

Draft

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2002, a pilot program was launched by the state of Idaho in Ada County to concentrate on the challenges that the court must face in managing domestic violence cases. The pilot program was called the *Ada County Family Violence Court (FVC)* and focused on strengthening families that are facing multiple issues, with the use of one judge to process cases and through early intervention strategies. “This new practice of ‘**one family, one judge**’ is designed to facilitate access to, and sharing of, accurate information pertaining to families within the court system, increase consistency when there are multiple court orders, and allow the judge to apply expertise to meet the unique needs of each family, while assuring continued, close judicial oversight to safeguard the safety and well-being of children” (Bonney, Moe, & Morse, 2005, pp. 40-41). The purpose of the court was to provide a safe environment for families at risk and for the judge to be able to create a coordinated response that factors in all of the familial issues, removing the possibility of separate judges providing different rulings that are confusing and have negative consequences to the family.

In the beginning of 2003, the Family Violence Court (FVC) was awarded a **three-year grant** funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through the Rocky Mountain Quality Improvement Center (RMQIC). The RMQIC had the following goals of financially supporting, evaluating the effectiveness of the program, to provide technical assistance, assist in establishing a working relationship between child protection workers and share in the findings of the project (Castleton, Castleton, Bonney, & Moe, 2005). The Family Violence Court Grant Project sought to determine whether assessment, comprehensive services and a streamlined delivery process assisted in strengthening and supporting families with substance abuse issues and who have a potential risk to or are experiencing child maltreatment when they become involved in the judicial system due to family violence issues. Per the grant’s guidelines, key assessment and service components were related to Child Safety, Permanency, Family Well-Being, Parent Safety, and Parent Substance Abuse.

Referrals

The Department of Health and Welfare referred 81 families to the FVC Grant Project, with the majority of the referrals being fairly consistent throughout the grant’s time frame. The project received on average 16 referrals every six months. Between the months of January 2004 until June 2004, the project received 23 referrals from DHW. This was the most referrals in any six month time period. During the time period of July 2004 until December 2004, Family Court Services began making referrals to the FVC Grant Project (34 families total), therefore increasing the numbers of eligible participants involved in the program. Most families referred from either source once entered, continued with the project until it ended in December 2005 (79%).

Throughout the length of the project, a total of **115 families** were referred to the FVC Grant Project. However, only 58 of these families were found to be eligible for

participation. This was due to a variety of reasons, for example there was no court involvement at the time of the referral, their court case had already closed, or their court case was being presided over by a judge who was not involved in Family Violence Court.

Participants Characteristics (Demographics)

Out of the 93 participants **90.3% were White** and 7.5% Hispanic. The remaining 2% of participants were of other ethnicities. Thirty percent of participants had graduated from high school and 32.3% had some college. An additional 11.8% had earned a GED, 4.3% had earned a bachelors degree and 15% did not complete high school.

At entry into the program, sixty-eight percent had a history of past violence, and **79.6% had a criminal record**. Ninety percent reported domestic violence in their past. Approximately 44% had past involvement with Child Protection (not including reason for referral). Thirty-five percent of participants reported mental health problems and 33% reported a past history of child abuse against them.

Substance abuse was quite prevalent in the participant group at entry into the program with **64.5% reporting abusing alcohol** in the past and **68.8% reporting abusing drugs** in the past. Forty-six percent reported substance abuse problems in their family history. Seventy-six percent of the participants were identified as having a present issue with substances at intake. Primary substances used by participants were: alcohol only (24), methamphetamines only (18), and multiple substances (29). Most common combinations of substance were: 1) Alcohol and marijuana, 2) alcohol and methamphetamines, 3) methamphetamines and marijuana, and 4) alcohol, marijuana, and methamphetamines. Please note that not all individuals who enroll in the program have to have a substance abuse issue. If their current or past partner does and because they were attempting to address outstanding issues in that relationship they were able to enroll since the program focus in the family unit.

At time of intake **62.4% were employed**. Of all participants, not just those employed, 36.6% reported having an annual income of less than \$10,060, 23.7% reported an annual income of \$10,061-\$20,560, and 12.9% reported an annual income of \$20,561-\$24,060. The remaining 26.8% of participants had annual incomes above \$24,060.

The 53 families who participated in the program had a total of **138 children** (average 2.6 children per family). Program participants included 47 fathers, 44 mothers, 1 stepfather, and 1 stepmother.

A majority of the participants required **intensive case management**. Many had mental health issues, financial difficulties, unstable housing, lack of resources, and criminal involvement. Out of 53 families involved in the project and there were 2,786 client contacts during the project with the FVC Case Coordinator. Families averaged approximately 53 contacts with the Case Coordinator. There were 415 one-on-one contacts and 2,371 other contacts (telephone, email, letters). Families ranged from 1 to 140 contacts per person. Contacts frequently occurred by telephone with clients. The length of contacts ranged from 2 hours to 10 minutes.

Family Outcomes (from entry to exit)

- Related to Child Safety, parents perceived a **marked reduction of conflict** from intake to exit from the project, especially in the areas of agreement of custody arrangements, problems with scheduling times for visitations, and overall problems with visitation.
- Since program enrollment **only four families** had a substantiated report (re-report or initial report) of child maltreatment. Since enrollment three families have had their children returned home (4 children) out of four families. One family's DHW case is pending and the two children remain in foster care. Forty-eight families had their children remain home during the project.
- In terms of Permanency, **strong improvements** were indicated from intake to exit from the program concerning parenting cooperation, and ability to live more independently as adults.
- Concerning Family Well-Being, and when utilizing standardized assessments administered at intake and exit from the program, **noticeable and significant improvements** were indicated by parents for family functioning (including fewer misunderstandings, more flexibility), perceptions of child well-being (such as school performance, cooperation), and conflict resolution.
- For Parent Safety, Forty-eight families had past instances of domestic violence at intake into the project. Thirty-four of these families reports past instances of domestic violence witnessed by children. Since enrollment date **only two families** reported instances of domestic violence and children witnessed both reported.
- Per a standardized pre-post assessment, risk factors for spousal abuse **dropped significantly** at exit from the program.
- Related to Parent Substance Abuse, parents participating in the project reported **marked reductions in drug and alcohol use** when compared to a similar group not enrolled in the program.

Overall the program produced **reduced involvement with the courts** when compared to a similar group not enrolled in the program. Further, through in-depth interviews with social service administrators, front-line social service providers, and parent participants, the **project was consistently rated very highly** for service coordination and collaboration. The care coordinator was given particular praise for effectively helping parents overcome challenges and change destructive attitudes and behavior.

In addition to producing significant positive changes in families' lives, **systemic accomplishments** of the FVC Grant Project are 1) improved relationships with DHW and court, 2) helping DHW staff look closer at domestic violence and child abuse, 3)

improved coordination of services, 4) providing financial support for services, 5) multidisciplinary team meetings and treatment planning meetings, and 6) one judge, one court, one family results in better protection of children because of enhanced and coordinated communication amongst all parties.

The areas that need **attention** for the continued success of the FVC Grant Project are 1) increased emphasis on making referrals, 2) continuing partnership efforts, and 3) maintaining as much as possible the one judge, one court, one family model by finding judges who will work closely together to coordinate cases.

References

- Bonney, M., Moe, A. & Morse, R. (2005). The Ada County Family Violence Court Grant Project: A New Collaboration to Better Protect Children and Families. *Protecting Children: A Professional Publication of American Humane*. Vol. 20 (4).
- Castleton, L., Castleton, B., Bonney, M., & Moe, A. (2005). Ada County Family Violence Court: Shaping the Means to Better the Result. *Family Law Quarterly*, 39(1), 27-52.