

**FAMILY STABILITY AND FAMILY-CENTERED,
NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SERVICES: RELATED OR NOT?**

In our daily efforts of educating and recruiting county children services agencies to become more family-centered, neighborhood-based, we are often times struck by the many initiatives an individual agency may be attempting to manage at one time. Often, the initiatives are seen as separate piloted projects aimed at different goals, objectives, and outcomes. However, when we compare the purposes of the various initiatives, they often have similar goals: *to serve children, families, and communities*, while the objectives or outcomes may differ. This is not the case for the Family Stability Incentive Fund (FSIF) and integrating a Family-Centered, Neighborhood-Based Services (FCNB) approach to practice.

The Family Stability Incentive Fund (FSIF) was established in 1996 by the Ohio Family and Children First Initiative and is administered through the Ohio Department of Mental Health and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. FSIF is based on the Family and Children First's principle that *when its possible, families should be supported in raising their own children*. FSIF's purpose is to *improve family stability by significantly reducing the number of children entering out-of-home care*. FSIF identifies six philosophical beliefs that include:

- ✓ *Research and practice have demonstrated that the most appropriate and effective place to impact out-of-home care is at the entry gate.*
- ✓ *Living with parents and siblings in a stable home with supports and services for the child and family, as long as the child is safe.*
- ✓ *Immediately accessing needed supports and services when the risk of placement exists.*
- ✓ *Depending on the needs of the child and family, every family-serving system has potential resources to share and the community responsibility to contribute to placement diversion.*
- ✓ *Protection and support of children requires a coordinated, integrated approach by all family-serving systems, which addresses the complex and multi-dimensional needs of children and their families.*
- ✓ *Culturally competent systems increase access to neighborhood and community-based supports and services.*

With these beliefs, the FSIF's goal is to reduce the actual number of out-of-home placements by 25 percent over 2 ½ years in each county site. Therefore, the target population for FSIF is children at risk of being removed from their homes; includes children of all ages from all local systems.

In 1996, 17 counties were awarded the Family Stability Incentive Fund. Today there are 70 counties participating in this effort.

All counties who undertake this initiative are required to form an interdisciplinary team (called Diversion Teams) that incorporate expertise from the fields of child protection, health, mental health, substance abuse, education, mental retardation/developmental disability, juvenile justice, and child and family development.

The first 17 participating counties developed three types of placement diversion models. A service model which focuses on staff or teams that accept referrals and assume responsibility for families for a period of time; a broker model which focuses on inter-system planning and collaboration; and

a funder model which focuses on the planned use of funding to meet community-wide needs.

All three of these diversion models have contributed to the success of this initiative with the initial sites experiencing over 11,000 fewer out-of-home placements compared to 1995 county placement baseline figures. The FSIF has also fostered increased awareness of informal and formal community resources and furthered the development of service options for maintaining family stability. The FSIF counties are applying the approaches to clustering, welfare reform, community-based juvenile justice programming and child protective services.

FSIF diversion approach compliments, supports and reflects the Family-Centered, Neighborhood-Based (FCNB) Services approach. The FCNB approach to service delivery was piloted by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 1992. Since 1996, PCSAO has been working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the ODJFS to assist 35 counties in integrating a FCNB Services approach into daily practice. FCNB Services values are very similar to that of the Family Stability Initiative Fund's philosophy:

- ✓ *Children have a right to grow up with their family.*
- ✓ *Children have the right to be nurtured and protected in a stable family environment.*
- ✓ *When children are at risk of harm, the community has the responsibility to intervene.*
- ✓ *Families are our community's most important resource and therefore, must be respected, valued, and encouraged to build on their existing strengths.*
- ✓ *The community must support families in raising and caring for their children.*
- ✓ *The racial, cultural, and ethnic heritage of families, and the neighborhoods where they live, must be supported and seen as assets.*

Public Children Services Agencies that integrate a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to service delivery strive to keep children in their own home when it is safe to do so, and if not, then as close to the child's home as possible. While the FSIF Diversion Team strives to keep children at home and offer preventive supports and services to children, FCNB extends the philosophy to incorporate neighborhood collaborations. Counties target at-risk neighborhoods where the highest number of referrals are generated from and begin to build relationships and collaborations with the "folks" living in these neighborhoods not just the service providers who provide services to families in these neighborhoods. . Out of the relationships and collaborations that are formed, neighborhoods become a natural support system for the at-risk families.

It is our belief that counties who received the FSIF and have Diversion Teams would extend the FSIF effort by consciously integrating a family-centered, *neighborhood-based* approach to service. By focusing on the FCNB five primary areas, agencies would build their capacity to partner with the FSIF Diversion to form positive relationships within vulnerable neighborhoods and build collaborative aimed at strengthening and stabilizing the neighborhood for greater quality of life outcomes for the children, families and communities they serve. ■