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Project Abstract

The Children's Bureau awarded a cooperative agreement to the American Humane Association and its partners, Walter R. McDonald & Associates, Inc., and the Institute of Applied Research, to operate the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Services (QIC-DR). All three organizations have been pioneers in advancing differential response nationally and within states, and are uniquely positioned to collaborate and complement each other's experiences, knowledge and networks. The American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and the National Conference of State Legislatures are contributing their expertise to enhance this QIC's project activities and thus, the quality of child protective services (CPS).

The purposes of this project, through research design and implementation, are to:

1. improve child welfare outcomes by implementing differential response, and build cutting-edge, innovative and replicable knowledge about differential response;
2. enhance capacity at the local level to improve outcomes for children and families identified for suspected abuse or neglect; and
3. provide guidance on best practices in differential response.

Throughout the five years of this project, information gained from the QIC-DR will be disseminated to the Children's Bureau; research and demonstration sites; public and private child welfare agencies; child abuse prevention, family support agencies and family resource centers; mental health, domestic violence, economic development and other system partners; legislators, judges and other legal professionals; national foundations and advocacy groups; and members of the training and technical assistance network.

Project Approach

The QIC-DR has a two-phase approach. Phase I focuses on the identification of knowledge gaps, service gaps, research priorities and experimental design. Phase II focuses on the implementation of the research design in three to five research and demonstration sites located across the nation, as well as dissertation research and the development of a dissemination process that will provide the most current and state-of-the-art information to practitioners, policymakers, administrators and researchers. Using a collaborative approach, the QIC-DR serves as a laboratory for innovation, application and learning.

The QIC-DR project team and the Children's Bureau draw on the expertise of families and leaders in the field at the federal, state and community levels, as well as a national advisory committee, to guide the process of selecting the research focus, discerning the key outcomes, and identifying effective practices and policies in differential response, and to recommend changes based on the research findings and knowledge acquisition. A family consumers council and an academic scholars panel will also be convened in Phase II.

The QIC-DR Goals

1. To promote innovation, evidence-based practice improvements and advancement of knowledge about child welfare outcomes through experimental control group design with random assignment that tests practice models of differential response.
2. To establish a national collaborative information-sharing network, resource and peer learning community on differential response and its related child welfare outcomes, and use multiple networks to aggressively disseminate information gained through this QIC.
3. To gain, disseminate and support the application and replication of knowledge at multiple levels regarding the identification of the core elements that support successful implementation of differential response, and the viability of differential response as an effective practice model in CPS.
4. To supplement rigorous research that will be undertaken by the sites and cross-site evaluators by supporting doctoral dissertations on differential response that can also contribute to building knowledge and answering key questions about this and related child welfare reform efforts.

Phase I - Year 1

Conducting a national needs assessment: The purpose of the QIC-DR is to leverage existing knowledge and build new knowledge of differential response reform to advance state and local differential response efforts to improve child welfare outcomes for children and families who come to the attention of CPS. To that end, project partners in cooperation with the Children's Bureau will undertake a comprehensive review of existing knowledge on differential response in child welfare. A preliminary inventory of existing documents will be conducted to build an information-gathering framework, followed by a more comprehensive needs assessment, a gap analysis, a literature review and a synthesis of differential response evaluations. Key informant interviews, focus groups and informational summits with diverse audiences will inform the selection of the topical focus areas for the research and demonstration sites administered in Phase II of the project.

Phase II - Year 2-5

Administering projects: Approximately three to five research and demonstration sites will be selected through a competitive process to ultimately answer the question, "What is the impact of differential response systems on the critical child welfare outcomes of child safety, permanency and well-being?" In addition, with guidance from the academic scholars panel, the QIC-DR will support up to four doctoral students for two years of dissertation research to create additional knowledge and more scholarly evidence about differential response. The QIC-DR will provide ongoing technical assistance to funded projects and will facilitate the development of an information-sharing network among projects.

Evaluating process and outcomes: A cross-site evaluation involving both descriptive and outcome analyses will be conducted to assess the outcomes achieved by the initiative and synthesize findings across the individual sites. Lessons learned through the implementation process will be documented. Additionally, the QIC-DR will provide technical assistance to support evaluations undertaken individually by the sites.

Dissemination of knowledge: To help build a knowledge-development process and engage the field, information will be shared in a timely manner throughout all stages of the initiative. Initial information will include an executive summary of the literature review, key informant interviews, focus groups and informational summits. A searchable annotated bibliography will be created. Other products that specifically look at differential response from a legislative and legal angle will also be developed. Initial findings from funded projects on their implementation process, strengths and challenges will also be disseminated. Finally, information on outcomes achieved through the cross-site evaluation will be shared nationally and project-specific outcomes will be synthesized and disseminated as they become available.

For more information on the project, please contact:

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