

The effectiveness of programs utilized by DCS in supporting vulnerable children diagnosed with a mental illness.

By: Tammy Howard (BSW Class of 2008)

Fall 2007

Introduction

Vulnerable youth such as those who are in state custody enter into the system with a wide variety of debilitating circumstances. A great percentage of these youth have been victimized, abused, neglected, and homeless. Even more come from poverty stricken environments that lack adequate resources for special needs and or health issues. Youth who have developmental disabilities, emotional disturbances, mental illness, or severe behavioral problems are increasingly being served by child welfare agencies and are being served out-of-home simply because their parents or guardians can not care for them. As a group, they are generally described in the child welfare literature as having "special needs". These youth hold significant challenges for the families, service providers, and caregivers working with them if their special needs or conditions are not appropriately addressed.

Summary of Primary Findings

Children in foster care have a disproportionate percentage of health and developmental problems that are often missed or not treated properly. Research literature suggests that children develop best when they live in safe, stable, and nurturing families. Children entering the child welfare system however have not typically experienced such stability. Foster care has the potential to provide a stable foundation for these children. A child's developmental needs are best met when their substitute families are able to "nurture and commit to these children and their individual needs over the long term" (Jones Harden, 2204, p. 40). As a society we have failed to meet the health needs of many of the children in out-of-home care. Most of

these children have been medically neglected or abused before placement and suffer from a higher than average incidence of serious health problems. Failure to diagnose and treat these children adequately upon their entry into the out-of-home care system may mean community neglect is allowed to replace parental abuse or neglect. A significant proportion of children who come into foster care are identified as having disabilities related to medical conditions, mental health, and/or developmental problems. Exact figures for the number of children in child welfare care with DD are difficult to confirm. American data suggests that one third of all children in care have a disability of some sort. The presence of a DD may in itself, create very specific needs for a child. At times, it is not the type of need that differs but the degree of intensity that distinguishes the needs of children (Schormans Ann Fudge, 2006, p. 522). It is imperative that social workers practicing in the child welfare division become aware of current programs and services being utilized by DCS to assist this vulnerable population of children. In addition, social workers need to realize the importance of early identification and intervention to help children with developmental, emotional, physical and or behavior disorders.

In 2000, the estimated number of children and adolescents with a serious mental disorder in the U.S. was over 1,866,000.

An estimated 17.6 % of those affected live in poverty.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social Workers practicing in the child welfare division need to be aware of all current

programs and services being utilized by DCS. The statistics revealed in the research can assist social workers and case managers in knowing what programs and or services being used are not only relevant to their specific cases but which are proving to be effective. The research can also be used to evaluate the course and pace of change within the DCS system, and to verify that important outcomes are being attained for the child and the family.

10 Recommendations for Practice with Systems of All Sizes

1. Social workers need to realize the importance of early identification and intervention to help youth with developmental, emotional and or behavior disorders.
2. It is imperative that an adequate initial and ongoing assessment of needs is completed on both children and families.
3. Communication between various system components within all levels needs to be improved.
4. Increase stability within the caseworkers or case managers. Many youth experience a change in case managers within a 12 month period due to reassigning.
5. Social workers need to be aware of the most current and available resources to assist children with special needs.
6. Advocating for increased funding, resources, and policies to protect this vulnerable population.
7. Social workers should help to educate families and caregivers on how to care for youth with special needs in the hopes of regaining parental custody.
8. Utilize school and community resources more effectively.
9. Work with communities to coordinate and facilitate activities to improve social conditions and enhance the quality of life.
10. Social workers should help formulate policy, set goals, and help to create new services and programs in assisting youth with special needs.

Conclusion

According to the research, current programs and services being utilized by DCS are shown to be effective with the families and children being served. Despite modest attempts to create and implement prevention services, the research does show a lack in prevention and pre-intervention services.

About the Author

I am currently a BSW student at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. My field placement agency is Department of Children's Services. I chose this topic for research simply because since I have been working at my field agency, I have noticed a significant amount of the children in state custody actually have been diagnosed with some type of mental disorder. Due to this fact I wanted to evaluate the programs and services utilized by DCS in working action plans for these children.

References

- Aubyn C. Stahmer, Laurel K. Leslie, John Landsverk, Jinjin Zhang, Jennifer Rolls. (in press). Children and Family Research Center, Fostering Results. (2004). *View from the bench: Obstacles to safety & permanency for children in foster care*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. [<http://www.fosteringresults.org/>]
- Developmental Services for Young Children in Foster Care: Assessment and Service Delivery. Accepted by the Journal of Social Service Research.
- Elizabeth M.Z. Farmer, Barbara J. Burns, Mimi Chapman, Susan D. Phillips, Adrian Angold & E. Jane Costello. (2001). Use of mental health services by youth in contact with social services. *Social Service Review*, 75(4), 605-624.

INSERT GRAPH/TABLE HERE

Table 6: Children in Custody Statewide by Age, Gender and Race on June 30, 2006

Race / Ethnicity	0 - 1		2 - 4		5 - 12		13 - 18		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
White Non-Hispanic	258	232	321	313	744	670	1,745	1,206	5,489
Black/African American Non-Hispanic	120	121	170	152	377	326	1,131	602	2,999
Hispanic	23	20	26	33	43	37	73	49	304
Multi-Race Non-Hispanic	18	11	15	25	41	44	49	27	230
Asian	0	0	0	2	0	1	4	6	13
American Indian/ Alaska Native	1	1	0	0	1	3	2	1	9
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Unable to Determine	20	20	24	18	25	29	64	26	226
Total	440	405	556	543	1,231	1,110	3,069	1,917	9,271

TN KIDS is a "live" database with on-going additions and updates being made to data in the system. Due to this continual process, results may vary based on the time a report is generated.

Tennessee Department of Children's Services

<http://www.state.tn.us/youth>

Annual Report FY 2006