# SDM News

**Mark Your Calendar:**

The annual SDM Conference will take place on October 2-3, 2002, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## Moving Children to Permanency

**SDM in Foster Care**

Following the successful implementation of SDM to guide workers who are responsible for children in in-home care, **Michigan** joined with the Children's Research Center (CRC) to expand SDM into the foster care arena.

SDM for foster care was initially piloted in nine Michigan counties. To evaluate the impact of SDM on foster care cases, each pilot county was matched to a comparison county using a variety of social, economic, and child welfare practice indices. Large cohorts of children placed in foster care in both the pilot and comparison counties were then identified and tracked over a 15-month follow-up period. Presumably, since both groups were subject to the same changes in law or policy incurred during the follow-up period, any differences in outcomes between the groups could be attributed to SDM.

In the SDM pilot counties a higher proportion of children returned home, a higher proportion of children had parental rights terminated, and a higher proportion of children were placed with permanent legal guardians. The study also indicated that permanency rates attained for African American children in Michigan matched those attained for Whites.

For a copy of the full report, outlining the results of the first phase of this foster care study, contact CRC at 608-831-1180.

## New Hampshire Implements SDM

Like other states, **New Hampshire** was aware of inconsistencies in conducting case assessments; making critical case decisions surrounding removal, reunification, and other permanency options; documenting activities and decisions; and managing ongoing cases. After extensive research, they concluded that the SDM model offered the best opportunity to improve case practice and child/family outcomes. CRC assisted New Hampshire throughout the development and implementation periods.

After orientation sessions, facilitated by **Elaine Squadrito** who serves as a Project Consultant through the **National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment**, the following steps toward implementation of SDM were taken:

? visiting district offices to share work products with staff and solicit their input;

? conducting workgroups for staff facilitated by CRC;

? developing assessment tools to meet New Hampshire's needs;

? recommending modifications to the existing automated screens to complement the SDM application;

? testing case-specific scenarios;

? training the supervisors on SDM policy, procedures, and computer applications; and

? establishing an expert SDM Core Team to oversee operations of the newly implemented SDM system.

## Introducing "SDM Talk"

SDM users now have an electronic forum to hold discussions with other folks who use SDM. "SDM Talk" is an unmoderated list serve that allows you to email everybody on the list with discussion items, questions, and responses.

Whether you are thinking about SDM, currently implementing SDM, or already use SDM to structure case management decisions, it is an easy and efficient way for you to see what the "SDM Talk "is about.

To subscribe to the list, send an email to: requests@listserve.com including the words: "subscribe SDM Talk" in the message.  You will receive a welcome message confirming your subscription to the list.

Questions about the list serve should be directed to **Theresa Healy** via email:  healy@chorus.net.

## Uniqueness of Alaska Reflected in SDM Model

*"…transportation to complete an investigation may consist of a flight in a small plane, then a snow machine ride to the home…."*

In 1986, **Alaska** became the first state to implement a research-based risk assessment tool in CPS. Alaska has now expanded its decision-making model to incorporate tools for initial screening, response priority, safety assessment, strength and need assessment, and reassessments for both in-home and out-of-home cases.

Several key adaptations of the model reflect the uniqueness of Alaskan life.  With a significant Alaskan Native population, the tool's items and definitions had to maintain cultural sensitivity specific to more than 226 distinct tribes. The important role of Tribes, Tribal Organizations and their resources is reflected in safety intervention options, as well as throughout the tool.  Many Alaskans live frontier, subsistence lifestyles. This may include small housing with limited windows, lack of electricity, lack of running water, and unique diets. Great care was taken to acknowledge and support Native traditions and subsistence related conditions while maintaining concern for child safety.

Vast distances, rugged terrain, and often brutal weather defy the traditional notion of "immediate" response. For example, the **Bethel field office** has a catchment area the size of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut combined. Within this vast geographic area are 56 villages that require a boat or small plane to access. Weather can prevent access to a village for a week or more.  In the winter, transportation to complete an investigation may consist of a flight in a small plane to the nearest village, then a snow machine ride to the home; in the summer the same location may be accessed by boat.

Alaska's SDM model will eventually be incorporated into its statewide computer system, which is currently in development. Training for trainers was held in October 2001 with full implementation taking place in December.  Field Administrator **Deirdre O'Connor** states, "Structured Decision Making supports the worker.  It is critical for Social Workers to understand that we are still relying on their professional skills and assessments.  SDM provides a process to guide, support, and document those assessments."

## Regional SDM Supervisor's Conference

**Recognizing the importance of supervisors in Structured Decision Making implementation**

By **Sandy Ranville** of the Michigan Family Independence Agency Foster Care Program Office, and **Terry McHoskey**, of the Children' Research Center

The **Michigan Family Independence Agency** hosted the first Midwest Region Structured Decision Making Supervisor's Conference in June 2001 in Detroit. More than 60 supervisors and program managers attended from **Ohio, Minnesota, Wisconsin,** and **Michigan**.

The conference goal was to recognize the importance of the first-line supervisor in child welfare services, and to strengthen the day-to-day delivery of children's services through better implementation of SDM as a case management model. A multi-state committee planned and organized the event, and the **Michigan FIA Child and Family Services Administration** provided funding.

The conference agenda focused on strengthening child welfare operations by improving supervisors' knowledge of successful implementation, operations, and key practice issues related to SDM. The program included several round tables for supervisors to present, share, and discuss strengths and issues and to generate solutions.

Evaluation from conference participants indicated the conference was a very positive experience and provided strong encouragement for a future supervisor's conference.

The planning committee, recognizing that the 2002 National SDM Conference is scheduled in Minnesota on October 2-3, 2002, decided to forgo planning a specific Midwest supervisors conference in 2002 in favor of encouraging and supporting program content at the national conference.

## Charter School Education Program Monitoring

In 1998, along with the enactment of charter school legislation in **Wisconsin**, CRC expanded the application of the principles of data collection, data services, and outcome analysis from the juvenile justice and CPS arenas into the educational arena.

For the last three years, the **City of Milwaukee** has contracted with CRC to monitor the educational achievements of any school chartered by the city. Charter schools are designed to be academically accountable to parents, students, teachers, and the public-at-large. CRC's educational program monitoring services provide each school with a vehicle to identify, quantify, analyze, and report on educational outcomes using state of the art data collection and reporting methodologies and analysis. It utilizes interviews and surveys to gather information about the learning program and assesses the satisfaction of the students, parents, teachers, and administrators involved in the learning community. CRC staff also visit the schools to observe classrooms, staff interactions, parental involvement events, etc.

To obtain a copy of an annual charter school report or to learn more about the services CRC provides to charter schools, please contact the Director of CRC, **Janice Ereth, Ph.D.**, at 414-961-9849 or jerethmw@aol.com.

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# Frequently Asked Questions about SDM

There are some common questions we hear regarding Structured Decision Making system implementation. We will ask our Senior Researchers to provide answers to some of those frequently asked questions (FAQs) in each newsletter.

Today's FAQ is:

**Q:** Since the safety assessment and the risk assessment ask similar questions or address similar issues, why don't we simply complete one form?

**A:** Safety and risk are separate assessments designed to be applied at different decision points in the life of a case. While the issues addressed on each assessment appear similar, an examination of the definitions reveals their separate identities.

Safety assessment is an examination applied at first face-to-face contact with the child and family to assess any imminent harm that may threaten a child and require immediate protective action. Risk assessment, on the other hand, is an examination of caretaker characteristics made at the point of investigation disposition to help classify potential for future child maltreatment and guide the worker decision to open the case for ongoing service or close the case. Risk assessment also helps guide the level of service or the number of worker contacts.

Please contact CRC with further questions or comments: 608-831-1180.

Thanks to **Terry McHoskey**, Senior Program Manager at the Children's Research Center, for providing this FAQ and answer!

## News and Notes...

**New Mexico Children Youth and Families Division** is planning to develop a guide to help assess potential foster parents. Development of this guide includes research to determine which combination of family and situational characteristics are related to either foster home closure by the department or by the foster parents.

The article "The Relative Validity of Actuarial and Consensus-Based Risk Assessment Systems" (Children and Youth Services Review) by **Chris Baird** and **Dennis Wagner** of the Children's Research Center received a Pro Humanitate Literary Award for June 2001. The award is presented to authors "who exemplify the intellectual integrity and moral courage required to transcend political and social barriers to champion best practice in the field of Child Welfare."