed care strategies and more successful in building collaborative ties to other child-serving organizations in the community, than were comparison sites. In six areas, the actions of the demonstration counties did not appear to differ systematically from those in the comparison counties:

- Case Management: No significant differences emerged between demonstration and comparison counties in the extent of changes made in three main aspects of case management: family involvement in case decision-making, team conferencing, and screening processes. PCSAs in both groups have slowly increased opportunities for families to be involved in case-level decisions; and both groups have taken substantial steps to increase use of team conferencing methods and to alter screening procedures for cases referred to the PCSA.
- Financing: The demonstration sites made greater use of managed care contracting mechanisms, although the number of counties participating was quite small (3 counties), making this an interesting contrast but not a systematic effect across the demonstration counties.
- Competition: Both demonstration and comparison counties have consistently sought to increase competition by expanding agency foster homes, through increased per diem payments and other methods.
- Utilization Review and Quality Assurance: Demonstration counties were only slightly more likely to conduct formal reviews of children entering placement and already in placement; and no difference emerged between the groups due to use of caseload analysis.
- Service Array: Little difference was evident between the two groups concerning improved service availability, the nature of new services developed, or timely access to services.
- Interagency Collaboration: Demonstration and comparison PCSAs have similarly strong relationships with the local Juvenile Court and with the local mental health board; in addition, in most sites, interagency work of the Family and Children First Council tends to dominate collaborative activities.

In five areas, the Waiver appears to have led to important changes in the demonstration sites that were not matched by the comparison counties:

- Service Array: In one aspect of service array, an important difference emerged concerning preventive services. Demonstration counties, more so than comparison sites, appear to be targeting new prevention activities to areas of insufficiency. In addition, demonstration sites appear to be more focused on prevention activity, with more of them both expressing a strong commitment to prevention and increasing spending on non-foster care at a rate above the median of all counties.
- Targeting: Initial exploration indicates that demonstration counties more often target their new service development to areas of noted insufficiency, and generally report doing more targeting of new initiatives to particular populations, than comparison sites.

- Quality Assurance and Data Management: Demonstration sites give moderately more attention to outcomes data, more often systematically gathering outcome information, sharing it with staff, and using it in management decisions.
- Overall Use of Managed Care Strategies: In both Year 2 and Year 4, a notable difference appeared between demonstration and comparison counties in use of managed care strategies – comparison sites had lower scores than did demonstration counties. In Year 2, the difference was statistically significant. This difference in overall score reflects differences in nearly all the components: in Year 4, the average demonstration county score was higher than that of comparison sites for seven out of the eight managed care components.
- Interagency collaboration: A key element of interagency collaboration, pooling or sharing funds, revealed a moderate difference between demonstration and comparison sites – during the Waiver, demonstration sites were somewhat more likely to adopt joint funding mechanisms. In addition, a Year 5 survey of child-serving agencies in all 28 study sites revealed a significant difference between the two county groups -- demonstration county collaborative partners view their collaboration with the PCSA as more successful than do comparison county partners.

Taken all together, the managed care findings may mean that the Waiver enabled counties to change practice more easily to include managed care strategies, but we do not yet know whether such changes have a direct impact on child and family outcomes. Some of the case studies (Chapter 7) suggest an association between rational management strategies and improved outcomes.

The findings on interagency collaboration suggest that the Waiver has had a measurable impact on the level of collaboration between demonstration PCSAs and their collaborative partners. We do not yet know the exact nature of many of these collaborations, and it is unclear exactly how these collaborations are contributing to improved outcomes for children.

Fiscal Findings

Using a strict test of statistical significance, the Fiscal Study team found no significant differences between demonstration and comparison counties in the patterns of change in child welfare spending over the course of the Waiver. Both groups of counties experienced growth in paid placement days and in the average daily cost of foster care, with no significant differences between them. In addition, neither group significantly changed the proportion of placement days that occurred in residential settings. However, in two areas, the patterns of change were close to significant and are thus important to highlight:

- Growth in foster care spending: Nearly all study counties increased foster care spending from the pre-Waiver period to the end of the Waiver period, but eight of the ten counties that grew the fastest, with over 50% growth from the baseline to 2002,

were comparison sites. This suggests that demonstration counties may have been able to contain foster care growth more than comparison sites.

- Growth in non-foster care expenditures: Overall growth in foster care spending means no shift occurred from foster care to non-foster care; nonetheless, most counties increased spending on child welfare activities other than foster care board and maintenance (called “other child welfare” spending). Most of the demonstration counties generated some revenues from the Waiver that could be used for such new spending on other child welfare activities. Ten of 11 demonstration counties spent more than their additional Waiver monies to increase other child welfare expenditures. And, although not statistically significant, the demonstration counties appear to have increased other child welfare expenditures by more than the comparison counties – seven comparison sites and only one demonstration site showed the smallest growth rates. These findings suggest that demonstration counties are taking advantage of the flexibility of the Waiver to expand their activities in areas other than foster care board and maintenance.

Outcomes Resulting from Program and Fiscal Changes

The Participant Outcomes Study examined a wide range of child and family outcomes, comparing the performance of demonstration and comparison counties during the pre-Waiver and Waiver periods. The Year 2 and Year 3 findings provided preliminary indications of what might have been happening under the Waiver – preliminary because the Waiver had been in operation for only a short time and the analyses were not adjusted for child characteristics that might have influenced the outcomes. In those years, differences between demonstration and comparison counties, or between pre-Waiver and Waiver periods, could not be attributed to the Waiver but provided a “check” on permanency and safety trends. The Year 4 and Year 5 analyses reflected more years of Waiver experience and data, and controlled for child characteristics, and so constitute the primary findings on the effects of the Waiver. This section describes primary and preliminary findings in the high-priority areas of permanency, placement stability, use of relatives, child and family well-being, and child safety, followed by a discussion of changes in the population entering placement and what this means for the PCSAs. Finally, some findings from the six county case studies are presented.

Permanency

The primary findings were that the Waiver did not have significant effects in the permanency areas of reunification rates, adoption rates, or median length of stay prior to reunification or adoption. The Waiver effect on exits to return home, while being significant overall, actually occurred in only one of the demonstration counties, and the proportion of children exiting to adoption was not larger than it would have been without the Waiver. Median length of stay in foster care prior to exit to return home or to adoption was not significantly different in the demonstration counties overall than it would have been without the Waiver.

However, primary county-level findings on permanency indicated that a few demonstration counties showed a significant Waiver effect on duration of first placement, depending on the exit destination. Three counties had longer length of stay for children exiting to return home, compared to what would have happened without the Waiver; two counties had shorter stays for children being adopted; and two counties experienced longer median stays across all exits, while one large county experienced a shorter median stay across all exits. These varied findings highlight the importance of examining individual county situations, due to the strong contrasts among the counties in the strategies they employed under the Waiver.

Although no significant overall differences in adoption rate emerged between the demonstration and comparison counties as a result of the Waiver, the preliminary findings were that in both groups the number of children eligible for adoption subsidies (a proxy for adoptions) increased substantially during the first three years of the Waiver. This showed that substantial changes were being achieved in the area of adoption, but the lack of significant Waiver effects in the primary findings indicated that those changes would have occurred even without the Waiver.

Placement Stability

Only preliminary findings were available for placement stability, and they indicated that demonstration and comparison counties had similar outcomes. During the first two years of the Waiver, both groups increased the percentage of children who experienced no moves during their first placement, and decreased the percentage who experienced five or more moves. In addition, the demonstration sites were no more successful than the comparison group at moving children to less restrictive placement settings.

Use of Relatives

Granting custody to relatives appears to have increased more in demonstration counties. The primary findings were that, among children exiting their first placement during the Waiver, the proportion going to relatives' custody was four percentage points higher (18 percent of all exits) than it would have been without the Waiver. And this pattern is significant in six of the 13 demonstration counties, indicating the breadth of the practice change.

The trend in the use of relatives as a placement setting appears more mixed. The preliminary findings indicated that during the first three years of the Waiver, both demonstration and comparison groups increased the number of children temporarily placed with relatives, but this pattern held in nine demonstration sites and only six comparison sites. However, by Year 5, the primary finding emerged that only four demonstration counties significantly increased use of relatives for first placements, while three counties significantly decreased those placement settings.

Cases Served In-home

In the absence of data related to family functioning, the study team examined child and family well-being through analysis of whether a case was served in-home or went into

placement at some point during the year. Primary findings indicated that little change occurred during the Waiver in the proportion of children served in-home; both the demonstration and the comparison counties maintained a pattern of serving approximately three quarters of all cases in-home.

Child Safety

The primary findings on child safety indicated that, for children exiting their first placements to reunification, there were no significant Waiver effects on re-entry rates or on the median duration of reunification before re-entry, either in specific counties or for the demonstration counties overall. These results indicate that the Waiver maintained the safety of children returned home at the same level that it would have been without the Waiver, thus alleviating the concern that a focus on reducing placement usage might lead to children being returned home too soon and needing to re-enter care.

However, another primary finding, using other data and methods, presented a different picture of safety. The Year 5 caseworker survey found significantly more multiple case openings in demonstration counties, possibly suggesting that demonstration counties closed cases more quickly than comparison counties and thus experienced more case re-openings. It remains unclear whether this can be attributed to the Waiver and the extent to which this posed a safety risk to children.

A preliminary finding supported the conclusion that children in demonstration counties were not demonstrably more unsafe. During the first three years of the Waiver, the majority of counties in both demonstration and comparison groups decreased recidivism among targeted children with abuse/neglect reports as well as among closed cases. Although the demonstration sites did not fare differently than the comparison group, these findings suggest that children were probably as safe under the Waiver as they would have been otherwise.

It is important to note that both preliminary and primary findings pertaining to child safety were severely constrained by data limitations in the areas of substantiation and indication, as well as the variation among the counties in how they categorize cases, assess risk, and record risk levels. Further research on child safety outcomes is critical before concluding that the Waiver did not worsen child safety. This chapter later proposes additional research questions and activities to assess safety outcomes for children not yet included in the safety analysis, as well as to document the safety outcomes of new screening and prevention initiatives implemented by the counties.

Population Entering Placement

The primary findings were that, compared to the pre-Waiver period, several demonstration counties saw significantly greater numbers of children in first placement during the Waiver who were under one year of age, white, and with alleged abuse or neglect; and fewer children who were 14-17 years old, of “other” race, with alleged sexual abuse, and with cognitive disabilities. These differences suggest that a shift was required in the focus of demonstration PCSAs. For example, increases in the proportions

of children who were younger and those with alleged abuse or neglect possibly indicate fewer court referrals and greater demand for adoptive homes and intensive family intervention services.

Case Study Findings

In addition to the findings from the Participant Outcomes Study, discussed above, the evaluation team has also begun to integrate all the findings through the experience of six individual counties.

- The two most successful counties profiled – Lorain and Muskingum – share a pattern of strong leadership and careful planning of systemic reforms. Both demonstrated an early and ongoing commitment to expanding resources for child welfare activities other than foster care board and maintenance, well beyond the flexible funds generated by Waiver participation. They also sharply reduced placement utilization, instead serving children in-home or through referral to community agencies.
- The other four case study counties experienced more mixed results during the course of the Waiver. Placement days increased in three of the sites, and the amount of flexible IV-E funds was limited. All the sites were able to leverage funds from other sources to expand non-foster care activities; one county turned to private managed care contracts, another built a valuable collaboration with the juvenile court; and another shifted its population focus to younger children. In the end, all seemed to find some success in changing the common patterns of intervention with new cases, but continued to struggle with the challenge presented by children already in foster care at the start of the Waiver, a group that received little systematic attention by either policy makers or the evaluation.

Key Factors That Diminished the Measurable Effect of the Waiver

The evaluation findings outlined above are a mix of evidence of a significant impact of the Waiver and areas where evidence of a systematic impact is lacking. Research always faces the risk that, even with perfect data, it will miss an effect that existed but could not be detected. As a consequence, the evaluation team is mindful that Waiver effects could have occurred in demonstration counties that were distinguishable from comparison counties but were not detectable using the data available. Why did the Waiver *appear to fail* to stimulate some of the expected changes among demonstration counties? The evaluation team hypothesizes several possible explanations:

First is the larger context of funding for public child welfare in Ohio. Title IV-E is but one of several major funding sources; indeed, local tax levies generate over half the funds for the PCSAs. Because these tax levy funds are also flexible, PCSAs had the ability without the Waiver to change the way these funds were invested. It is possible that PCSAs needed more than flexibility to make investments to reduce foster care expenditures. Further muting the effect of IV-E changes is the fact that, during the later years of the Waiver, Ohio counties experienced substantial losses in state support. Local mental health boards and juvenile courts faced serious cutbacks, especially in the past

two years; and funds available due to federal changes in welfare programs initially supported child welfare initiatives, but then these too were severely curtailed as welfare rolls rebounded in the economic downturn.

Second, Ohio child welfare programs are administered at the county level, leading to substantial variability in county program initiatives. Each participating county undertook somewhat different approaches to reform, varying in nature and intensity of effort. For example, Franklin County entered into a managed care contract whereby private provider groups would serve substantial proportion of the child welfare population, while Portage County had a small case rate contract for selected children awaiting adoption; Lorain County systematically modified agency operations in accordance with a strategic plan and accreditation standards of practice, while several other counties tried one or more discrete practice changes; Muskingum County consciously expanded reliance on relatives, both for temporary placement and as permanent homes for children in care, through family group conferencing, while many other counties pressed case workers to look more to relatives without putting specific strategies in place. Where analysis occurs at the county level, the study team has limited ability to tease out the effects of competing programmatic initiatives when the sample size is only 14 demonstration sites and 14 comparison sites.

Third, many of the counties in the study are small in size, with annual foster care caseloads often too small for complex analysis. The small sample sizes mean that, to detect a significant change, the impact would have to have been very powerful. In particular, the presence of many small counties causes confidence intervals on the length of stay findings to be extremely large, making it hard to say whether there is no effect or whether the sample size is too small to reveal the effect.

Fourth, data limitations clearly impact the study team's ability to document changes related to the Waiver. For the Fiscal study, the team's ability to interpret expenditure trends was limited by imprecision of data provided by the counties, the inability of PCSA staff to interpret trends in their own fiscal data, and the absence of complete data from several of the 28 counties. For the Participant Outcomes study, the study team faced the usual challenges associated with large secondary data sets, such as changing and inconsistent variable definitions and data entry procedures, loss of some data in the transmission process, case duplication, and data modifications over time.

Fifth, demonstration county administrators lacked the management tools that would have linked investments in family and community-based services to outcomes and allowed the staff to track progress towards outcomes and change course as necessary. When the Waiver began, the fiscal study team judged that no demonstration county or comparison county had a comprehensive, sophisticated, integrated approach connecting budgeting, program implementation and outcomes in child welfare. For the most part, county fiscal administrators seemed to operate separately from program administrators. Most counties' fiscal offices did not track aggregate expenditures by service type or program area and almost none possessed the ability to track service costs and outcomes at a child-specific level.

During the five years of the Waiver, the team observed that the majority of county administrators did not develop stronger connections between finance, program operations and outcomes. Based on annual interviews with fiscal staff, the team perceived that neither demonstration nor comparison county staff developed comprehensive new information resources linking these three components of their operations. Budgeting and expenditure tracking for child welfare services appeared to continue in the same manner as it had prior to the Waiver in all of the counties analyzed. County budgets were not developed by program area with specific expectations for outcomes to be achieved. County expenditures were not tracked by program and analyzed for impact and effectiveness at the aggregate or the child-specific level.

The Process Implementation Study provides ample evidence that demonstration county officials undertook a range of activities and new programs as part of their Waiver project. Based on interviews with county staff and observation of Consortium meetings, the study team observed that county program administrators, along with state and federal officials, seemed to believe that flexible funding by itself would inspire large-scale innovation in child welfare services and result in reductions in foster care use and cost. Without the tools to manage the stimulus of the Waiver, county administrators were left to hope that programmatic changes would drive changes in spending without their explicitly tracking expectations and monitoring progress, changing course as necessary.¹

Sixth, the risk associated with not responding to the Waiver stimulus was limited. In general, PCSA fiscal staff appeared to view the Waiver as a relatively low-risk proposition. While they may not have known how much additional revenue the PCSA was receiving through the Waiver, most fiscal staff believed that their agency was receiving more revenue than it would have without the Waiver. Counties were encouraged to participate in the Waiver only if they were expected to receive at least as much Title IV-E revenue through the Waiver as they would under normal Title IV-E reimbursement rules. The state provided a formula to help counties make this assessment. During the implementation of the Waiver, reports from ODJFS showed most counties receiving additional revenue as a result of Waiver participation.

While the fiscal incentive to reduce foster care expenditures existed, the financial risk of *not* reducing foster care expenditures was muted. As a result, during the five years of the Waiver, perception of the Waiver among PCSA fiscal staff continued to reflect a focus on securing enough revenue for expenses recommended by program staff. Most demonstration county fiscal staff treated the Waiver award the same way they had treated other sources of flexible revenue in the past. They appreciated its predictability and used it as another slice of the revenue pie that was not explicitly connected to any type of spending or a particular outcome.²

¹ It is important to note, however, that Process study findings suggest some movement among counties, especially demonstration sites, to better share programmatic and fiscal information at the management level to facilitate development of the needed tracking and planning functions; see Chapter 2, Section 2.7.3.

² **The most sophisticated demonstration county fiscal staff viewed the change from fee-for-service reimbursement to a fixed amount of revenue primarily as a potential source for additional revenue that the county would not have gotten under the fee-for-service arrangement. The Waiver provided an opportunity for maximizing revenue from other sources while maintaining historical levels of Title IV-E board and maintenance reimbursement.**

Finally, integrating the data from all the studies presented its own set of challenges. Each study team, given the varying nature of the data being gathered, used somewhat different standards to judge a finding as worthy of note. In the Process Implementation Study, which relied almost exclusively on qualitative data at the county level, no formal statistical significance was calculated in most areas of examination. In comparing demonstration and comparison counties, a difference of two or three counties was termed “slight”, four to six counties was termed “moderate”, and a difference of seven or more counties was judged to be “substantial”. By contrast in the fiscal study, which similarly used the county as the unit of analysis, the team used a non-parametric test to compute statistical significance. In addition, the findings from the length of stay analysis and the fiscal analysis are not completely compatible. As noted on page 94, the populations used in the two analyses are not identical; each study examines a somewhat different part of the overall population of children served. Also, the length of stay analysis is able to control for many child characteristics, something that cannot be done in the fiscal study because it relies on county-level data rather than child-level data.

In the end, the Title IV-E Waiver did not appear to be strong enough to alone generate fundamental reform of the state’s public child welfare system. While demonstration counties reported many activities and programs undertaken as a result of the Waiver, these actions were neither sufficiently large-scale nor sufficiently targeted to bring about a statistically significant change in foster care expenditures or child and family outcomes. The Ohio child welfare system is quite complex; adoption of broad-based system reform in the absence of well-articulated logic models targeting specific outcomes is unlikely to succeed. The Waiver appears to be one route to reform, but not the only route and not a sufficiently robust one to alone lead to improved child and family outcomes. In a few isolated demonstration counties where the Waiver has been accompanied by clearly defined goals and a rational implementation plan, it seems to contribute to the reform agenda and lead to reductions in placement utilization and increased activity in non-foster care areas.

With further time to address some of these barriers and limitations, the evaluation can be expected to bring to light more varied effects of Waiver participation in the demonstration county group and/or in particular counties that will supply deeper information to understand the complex dynamics of systemic reform.

PROPOSALS FOR FUTURE WORK

Further evaluation of ProtectOhio will build on the findings summarized above, addressing areas where more information is needed to fully illuminate the effects of the Waiver. To tackle the factors that limited the first evaluation, the evaluation team proposes a three-pronged approach:

- Research in areas that the evaluation team did not yet explore;
- Exploration of areas where more in-depth information could reveal more subtle effects;

- Ongoing data collection in areas where the existing approach has been valuable but more time is needed to observe Waiver effects.

New Areas of Research

Due to challenges and limitations in available data, both Westat and Chapin Hall used the first few years of the evaluation to clarify and implement the best approach to data collection and analysis. As a result, time did not allow for a full examination of certain critical areas such as child safety, re-entry to care, and placement experience of children already in placement when the Waiver began. It is reasonable to expect some impact of the Waiver in these and other areas.

An overriding question posed by the Federal government is: Are children served by the demonstration counties safe? In any new child welfare practice or system reform, it must be demonstrated that child safety is not compromised. The evaluation has shown that the Waiver did not harm children who were reunified with their families after first placements, or at least did not increase their rate of re-entry. However, the caseworker survey found that significantly more cases in the demonstration counties had been opened four or more times, which may suggest that demonstration counties tended to close cases too quickly, leading to a greater proportion of those cases re-opening. Thus, many crucial questions related to safety remain unanswered. The counties have implemented numerous activities (especially in the area of prevention) that have not yet been investigated, and new primary data collection is required to fully assess those activities. Similarly, the study team has not investigated community and family trends that may influence maltreatment and reporting patterns as well as safety outcomes. In addition, new information is available on family risk assessment that is highly relevant to safety issues, and that information has not yet been used in the evaluation. Finally, broadening the re-entry analysis will allow the study team to examine safety outcomes for children with other types of exits from placement (besides reunification).

Two situations highlight the gaps in knowledge. First, during evaluator site visits, several counties reported that they were focusing on the prevention of placement and had implemented new services for families; however, that shift did not emerge as statistically significant in the fiscal analysis. So far the Participant Outcomes Analysis has not examined cases that did not involve placement and has not analyzed prevention services and their outcomes. An investigation of these services and safety outcomes will be a major focus of the evaluation during the extension and will provide important information on the effects of flexible funding. In addition, some counties have reported use of relatives early during the referral and intake process, essentially diverting the child from coming into PCSA custody, which the study team could not evaluate with the available data. The team proposes six possible evaluation activities to address these gaps:

1. *Community and family trends*: Learning about community and family trends in child populations, family stresses, child maltreatment, and abuse and neglect reporting, even prior to case opening in FACSIS, will aid in understanding Waiver impacts. Have there been changes in the characteristics and sizes of the child populations? If

so, did they affect the patterns of maltreatment in the counties? Did the Waiver have an affect on the reporting of child maltreatment and the counties' response? Was there a difference in the likelihood of investigating child maltreatment between demonstration counties and comparison counties? The study team proposes a sentinel study, wherein community reporters at a representative sample of schools, day care centers, hospitals, police departments, and juvenile facilities (the primary sentinels in communities who are in positions to identify child maltreatment) would report situations where they suspected child maltreatment, over a period of a few weeks. The study team would analyze data related to maltreatment patterns, characteristics of the children in maltreatment occurrences, services provided to cases, and child and family outcomes.

2. **Reports not resulting in placements:** The evaluation has not investigated whether the Waiver compromised safety for four groups of children who were alleged victims of child maltreatment but who did not experience placement, at least not as a result of that allegation: (1) children who were reported but referred to the community for services (i.e., screened out), so that cases were never opened; (2) children for whom cases were opened but then closed during intake, with no further services provided; (3) children for whom cases were opened and full risk assessments and investigations were conducted, but no services were provided and the cases were closed; and (4) children for whom cases were opened and full risk assessments and investigations were conducted, but in-home services were provided rather than placement into foster care. Depending on Ohio's areas of interest and emphasis in the extension, several approaches could be used to help understand Waiver effects on safety for these children: (a) audit logs of allegations in which cases were not opened, to assess the effect of the Waiver on counties' likelihood of investigating allegations; (b) conduct a survey of closed cases, to assess the effect of the Waiver on case closings; (c) audit records of cases that were closed without placement and later re-opened, to assess the Waiver's effect on the safety of children who were not placed into foster care.
3. **Cases with placement:** The study team proposes further study of cases where there was placement into foster care. Several activities would help to better understand the Waiver's impact on the safety of these children: (a) broaden the re-entry analysis to examine children who exited placement to relatives' custody and for children with "other" types of exits; (b) investigate the Waiver effects on the safety of children initially receiving services in-home but ultimately placed into foster care; (c) analyze runaways through a qualitative study in the three counties with significant increases in runaway rates.
4. **Risk level and outcomes:** Counties conduct risk assessments for cases that they accept through the intake process, and the Waiver may have influenced counties' responses to the assessments. The study team could examine a sample of cases to assess whether demonstration counties less likely to provide services or placement, depending on the risk level of the case.

5. *High-utilization model*: To examine the Waiver’s success in reducing length of stay for children who had been in care for a long time or had repeated placements, the study team proposes to examine cases in which children have been in care for at least 2 years. The team would develop a model to estimate the Waiver’s effects on their length of stay and type of exit. An alternative approach might be to model all children in care at the start of the Waiver.
6. *Evaluation of managed care impact*: The study team proposes to investigate the Waiver effects in the counties with major managed care contracts by comparing outcomes (type of placement, length of stay, type of exit, and re-entry) for children served by public and private agencies.

Further Exploration of Areas Already Studied

In several key areas, the five-year evaluation identified emerging effects of the Waiver that can be expected to more fully develop in coming years. In terms of system reform activities and changes in interventions (reflecting the logic model presented above), four topics merit further exploration: preventive activities, targeted service development, data management enhancements, and interagency collaboration. In addition, in terms of changes in child and family outcomes, two areas will be explored more fully: expanded model development related to analysis of first placement experiences during the Waiver and the use of relatives.

1. *Prevention*: The Process Implementation Study team proposes to expand the case study investigation of selected sites to more fully probe the nature of prevention activities and their effects on child and family outcomes. It may also be valuable to survey PCSA staff in all counties concerning their knowledge of and reliance on specific preventive efforts, and whether the availability of prevention services has had an impact on their casework practice.
2. *Targeting of new service development*: The study team plans to reanalyze qualitative data from Year 3 and Year 4 across all services to see whether demonstration counties do more targeting in all service areas. It may also be useful to survey case workers to examine perceptions of changes in areas of greatest service need, given new service development.
3. *Integrated program and fiscal management*: Throughout the evaluation, both the fiscal study team and the process study team explored aspects of PCSA fiscal operations and decision-making, observing substantial variation among the counties in the strength of the connections between finance, program operations and outcomes. No county appeared to have developed comprehensive new information resources linking these three components of their operations, but some sites showed more progress in this direction than others. The study team proposes to investigate the efforts of selected counties, in both evaluation groups, to better link fiscal and program information and decision processes.

4. *Interagency collaboration:* Given the high levels of collaboration found in both groups of counties, the study team proposes to examine in more detail the nature of these activities, re-examining data from the Year 5 collaboration survey, plus gathering additional information via a follow-up survey to the PCSA collaborative partners.
5. *Model development:* Building on the work in Years 4 and 5, the Participant Outcomes Study team proposes additional model development to revise the length-of-stay model to incorporate the recently revised FACSIS data. All additional model development will address changes in case mix, as did Year 4 and Year 5 analyses. The additional work also will incorporate the managed care index (described in Chapter 2), which was not done previously, to see if the level of managed care utilization influenced the findings.
6. *Use of relatives:* Since many counties reported increasing their reliance on relatives, the team proposes to examine safety outcomes in the counties that experienced increases in either relative placements or exit to relatives' custody.

Continuation of Prior Data Collection

There are many indications that demonstration counties have begun to develop the capacity to systematically respond to the Waiver stimulus; continuation of certain parts of the evaluation's data collection activities will confirm whether some of these nascent activities will lead to basic changes in caseload dynamics and/or spending patterns.

1. *Caseload dynamics:* The study team proposes continuing to report on county-level trends in caseload dynamics (number of reported abuse and neglect incidents; use of in-home vs. placement services; number of children in ongoing cases; volume of children entering first placements; and case mix of children), incorporating later years of placement data. Additional trend reports will be added to measure outcomes for new initiatives offered by counties for the extension, such as the ODJFS family assessment pilot initiative.
2. *Expenditure patterns:* Throughout the five years of the Waiver evaluation, the Fiscal Study team has systematically gathered expenditure data from each PCSA in the evaluation, creating a comprehensive database on spending for foster care and other child welfare activities. Because many of the demonstration counties initiated changes in practice at various points during the Waiver, it is reasonable to expect that some reforms had not been in place long enough to observe effects on spending patterns. For this reason, continuation of the fiscal data collection process is a high priority for the evaluation.

The basic thrust of the research proposed for the Waiver extension will require work at two levels – continued data collection across all 28 study sites, and some more intense focus on individual counties. In addition to the specific research tasks outlined above, the evaluation team will continue to share research findings with all of the evaluation

counties, through a debriefing synthesizing the overall findings from the first five years of the evaluation.

The extensive findings of the evaluation have cast valuable light on the dynamics of child welfare system reform in Ohio, and more can be learned. If the state is awarded an extension to ProtectOhio, the proposals suggested above will be discussed by ODJFS and the participating counties, and a subset of the activities will be identified as future evaluation tasks.