

The core belief supporting the need for community-based care is that increased responsibility, cooperation and coordination among local organizations will ultimately ensure better services for families and greater protection of children. In order for community-based care to reach its full potential, local organizations and individuals from all aspects of child welfare need to come together to decide upon shared goals and objectives.

Family Services of Metro Orlando (FSMO) has proposed that the first step toward decreasing the persistent fragmentation that exists among child welfare services in Orange and Osceola counties is a system of care redesign that fully engages community-based service providers typically operating outside the scope of child protection services.

A review of historical efforts towards this goal indicates that the system redesign should be developed from a macro and a micro perspective concurrently. This is operationalized as strategic planning (macro) and resolution of systematic barriers to quality service provision as identified by quality evaluation (micro). These dual tracks complement each other in a manner analogous to quality improvement and quality assurance.

The Strategic Planning Group was formed in April 2007 to address system of care redesign from a macro perspective. The group is comprised of over thirty representatives from local organizations such as child placing agencies, schools, and direct service providers. During the first meeting, members decided the direction of that the group should include the following:

*Quality of life improvement is the earliest point of intervention.*

The group strongly felt that is important to mitigate risk before risk exists. Initiatives to mitigate risk of abuse and neglect need to focus on quality of life issues that create conditions favorable to risk of abuse or neglect. Primary prevention via education and assistance to families that addresses fundamental quality of life issues, such as economic sustainability, is highly predictive of success and the most cost effective means for protecting children. The 2-1-1 system will be utilized as the hub for inquiries regarding available resources. The Strategic Planning Group will focus on developing community awareness of 2-1-1 through joint marketing, speaker's bureaus, and joint communication with schools and community centers.

*Community development yields community coordination.*

Best practices for developing and more importantly, maintaining coordinated community care will be examined by the Strategic Planning Group. Initially, members of the group will research efforts made by other regions, states, and countries in order to examine what works and lessons learned. The group would also like to create a web based vehicle for sharing of best practices and quality improvement needs among participants in the community. A symposium on best practices as they relate to community-based care will be held as well. New funding will be required to support activities such as the web site and symposium.

*Coordination of community efforts requires dedicated attention.*

Ultimately the group would like four positions to fulfill the need for a coordinated system of care: an Executive Director, Orange County Coordinator, Osceola County Coordinator, and Administrative Assistant. Funding for these positions may come from multiple sources and will assist in the development of the project through coordination of currently fragmented system improvement workgroup, committee, and task force activities. Through this full-time dedicated position, the Strategic Planning Group will become the central coordinating children's services board of Central Florida – a local Children's Cabinet.

Benefits of these proposed activities include:

- ☑ Improved coordination of services  
*(better access to the right service mix, recognizing that one size does not fit all)*
- ☑ Improved coordination of service planning  
*(more effective reinforcement of service outcomes)*
- ☑ Better identification of service gaps  
*(avoiding the "Goldilocks effect", too much of one service, too little of another)*
- ☑ Simplified access to and navigation among available services  
*(therefore, greater participation and improved utilization)*
- ☑ Timely access to services  
*(families get the services they need when they need them)*
- ☑ Coordinated community strategic planning efforts  
*(system improvement activities will no longer be "silo-ed")*
- ☑ Increased return on investment and more efficient use of resources  
*(strengthened positioning for funding of programs that are non-duplicative, efficient and effective)*
- ☑ Consumer-driven service delivery  
*(due to centralized information collection and publication)*

These benefits of coordinated services and planning together support improved outcomes for children and families within the child protection system and better community mitigation of the conditions that lead to child abuse and neglect in the first place. While the group foresees an ongoing cost to achieve and maintain the desired level of coordination, the return on investment in real dollars will come through decreased fragmentation of services, managed utilization of resources, early intervention for lower-cost services, and strengthened arguments for service funding to meet focused and measured needs.

As always, measurement of the true return on investment must consider the number of families strengthened and children protected from abuse and neglect which is the ultimate measures of success.