

Testimony of  
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Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities

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Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts and Members of the Subcommittee,

My name is Robert Quinn Sawyer, former Director of Child and Family Services in Olmsted County, Minnesota. I appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on the reauthorization of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and thank Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts and the members of this Subcommittee for the invitation to do so.

The comments that I will offer reflect a local perspective on Child Welfare Reform efforts and Differential Response in Child Protection in particular.

For more than a decade the Minnesota Department of Human Services in collaboration with the 87 counties and 11 tribes has been actively engaged in Child Welfare Reform. Minnesota is a state supervised county administered child welfare system generating considerable local control in the provision of services for children and families in the child welfare system. Minnesota counties fund approximately 48% of all child welfare services in the state while the federal government contributes 36% and the state government 14%. The state department and counties enjoy a positive constructive working relationship that has facilitated a strong child welfare reform effort.

The Child Protection System since the 1960's saw a significant increase in the reporting of child maltreatment as expanding reporting requirements were added in an effort to address perceived child safety concerns. The system was limited to an investigative response that became an increasingly forensic process with a focus on procedure and practices that were developed in response to the most severe forms of child abuse and neglect. The Child Protection System had one way of responding to all reports accepted for intervention. Nationally and in Minnesota approximately one third of accepted reports of child maltreatment were founded. In Minnesota approximately 65 to 70% of all reports were concerned with child neglect.

In 1997 Minnesota legislation prompted child welfare reform in an effort to improve child welfare outcomes. A pilot project in Olmsted County experimented with an Alternative Response to child protection reports of low or moderate levels of risk. In 1999 legislation permitted counties to voluntarily engage in Alternative Response an early name for Differential Response. The Minnesota Department of Human Services in cooperation with the McKnight Foundation supported a four year pilot project in 20 counties from 2000 – 2004. A rigorous field study was conducted by The Institute of

Applied Research, using control groups, participant interviews and the review of administrative data. Significant findings included:

1. Child Safety was uncompromised
2. Fewer new child maltreatment reports
3. Less costly approach in the long run
4. Families liked the approach
5. Social Workers supported the approach

In 2005, Minnesota law was changed requiring a Differential Response System in Child Protection with the preferred way to approach families being a Family Assessment for reports not alleging substantial child endangerment. At the time of the law, all 87 counties in Minnesota were voluntarily providing a Differential Response System.

What is Differential Response? A Differential Response System organizes a child protection agency to respond in a proportional manner to reports of possible child maltreatment. At a minimum an Investigative Response and a Family Assessment Response provides an agency options in how to approach a family when there is an accepted report of child maltreatment. An Investigative Response continues to focus on reports alleging substantial child endangerment. A Family Assessment Response is a formal response of the agency that assesses the needs of the child or family without requiring a determination that maltreatment occurred or that the child is at risk of maltreatment.

Effective social work practice in child protection strives to engage children and families in a constructive working relationship that resolves the issues and challenges impacting child safety and well-being. Collaborative working relationships with community resources and families build supportive coordinated efforts to enhance safety and well-being. Both an Investigative Response and a Family Assessment Response utilize the same structured decision making tools to provide a frame of reference for evaluating child safety and well-being and the identification of family needs.

Minnesota is a leader in developing a Differential Response System to reports of child maltreatment. The majority of Minnesota families reported for neglect or abuse receive a Family Assessment Response where fault finding is set aside and replaced with a safety focused family assessment and services. High risk reports continue to receive a forensic investigation but greater attention is now paid to family and community engagement and the recognition of strengths that could be used to promote safety and well-being. During the four years (2000 – 2004) this program transitioned from pilot to full implementation, out of home placements decreased 22%.

Olmsted County is one of 87 counties in the state of Minnesota with responsibility for administering the child welfare system providing intervention and services for children and families where there are child protective concerns. Olmsted County initiated a county wide Differential Response System in 1999. The Differential Response System is organized to provide an Investigative Response, a Family Assessment Response and a

Domestic Violence Response for those reports where a child is exposed to intimate family violence. The implementation of group supervision, a consultation framework, family involvement strategies and group decision making for major decisions has supported a practice model that strives for partnership with families and collaboration with community resources.

In recent years the Differential Response System has been enhanced by the development of a Parent Support Out Reach effort to respond to families screened out of child protection that may have needs that if addressed now will prevent their future entry into child protection. Targeted early intervention front load the child protection system providing necessary service to families when they need them.

Over the past decade with the implementation of a Differential Response System Olmsted County has seen the following positive results:

1. Fewer investigations
2. Less repeat child maltreatment
3. Less court involvement
4. Less children in placement
5. More family involvement
6. More children served

Perhaps the greatest lesson learned through the implementation of a Differential Response System is it is not what we have to do alone that is important but how we choose to do it that makes a difference. We have changed how we see and engage families and through that have reached better results.

The following recommendations are respectfully presented for consideration:

1. Support the efforts of states, counties and tribal child welfare agencies to establish Differential Response Systems in child protection.
2. Support efforts of states, counties and tribal child welfare agencies to “front-load” the system providing supportive interventions for at-risk families screened out of child protection.

Thank you for the work you will do in the reauthorization of CAPTA continuing to enhance safety and well-being for children and the strengthening of families to provide safe, nurturing home life.