

DHS Adopts Reform

Officials Praise "Family Team Meetings" Concept

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By GARY REMAL

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AUGUSTA -- Even the harshest critics of Maine's embattled child-protection system say a new technique being introduced to bolster parents who may be at risk of losing custody of their children is a giant step forward.

The new system -- known as "family team meetings" -- gives parents the right to gather their family members, friends and people who know their children best, such as teachers, coaches and neighbors, when meeting with state Department of Human Services officials who question their ability to care for their children.

"We're kind of on the leading edge in trying to take it statewide over a pretty large area," said Karen Westburg, director of the Bureau of Child and Family Services within the state Department of Human Services.

The new procedures, first piloted in Augusta and Bangor district DHS offices in late summer, were developed by an Alabama consulting firm, the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, directed by Paul Vincent. Vincent headed Alabama's child welfare system from 1989 to 1996. The concept was developed in response to a court consent decree under which his department operated, allowing parents more say in child-protective cases.

What Vincent's company calls family team meetings were brought to Maine by Westburg, following the hailstorm of criticism from across the nation after the Jan. 31, 2001, death of 5-year-old state foster child Logan Marr. Marr's foster mother, former state child-protective worker Sally Ann Schofield, was convicted of manslaughter in connection with Marr's suffocation death.

State police say the little girl had more than 42 feet of duct tape wrapped around her head, her chest and parts of her face, which they say Schofield used to discipline Marr.

Westburg said her agency has been working for more than two years to bring the new mechanism to the front lines.

"Family team meetings we see as an incredible opportunity. They're an important part of our reform effort," she said. "It's a major tool to better engage families, with the goal to improve the outcomes with children and families."

Vincent said his agency borrowed techniques from those used to involve severely mentally ill or mentally retarded people in their own care in developing the family-team concept.

"It is sometimes hard to figure out why our field has been slow to adopt it," Vincent said. "Historically, child-

welfare systems have developed some mistrust of families, probably because child-welfare workers tend to see families at their most challenging."

Social workers also have seen themselves as experts who should develop the solutions, he said, adding, "The field really hasn't seen what families have to contribute to the process."

Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, a harsh critic of Maine's Department of Human Services after Marr's death, praised Maine officials for adopting the team meeting concept.

"It's one sign that Maine's Department of Human Services is serious about change. ... It's one thing that can make the child-welfare system more humane and more family-friendly," Wexler said from his office in Alexandria, Va.

"Even more encouraging than family team meetings, per se, is the fact that DHS is now willing to reach out beyond Maine's borders for help, and it seems to be reaching out to the right places," Wexler said.

That does not mean he is completely at ease. He said some state child-protective workers are likely to be skeptical, and he acknowledged that the department continues to have final say on plans for children. But he finds the change encouraging, and he credits Gov. John Baldacci, elected last November, with much of the impetus for the change.

"There are a number of variations on this approach used in many places around the country. The track record is good -- fewer placements, shorter placements, more placements with relatives with no compromise of safety," Wexler said.

After Marr's death, Maine human services officials called in outside consultants to help them change the way they were operating, Westburg explained. The consultants suggested going to the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group in Alabama to shift to the family team approach.

"It changes the role of the social worker from the person in charge of the investigation to the person in charge of a team," Westburg said.

Maureen E. Dea is a Brunswick attorney who was involved in several of the earliest family meetings in the Augusta area. She usually represents children in child-protective hearings as a court-appointed "guardian ad litem," so she observed the meetings from a neutral perspective.

"I think it's a good change. I think it's a positive change. And I think Karen Westburg has done a lot of positive things over the last couple of years," Dea said. "But like everything else, it depends on the person running the meeting."

Dea does worry that some DHS workers might not like the new procedures, but she believes the procedures will be received well enough to let the concept survive.

"I think if they just use them in the easy cases, that would be sad, because the easy cases don't need it as much as the hard cases," Dea said.

Westburg said of the changes, "They have been received really positively in the community, among the staff here and clients. We have even had several clients involved in staff training."

She admitted that her caseworkers' acceptance of the new system varies. And many caseworkers worry

that they already have more than they can do, knowing that this new procedure will add to their workload at a time when the department does not have money to hire more people.

"There's no doubt; in the short run, it's going to be much more time-consuming. That's obviously a concern, since some of the resources we were hoping to get we were not able to get because of the larger (state) budget issues," Westburg said. "Our staff is feeling overwhelmed. But they're feeling they're doing the right work; and we feel that over time, if we do the right kind of work, it will reduce work. ... It will be tough from a manpower perspective to do this without additional resources. But ... it's such a positive step, we are committed to make things happen."

However, Westburg also cautions that the technique will not work in all cases.

"There are going to be cases where family team meetings are more appropriate than for others, and there will be cases for which this approach is not appropriate."

Dea said it won't work, for instance, when parents are heavily involved with drugs or alcohol and cannot come to meetings sober, or where there is a serious threat of violence. Still, Dea said, "I think if they just use them for the easy cases, that would be sad, because the easy cases don't need it as much as the hard cases."

While a parent goal might be to move immediately to regain custody of children, team members and department officials might have to convince the parent of more realistic goals, such as improved visitation rights, at least as intermediary steps toward regaining custody of children. But Westburg said parents might be more easily convinced with people around them they trust, people they believe have their children's best interests at heart.

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