



IMPACT OF THE DAWN PROJECT ON THE MARION COUNTY CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM¹

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Introduction

Conceptual and organizational reforms in service provision within systems of care have created additional complexities that make it difficult to understand the impact that approaches such as the Dawn Project are having on their communities. The purpose of this study is to understand how key stakeholders in the children's services arena in Marion County perceived the impact that the establishment of the Dawn Project had on the social services community over time.

Methods

Data for this study were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including system and agency leaders and parents who were involved in the children's social services system at the inception of the Dawn Project through the first five years of its existence (i.e., those best able to comment on changes to the children's social services arena). A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to develop a cumulative understanding of stakeholder perceptions. Analytic induction and the constant comparison method (Krauthwohl, 1998) were used in an iterative process that continued until all discrepancies were resolved and no additional information appeared to be forthcoming (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants. The research team generated a list of names of potential interviewees from a document search of the Dawn Project. The most important criterion was knowledge and involvement in the children's social services arena at the inception of the Dawn Project through the time of the study. Through several iterations, this list was examined for completeness by the Dawn Project Consortium, and personnel from the Dawn Project and Choices, Inc. Potential interviewees were sent a letter of invitation. All but one of those invited were interviewed (this person provided a substitute). Ultimately, 20 informants participated in this study.

Interviews were coded independently using ATLAS.ti software (Scolari, 1997). Inter-rater reliability checks were conducted throughout the coding process, and ranged from .78 in early comparisons of individual transcripts to .94 in later comparisons. Coding differences were resolved through discussion. In addition, an outside reading of coded transcripts by an

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experienced researcher provided a check of the coding scheme and an opportunity to fine-tune further coding.

Results

On the whole, the majority of the data could be characterized as being related to positive impact of the Dawn Project, with secondary foci on negative perceptions of impact, followed by a small, but noticeable theme we titled “ambivalent themes.” Although representative quotes from the respondents are included throughout the following findings section, the reader is directed to the full report of this study, which includes much more detail.¹

Positive Impact at the Community Level. Study findings that relate to positive community level impact fell into the following groups: increased collaboration and service coordination, importance of family involvement, loosening fiscal constraints, enhancing strengths approaches, and ecological responses. Although there is some overlap among these categories, this framework provides a way to understand how the Dawn Project has impacted the community.

Increased collaboration and service coordination. The clearest theme to emerge from the data was the increase in service coordination and collaboration that has occurred among and across providers and systems in Marion County. Primarily, according to respondents, there has been increased recognition among stakeholders that the children served by the Dawn Project tend to be involved in many different systems, thus making service coordination a useful approach. One respondent put it this way, “...more and more there is the understanding that these kids just touch so many different systems.” In fact, the overall impact that the Dawn Project has had on collaboration in the children’s social services arena in Marion County is difficult to overemphasize. In the words of another respondent, “this was one of the first collaborative projects that brought together people from so many different departments and systems.”

Importance of family involvement. After collaboration and service coordination, the next clearest theme to emerge from the data was the importance of involving families at all levels of service delivery. By viewing the family as a resource in the treatment program, and asking families what they need rather than telling them what services they will receive, the Dawn Project is helping the community become aware of the importance of building on family strengths. An interrelated theme focused on the role the Dawn Project has had in the development of the Families Reaching for Rainbows advocacy group, a chapter of the Federation of Families that provides support to families through a network of parents and caregivers (see Families Reaching for Rainbows, 2005). Respondents reported that “Rainbows” has provided a safe setting for parents and caregivers to share their experiences, provide input to the various systems, and understand that they are not alone.

Loosening fiscal constraints. At the County level, respondents report that traditional power structures have been challenged because of the creation of the Dawn Project. Some of the financial barriers have been “loosened” and there is more talk about wraparound and the use of “flex” funds. This often involves nontraditional supports such as purchasing equipment so someone can take a child fishing. Many respondents also discussed how the use of costly

residential services has been reduced and in some cases, the nature of residential treatment is changing.

Enhancing strengths approaches. There is broad consensus that the Dawn Project has had an overall impact in the adoption, use, and proliferation of strengths-based approaches. There is a sense that this philosophy is not just recommended, but is also well modeled by Dawn Project personnel.

Ecological (holistic) responses. The perception also exists that the Dawn Project has pushed the systems to move beyond just treating children to also working with their environments. Likewise, respondents mentioned the importance of the multi-system treatment plans that are used to ensure that all of the domains of a child's life are addressed.

Challenges to Implementation. Of course, not all the findings were positive, and several negative themes also emerged from the study. Social service agencies are notoriously underfunded and it is expected that a certain level of resentment would exist toward a program that does not appear to be operating under the same constraints. The following sections on 'elitism' and 'resistance' provide some insight into that response. There also appears to be a real struggle between conventional and unconventional approaches to service provision in Marion County, which may be highlighted best in the section that follows on 'urban legends.'

Elitism. It was suggested that there is a degree of eliteness associated with the Dawn Project. While there are eligibility requirements for participation, some negative reaction emerged about Dawn's perceived ability to be exclusive in whom it serves; however, the preponderance of data in this area suggest this finding is more likely related to concerns about Dawn having more money than "typical" public agencies. Regardless of the underlying causes for perceptions of elitism, one respondent suggested that Dawn Project leaders need to spend time "sitting, talking, listening with the community providers."

Enabling parents. As previously noted, the greater involvement of the families is credited as one of the major positive impacts of the Dawn Project. However, the impression also emerged that in some cases, Dawn Project service coordinators do too much for parents and families rather than making sure families learn how to do things themselves. For some respondents, the concern was focused on the length of involvement Dawn had with families." As one respondent put it, "There's a difference between teaching people how to fish and fishing for them."

Urban legends. A series of 'urban legends' have developed about some of the unconventional methods adopted in some cases within the Dawn Project. "The perception was, you want a new house, you want new carpet, you want new something, just get into the Dawn Project. They'll buy you whatever you want -- that's exaggerated; that was not even true." Still, whether such legends are accurate or not, their mere existence points to the large presence of the Dawn Project within the community as well the frustration felt by those who lack the freedom to act similarly or who disapprove of unconventional approaches.

Resistance. "It is important for us to be fair...I think there is resistance." We would be remiss in writing about system change if we did not consider resistance to that change and how it

is perceived. As one respondent put it, “There are some systems that are very resistant to [Dawn].” One component of the resistance to Dawn is the perception of a new organization “riding into town to save the day” and the perception emerged of Dawn as something of a “maverick” in the community. Additionally, there is some perception that some agencies may be actively providing obstacles to demonstrating the success of the Dawn Project: “It’s pretty chilling when folks act in this way: ‘I don’t want this project to be successful so I cannot possibly allow data to be disclosed which shows that it might be saving money, too.’”

Ambivalent Themes. In some cases it is difficult to determine whether emergent themes from the study were based on reasonable expectations of one system of care within an entire community. For example, perceptions emerged that the Dawn Project is limited in what it does while children are in residential treatment facilities and that Dawn has not been successful in truly blending funding. However legitimate, these concerns suggest structural barriers in the larger social services system that cannot be resolved by a single agency. Blending funding, for example, would require changes in state statutes. Similarly, it was reported that Dawn has not changed the essential nature of the children’s system, which continues to be a “failure-based system.” Actually, the fact that Dawn does not focus on prevention was a common theme uncovered in the study. Although respondents also seemed to recognize that these issues went beyond the capability of the Dawn Project to change, still there was some expectation that such systemic change should be Dawn’s goal.

Conclusions

The broad themes uncovered in this study indicate that the Dawn Project system of care has led to a variety of direct and indirect system-level changes in Marion County children’s social services. Most important, findings demonstrate that the primary impact on the community is the emergence of the core system of care principles articulated by Stroul and Friedman (1986) almost 20 years ago, including coordination, strengths-based philosophy, family involvement at multiple levels, flexible funding, and community-based service provision. In fact, system-level coordination and family involvement were the strongest themes to emerge from this study.

Emergence of these core principals appears to be related to several factors, including the Dawn Project Consortium that regularly brings together system level administrators from the various child serving systems in Marion County and family members. Likewise, at the treatment level, Dawn Project service coordinators are trained to be persistent in connecting people from disparate systems and agencies and then maintaining lines of communication. In essence, a primary purpose of the Dawn Project is to encourage cross-system relationships and family involvement at multiple levels and it appears to be working. Thus, even while the additional meetings associated with a system of care may be viewed by some as a “necessary evil,” the connections they engender appear to be effective in creating and sustaining cross system relationships and understandings.

Obviously, inferences drawn from this exploratory study must be made cautiously and several limitations are noted. First, this study did not necessarily examine the prior community milieu that allowed an initiative like the Dawn Project to take hold and flourish. Undoubtedly, local and national climate and policy shifts set the stage for Dawn as well as for many of the

changes attributed to Dawn. Second, we used purposeful sampling in this study and acknowledge the possibility that not all stakeholder perspectives were adequately represented in the process. However, respondents were invited to be interviewed because they were able to reflect on the children's social services system in the County before and after the establishment of Dawn. By checking and rechecking our respondent list before initiating the interview process and then asking respondents during interviews who else should be interviewed, we have additional evidence that our study sample was adequate. Still, we recognize the possibility in interview research that another group of respondents may have produced a different set of findings.

We conclude by noting that at first blush it may seem the task of creating a system of care model is primarily a technical one. Contracts must be written and procedures defined. Once this process is complete, we may believe that the hard work is finished; however, the more difficult work of building and sustaining relationships continues. Developing an effective system of care model is a slow and, at times, painstaking process. While structural agreements and arrangements may establish the contours of the organization, it is the actual day-to-day work of many individuals, including families, that brings the work to life (Sullivan, 2001).

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