SDM® NEWS

Ensuring Implementation Fidelity

Whether you have just started to implement the Structured Decision Making® (SDM) system or have been using it for some years, the overall effectiveness of the SDM® system in achieving desired outcomes of reduced harm to children and reduced time to permanency depends on the resources and efforts put into ongoing monitoring and supporting quality implementation. If you are confident that your SDM system is functioning according to design and helping workers make consistent and accurate decisions, we would like to hear from you and share your success story with other jurisdictions that may be struggling.

If you are uncertain about the quality of SDM implementation in your agency, the Children's Research Center (CRC) can be of assistance. Our experience has shown that implementation can be greatly enhanced with ongoing quality monitoring. Some older systems lack regular management reporting, which is critical for monitoring implementation and ensuring that workers are using the system as designed. Over the last several years, CRC has worked with numerous jurisdictions to develop methods for transparency and accountability of SDM assessments. These methods can give you the vital information necessary to assess whether your system is working as intended.

Evidence for the reliability, validity, and equity of the SDM system continues to grow. In many jurisdictions, use of SDM assessments is contributing to significantly improved outcomes. Over the past three years, counties in one state dropped their six-month recurrence rate by over two percentage points, and are now below their program improvement plan (PIP) goal—and have remained there for two years. Los Angeles County reduced its foster care population by about 10% over the past two years, and simultaneously reduced the average length of stay by about 300 days. These results are achievable for other jurisdictions, but require investment in quality implementation as well as coordination and integration of the SDM model with other valuable initiatives.

There are several specific ways that CRC can assist your jurisdiction. These include the following:

Updating the model. CRC has added tools for key decision points that did not appear in earlier versions. For example, the SDM model now includes screening and response priority tools, reunification assessments, and tools for assessing foster and relative care providers to increase safety and stability in out-of-home care.

Risk validation study. The SDM model's actuarial risk assessment should be validated within three to five years of implementation and every five to ten years thereafter.

8th Annual SDM® Conference

November 12–14, 2008

Sacramento, California

The theme of this year's conference is "Weaving the SDM® Model into Daily Practice." Advanced SafeMeasures® workshops will be part of the conference lineup.

For more information, visit the NCCD/CRC website at www.nccd-crc.org, or call us at (608) 831-1180.

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Validation studies ensure that the risk items on the assessment continue to relate strongly to actual outcomes in your jurisdiction.

Management reports. With an extract of your data, our analysts can provide reports detailing model fidelity as well as important process and outcome measures.

Training and technical assistance. This assistance may include reading cases to assess the quality of SDM implementation; teaching supervisors to conduct case reading for ongoing quality assurance; conducting refresher trainings on the SDM system; and providing advanced training on topics that include interviewing for the risk assessment, safety planning using the SDM safety assessment, using SDM assessments as outlines for effective documentation, and integrating the SDM model with family engagement. CRC can also review current policies and procedures to ensure that there is consistency in practice.

Extending SDM principles into other systems. The principles behind the SDM model in child protection have informed new SDM models for adult protective services, prevention services for families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, and foster and relative care providers. CRC continues to refine its work on decision systems in juvenile justice, and has introduced the Juvenile Assessment Intervention System™ (JAIS) model.

The SDM system has a demonstrated ability to improve outcomes. Yet, like most initiatives, effective implementation requires attention and effort. Without a thorough understanding of how the SDM system fits into practice, it is easy for workers to view it only as required paperwork. CRC staff can help revitalize SDM implementation and provide administrators with confidence that field staff are making the best decisions to reduce future maltreatment and expedite permanency.

We know that budgets will be tight this year, which is all the more reason to be sure that your agency's resources are being directed in ways most likely to result in the best possible outcomes. Information outlining the current SDM model, as well as additional materials describing other ways CRC has been helping social service agencies achieve results, is available for download at http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/c_sdm_about.html.

For more information on ways CRC can support your ongoing efforts at program improvement, please contact Raelene Freitag, Director of CRC, at 608-831-1180 or rfreitag@mw.nccd-crc.org.

Data-driven Decision Making in Educational Settings

CRC staff continue to disseminate and utilize the principles of data-driven decision making in the City of Milwaukee charter schools and many of the small high schools supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Milwaukee. CRC staff work with each school to develop specific, measurable student academic outcomes and methods of gathering data related to those outcomes. CRC then collects and analyzes the data and produces an annual programmatic and educational performance report for each of the schools. Schools use the data to identify and focus on specific activities for school improvement over the next academic year. Some of the schools have been using this process for over ten years, while others are new to the process.

For more information on how CRC can help educators achieve better outcomes, contact Sue Gramling at sgramling@mw.nccd-crc.org.

Reliability Testing of Adult Protective Services Screening and Response Priority Assessment

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) recently conducted reliability testing on a newly developed SDM screening and response priority assessment for use in adult protective services (APS). The testing was conducted with the New Hampshire Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services in December 2007, with 14 members of the Bureau's SDM development workgroup. Each rater reviewed five cases and independently completed paper copies of SDM assessments. The testing yielded positive and promising results.

The purpose of the screening component is to determine if a report requires an APS protective response (sometimes called an investigation in other jurisdictions) and if so, how swiftly the response should be initiated. The response priority component requires workers to make multiple decisions about the nature of the allegations, and agreement among raters ranged from 78% to 100%. These rates indicate good reliability, meaning that the assessment can help workers make more consistent decisions. When determining response priority—how quickly action should be taken—

agreement rates ranged between 84% and 100%, and the overall agreement rate for the response level was 76%.

Again, this finding indicates good reliability, and suggests that implementation of the assessment has the potential to increase worker consistency in decisions regarding which cases meet the threshold for protective response and how quickly an investigator must respond.

For more information about the SDM system for APS, please contact Kathy Park at kpark@mw.nccd-crc.org.

Advanced Training Curriculum to Be Developed in California

Traditional SDM training has focused on the specifics of completing an assessment, using definitions, and taking case actions based on assessment results. SDM jurisdictions are clear about key decisions, like the need for a safety plan when there is imminent danger that could be controlled without removing a child, and focusing a case plan on priority needs while building on priority strengths. Integrating the SDM system into a practice model, however, requires the knowledge and skill to connect SDM assessments with activities that flow directly into and from each assessment.

In partnership with the California Department of Social Services, CRC is launching a series of advanced seminars that address key connections between SDM assessments and a larger strength-based, family-centered practice model. These seminars will include linking interview skills with SDM assessments, as well as using SDM safety assessment and strengths and needs assessment results for case planning.

It is expected that providing a series of short, advanced SDM seminars will create a more integrated practice model for workers. For example, when completing a risk assessment, how does a worker inquire as to whether or not there is a substance abuse issue? How should a worker score an item when there is a difference of opinion between family members, or between the family and the worker? When developing a case plan, how can a worker engage the family in selecting goals and activities? How can conversation with a family early in the case improve the reunification assessment process months later?

Workers will still get traditional training on completing SDM assessments. With the new curriculum, they will also be offered advanced seminars specific to their job assignment as they gain experience. CRC will develop the advanced curriculum and subsequently train trainers from California's system of regional training academies.

For more information, contact Raelene Freitag at rfreitag@mw.nccd-crc.org.

Staff Profile: Lisa Stenzel

In January 2008, Lisa Stenzel joined NCCD/CRC as a research associate. Lisa grew up in Brookfield, Wisconsin, and holds a B.S. in criminal justice from Edgewood College. During and after college, Lisa worked at the State of Wisconsin Department of Justice's Division of Criminal Investigation as part of the Amber Alert program and the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. Immediately before joining NCCD/CRC, Lisa worked as an analyst at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in the Washington, D.C., metro area. She and her fiancé, Adam, an ecological restoration technician, moved back to Wisconsin to enjoy the company of their families and the friendly people and slower pace of the Midwest.

Although her degree is in criminal justice, as Lisa's career has progressed she has become more interested in the social welfare aspect of justice issues. Her decision to join NCCD/CRC was informed by her desire to continue working in a nonprofit agency. She also wanted to continue doing work to help children, but was excited to move to a prevention-oriented sector.

Outside of work, Lisa enjoys reading, spending time outdoors, and travel. Door County, where her parents own a cottage, is a frequent destination. Lisa has done quite a bit of world travel as well, and counts Peru's Machu Picchu, Italy's Cinque Terre villages, and the city of Bruges, Belgium, as favorite spots. Among her long-range travel plans are a return to the Grand Canyon, a trip to South America to visit her sister (who's currently living in Chile), and a "dream" trip to Costa Rica. One of her goals is to live as sustainably as possible; to this end, she takes the bus to work as often as she can, uses reusable bags, and shops at the Farmer's Market.

Lisa's efforts at sustainable living don't stop for special events. Lisa and Adam will be married on September 13, 2008, in Door County, and they're planning a green, locally focused wedding. Their eco-conscious decisions include buying flowers from a local greenhouse and using blue Riesling bottles as vases. Lisa will wear a custom-sewn dress made from her mother's and future-mother-in-law's dresses.

We're very happy to have Lisa as part of NCCD/CRC's research staff and look forward to many years of working with her.

From the Field

Why Am I Here?

Why am I here?

This existential question has occupied philosophers for centuries. This article won't try to answer the larger question of why we are here on earth. Instead, we'll focus on an almost-as-perplexing question: why are we in a family's home AFTER the assessment is over?

During the assessment phase, our purpose is clear. We are gathering the information needed to complete the assessment at hand, whether that is the safety, risk, or family strengths and needs assessment. After that—after the case plan is written and before the reassessment, or between reassessments—why are we there?

It is easy for workers to use each contact with the family to "check in" and then get caught up in the day-to-day issues, conflicts, dramas, joys, and successes of the family. As natural helpers, when a mother presents a new problem, we want to help solve it. When a father describes a new need, we want to help meet it. Although we are well-intentioned, if these activities are unrelated to the priority need areas that make up the focus of the case plan, our actions could inadvertently slow the family's progress toward reunification or case closure.

Think of a goal you decide to pursue. For example, suppose you decide that this is the year you will really start that exercise program. Then you realize the garage needs to be cleaned out. Then you decide to sign up for an interesting course. Then your child makes the soccer team and needs rides to practices… soon the year is gone, and the exercise program never really got started. What happened? Losing sight of priorities happens to everyone.

Families are not different in this regard. We build a case plan with a family that is designed to reduce risk of maltreatment by addressing priority needs. We should expect that there will be lots of competition for their time and energy. If we get caught up with them in all the things that distract them, we miss a golden opportunity. Of course, if anything compromising safety emerges, it must be addressed immediately, whether or not it relates to the priority needs that focus the case plan. Apart from safety, however, each contact with a family should focus on progress toward the case plan goals. An easy way to keep notes of each contact would be to create in advance a note page that specifies a family's priority need areas, and within those, specific case plan goals, objectives, services, and activities. At each visit, progress can be noted. If progress is not being made, it is important to discuss it with the family promptly. Perhaps there is a barrier not previously known that needs to be addressed. Perhaps a service provider is not meeting the family needs. This "checking in" should not be undertaken with a monitoring or "Gotcha!" approach, but with the caseworker acting as a coach and supporter—someone who wants the family to succeed.

Ongoing caseworkers may think of SDM assessments as something done only at reviews. But the answer to the question "Why am I here?" makes it evident that the SDM model is integral to every contact. The priority needs that led to the case plan frame the content of discussion on each and every visit. Looking for changes in safety should happen on every visit. Finally, if the focus of every visit is progress toward case plan goals (and visitation, if a child is out of the home), then completing a reassessment will be a straightforward process with no surprises for the worker or the family.

Registration for the SDM® Conference Is Now Open!

Registration for the 8th National SDM Conference is now open. The focus on weaving the SDM model into practice reflects the importance of developing an integrated practice model in which SDM assessments are how key decisions are made. The workshops offered at this conference represent struggles and successes along the path to quality implementation. This year's conference will include master classes on individual SDM assessments and advanced SafeMeasures® workshops.

Please plan on joining CRC staff and our co-hosts November 12–14, 2008, at the DoubleTree Hotel Sacramento, 2001 Point West Way, Sacramento, California. To register for the conference, please see http://www.nccd-crc.org/crc/c_conference_main.html. If you have questions regarding the conference, please call (608) 831-1180 and speak with Angela Noel or Keely Stotlar.