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CRC staff completed research to re-validate the family risk assessment in 2003. The sample included 5,694 families investigated for abuse or neglect between January and March 2001. As with the first study, outcomes were collected for a standardized two-year period. Findings indicated that the risk assessment currently in use classified families such that an increase in risk level corresponded to an increase in the proportion of families with a subsequent investigation, as well as confirmation of child maltreatment.

Minor changes to the risk assessment, however, did improve its classification abilities. Across all measures of subsequent maltreatment, the classification resulting from the proposed risk assessment provides more distinction by consecutive risk levels than does the classification obtained with the existing risk assessment. For example, the existing risk assessment classifies families such that those in the very high risk group have a re-investigation rate that is 10% greater than the rate for high risk families. In contrast, the proposed risk assessment shows a 24% increase in the re-investigation rates for very high versus high risk families.

The most recent validation study served its purpose. CDSS chose to remain with the current risk assessments and, despite agency changes to operational policies and procedures, potential increases in the effectiveness of service delivery, or other changes among the client population (such as substance abuse patterns, demographic changes caused by migration, etc.), the department can be sure that the risk assessment accurately classifies families by their likelihood of future child maltreatment.

Targeting Prevention Services for TANF Applicants using Risk Assessment

As a group, families applying for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) have higher rates of subsequent referral to child protective services (CPS) than the general population. One study noted that 22% of all AFDC (TANF’s precursor) families were investigated by CPS in the five years following application.1 The front door of TANF may be an ideal opportunity to offer preventive services. Each successfully preventedinvestigation translates into reduced strain on CPS resources. More importantly, harm to children is reduced, creating stronger, healthier families.

Blanketing all TANF applicants with preventive services, however, would be cost prohibitive and largely unnecessary. Nearly 80% of the families in the study did NOT experience a CPS investigation. The need exists to effectively classify TANF applicants in effort to target preventive services for families at greatest risk. CPS agencies that use Structured Decision Making (SDM) for risk assessment know that there is no more reliable, valid and equitable way to accomplish this than use of an actuarial risk assessment tool.

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The California Risk Revalidation

The dilemma is that all existing CPS risk tools were developed on samples of families already referred to CPS agencies. Due caution must be exercised when applying a tool designed for one purpose for a related, but different purpose. After careful review of the literature and existing risk tools, Orange County, California is poised to pilot this innovative application for risk assessment.

Workgroups will meet during 2004 to adapt the California Family Risk Assessment for use with TANF applicants. Rollout of the tool is anticipated toward the end of the year, beginning with a small cohort of pilot sites. Most of the information needed to complete the tool is already collected during TANF application. Families at higher risk will be offered voluntary preventive services. SDM’s Family Strengths and Needs Assessment will be used to prioritize needs and strengths in order to select services.

Because the risk tool will be used in an innovative way, its results will be considered provisional until a prospective revalidation study can be conducted in two or three years.

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If your jurisdiction is interested in partnering with CRC to take this research to the next level, we urge you to contact Raelene Freitag or Kathy Park at 608.831.1180 or Janice Ereth at 414.961.9849.