

LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Award Project Evaluation

Project ID	HS-4
Title of Program	Intensive Reunification Foster Care Program
Program Category	Human Services
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FLSA Designation	Both (if applicable to a team)
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Description of Productivity Improvement

In an effort to provide families of infants with the greatest opportunity to achieve timely reunification, New Hanover County's Department of Social Services (DSS) developed an Intensive Reunification Program in October 2015. This program is in partnership with Casey Family Programs and Chief District Court Judge J.H. Corpening.

The Intensive Reunification Program is a short-term, intensive, family-based program that is designed to quickly address any and all barriers to reunification and reunite families within 60-90 days. The goal is to meet all federal, state and county standards for reunification. In addition, the program aims to prevent long-term foster care placements, build and support the bond between the parent(s) and infant, and provide children with the best permanent placement "their own home" when it can be safely achieved.

To date, DSS has had six families involved in the program. Two trial home placements that occurred near the 60-90 day mark of entering the program are being monitored and additional families are showing progress. This 60-90 day time frame is significantly shorter than our Leading by Results target of reunification, which is 12 months. DSS anticipates that this innovative program will continue to expedite safe, successful reunifications for the most vulnerable children.

Description of why this project was initiated

Research indicates that successful reunification happens when children are quickly moved to safe trial home placement with intensive wraparound services, maintaining bonding and preventing parental alienation. In cases of child custody, reunification is always the primary goal for children removed from their families. While federal guidelines direct state and local DSS agencies to complete this goal within a 12 month time frame, the reality is that reunification efforts are less successful the longer a child remains in custody and is separated from his/her parents.

New Hanover County DSS, along with many North Carolina DSS agencies, struggle to meet this 12 month guideline. Additionally, parents can become ambivalent in the course of working with DSS towards permanent plans of reunification. This is especially troubling with parents of newborns who have not yet had a chance to bond with their child. The Intensive Reunification Program in New Hanover County focuses on this population of foster children. The objective is to provide intensive services along with visitation so that parents can bond with their newborn. The program diligently works to increase the safety and strength of the family systems in order to move to trial home placement much more expediently. The overall aim is to safely reunite children with their parents, while encouraging a bond with their children in partnership with DSS.

Quantifiable results (sustainability, cost savings, cost avoidance and/or a higher level of service).

Indication of what resources were used and what was done with any accrued time savings

The Intensive Reunification Program has been in operation since November 2015, so long-term supporting data has yet to be determined. However, the immediate success is clear. Six families are being served at this time. Of these six, New Hanover County DSS moved to trial home placement with two families, safely and well ahead of the 12 month standard timeframe. Additionally, three other families are making significant progress and, hopefully, will be moving to trial home placement soon.

Program partners see the benefits of the program and continue to work diligently to provide the services and funding needed for reunification. Recently, Casey Family Programs visited with New Hanover County DSS and Judge Corpening to discuss the program's efforts to date, as well as discuss expanding the program, which would include additional funding.

The cost of the Intensive Reunification Program was, in part, funded by a grant through Casey Family Programs. This funding helped to absorb the cost of a dedicated therapist and the Intensive In-Home Services that are not funded by Medicaid. Additionally, in order to alleviate barriers to reunification, Casey Family Programs funds are utilized to assist with other costs such as rent deposits and transportation costs. In October 2015, \$34,770 was provided initially by Casey Family Programs to start the program. The organization has committed another \$35,000 to help sustain the program through December 30, 2016. New Hanover County funds one full-time social work position to manage the Intensive Reunification Foster Care caseload.

Other descriptive information

The Intensive Reunification Program is a short-term, intensive, family-based program that is designed to quickly address any and all barriers to reunification and reunite families within 60-90 days. The goal

is to meet all federal, state and county standards and policies for reunification, prevent long term foster care placements, build and support the bond between the parent(s) and infant during a crucial time of the child's life, and to provide children with the best permanent placement in their own home, when it can be safely achieved.

The Intensive Reunification Program's goal is to expedite permanency for infants that come into custody by way of neglect or abuse. The process focuses on increasing the bond between parents and the infant shortly after birth in order to help reunify the parent(s) and young child. Through increased visitation and intensive services, both in the home and the community, the aim is to have reunification occur more quickly, ideally in 60-90 days.

The purpose of the Intensive Reunification Program is to:

1. Identify any needs, barriers or safety concerns that are hindering reunification.
2. Identify and implement any services that will address those identified needs in the parent's case plan.
3. Build and support the bond between the infant and parent through increased visitation.
4. Expedite the reunification process by quickly coordinating individualized services to the families while building and supporting a bond between the parent and child.
5. Connect the families with resources to address any barriers to reunification.
6. Accomplish reunification while continuing to monitor any needs or concerns and addressing them to minimize or eliminate the risk of re-entering custody in the future.

Safety is always the first concern and goal of the county's DSS. It is best for children to be raised by their own families whenever possible. Reunification is most effective when working in partnerships with clients/families. It is important to reduce barriers to services and be accountable for service quality in order to help facilitate change in behavior. Increasing contact between parents and their infant will increase their bond and desire to work toward reunification.

This program has high standards and expectations, including to:

- Implement the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for Reunification.
- Connect and coordinate wrap-around services immediately to address any needs and safety concerns.
- Conduct bi-weekly child and family team meetings and bi-weekly risk assessments.
- Coordinate 3-5 weekly visitations both in the home and community.
- Follow up with service providers to gauge progress or lack thereof.
- Identify and eliminate barriers to reunification.
- Achieve trial home placement within 60-90 days.
- Achieve permanency in less than five months.

The Intensive Reunification Program includes wraparound services that include: individual and family therapy, communication building, parent training, behavior management instruction, marital counseling, life skills training, safety planning, substance abuse treatment, relapse prevention, assistance in connecting with services, in-home transitional assistance, child health and development services, and other services as needed.

DSS staff are committed to this program. The Intensive Reunification Social Worker (IRSW) is focused on increasing the bond between parents and their child through increased interaction and visitation and intensive services. State standards for NC Child Welfare are currently one social worker per 15 children; but due to the extensive time commitment and non-traditional hours, the IRSW serves a reduced case load of 3-5 families. Staffing for this program is significantly more costly in terms of administrative dollars and is a unique model for traditional NC Child Welfare practice. However, the

financial benefits include a significant reduction in foster care costs and the overall well-being benefits for the child and family justify this investment.

This program is a true partnership in New Hanover County. The IRSW conducts case management and coordinates services with a Family Reunification Specialist through Methodist Home for Children (MHFC). The MHFC worker provides in-home services a minimum of 2-3 days per week. MHFC has altered their current programming model to focus on nurturing, child development, and parent-child interaction in response to this program.

Services are further coordinated with the New Hanover County Health Department's Care Coordination for Children program (CC4C). CC4C provides developmental screening, face-to-face contact, monitoring of appointments and medication administration, and monitoring of overall health and well-being. Mental health services are provided with a contracted mental health professional and substance abuse services, if needed, are provided by community service agencies and other local providers.

The IRSW provides daily contact with the families, most of this contact consisting of parent-child visitation in the family's home. The IRSW, along with providers from Methodist Home for Children and CC4C, utilize this opportunity for coaching and mentoring in the home environment. In addition, the "Triple P" parenting program through New Hanover County's Smart Start Program is utilized with families as an additional resource.

The IRSW maintains documentation on a daily basis, as well as completes a weekly summary to monitor and track services. Bi-weekly child and family team meetings are conducted to discuss the progress or lack of progress, any barriers to reunification, and to ensure all team members are on the same page. Bi-weekly risk assessments assist the IRSW in gauging the advancement of the case toward trial home placement. As in all other home placements, the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale for reunification must be completed at the beginning of each case and upon the implementation of a trial home placement.

Upon a successful trial home placement, the case is brought back to court and a recommendation for closure is made. Prior to any case being recommended for closure, a written discharge plan is given to the families and any on-going needs or services are addressed at that time. A parent may also be discharged from the program and returned to a regular reunification Social Worker's caseload if they are not in compliance with the Intensive Reunification Program, including:

1. Refusal to participate in the Intensive Reunification Program.
2. More than 3 missed appointments with any individual service provider.
3. More than 2 missed visitation appointments with their child with less than 24 hours notice to the IRSW.
4. Missing a Court appearance
5. Obtaining a new criminal charge.
6. Entering into a treatment program that will last longer than 60 days.
7. Being incarcerated for more than 3 days.
8. Continued substance abuse for longer than 30 days into the program.
9. Conduct that is detrimental to the program or safety of the child. This can include, but is not limited to: any further neglect or abuse allegations, inadequate supervision of the child while in their care, violation of any court orders, threatening behavior toward anyone involved in the program, any

domestic violence, being under the influence in the presence of the child. Behavior can be deemed detrimental at DSS or the judge's discretion.