Wisconsin Tailored Dispositional Orders Project

Final Report – June 2022

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project grew out of the federal Child and Family Services Review conducted in 2018. Led by the Department of Children and Families ("DCF") and the Children's Court Improvement Program ("CCIP"), it is one strategy in Wisconsin's Program Improvement Plan to improve permanency outcomes for children. This project promotes the shared responsibility of the parents, child welfare agency, court, and legal partners in achieving timely reunification for the child. The project makes changes to the current process by tailoring the Conditions for Return to the child's safety and identifies the parent's behavior changes that are needed to safely return the child home.

GOALS OF THE PROJECT

1. Tailor the conditions for return to meet the needs of the individual parents.
2. Increase the percentage of cases resulting in reunification.
3. Improve the timeliness of achieving permanency, namely reunification.
4. Increase parent/family participation and engagement.

PROJECT DESIGN

This project seeks to improve Conditions for Return so that they are tailored to meet the needs of the individual parents and written in a sequence of priority to address the most significant issues and the behavioral changes that are needed to promote timely permanence. The SMART goals framework was utilized to define tailored Conditions for Return.

Tailored Conditions for Return are:

- **S**pecific to the safety threat,
- **M**easurable and based on behavioral changes,
- **A**chievable to know when progress is made,
- **R**ealistic to be completed and understood, and
- **T**imely.

PILOT SITES / INNOVATION ZONES

This project was piloted in three innovation zones to assess the effectiveness of the project and identify any modifications that may be needed before the project is rolled out statewide. The following factors were analyzed to select three counties for this project: number of CHIPS cases opened in 2018 and 2019, number of WICWA cases, legal, judicial, and county agency leadership and interest, other initiatives or pilots in place that the county is participating in, whether the county received the Child Safety Decision-Making training, and permanency data outcomes including: percentage of cases resulting in reunification compared to the statewide average, percentage of reunifications within 12 months of removal compared to the statewide average, and number of days to reunification compared to the statewide average. As a result, Barron, Manitowoc, and Waukesha counties were selected as the three innovation zones to pilot the Tailored Dispositional Orders Project.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

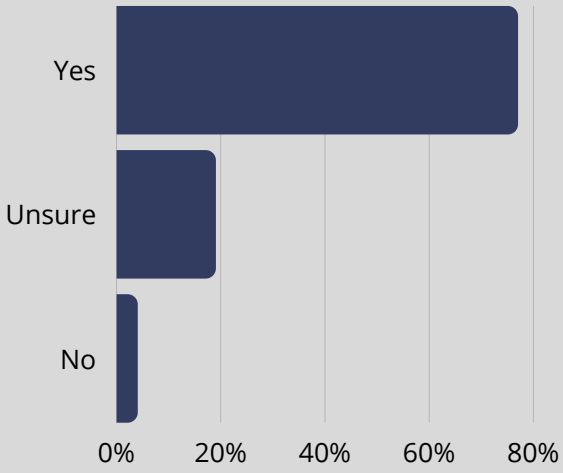
Fall 2020	DCF and CCIP met with a judge, prosecutor, and child welfare leadership from each potential pilot county to explain the project and confirm there is leadership and interest in participating in the project.
November 2020	Barron, Manitowoc, and Waukesha counties were selected to pilot the Tailored Dispositional Orders Project.
January 2021	Tailored Dispositional Orders Project Kick Off Meeting held to explain the project and provide stakeholders with a timeline of upcoming trainings and resources that will be shared.
March - April 2021	Module 1 Training: Child Safety and Tailored Dispositional Orders
April - May 2021	Facilitated Discussion with lead team from each county to identify their action steps for the project.
May 2021	Case Worker Focus Group Interviews
May - June 2021	Module 2 Training: Engaging Families in Child Welfare
Summer 2021	CCIP and DCF provide pilot counties with technical assistance and support during county meetings.
August 2021	All Sites Meeting for counties to share their progress, obtain ideas from one another, and discuss plans moving forward.
Sept - Oct 2021	Mid-implementation discussions with Leadership Teams
November 2021	Module 3 Training: A Parent's Perspective
Feb - March 2022	Final surveys and focused groups were conducted with pilot counties
March - April 2022	UW: Institute for Research on Poverty conducted a process study to evaluate the project.

FEEDBACK ON TRAINING AND RESOURCES

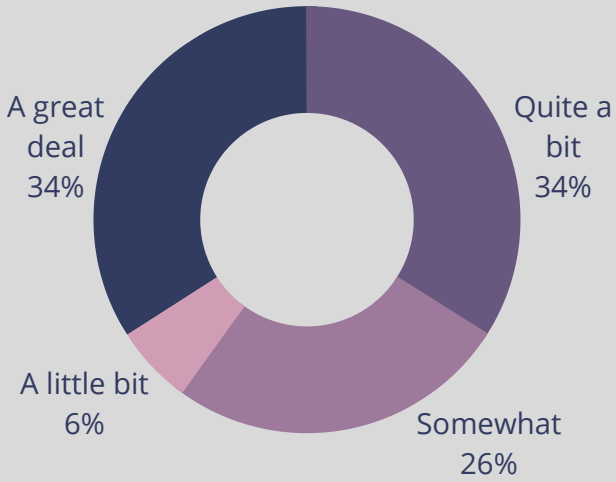
Each innovation zone had their own separate trainings to allow for group discussion and collaboration. The trainings were multi-disciplinary with judicial officers, attorneys, child welfare professionals, and CASA represented. The Module 1 training focused on Child Safety Decision-Making and Tailored Dispositional Orders. The presenters were Andrea Cleland from the Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional System sharing the child welfare perspective and Kristen Wetzel from the Children's Court Improvement Program sharing the legal/judicial perspective. Resources provided to stakeholders included: Child Safety Decision-Making benchcards, What are SMART Goals? handout, and DCF Worker Desk Guide. The Module 2 training focused on Engaging Families in Child Welfare. The presenters were retired Judge Jill Falstad from Marathon County who has a background in treatment court and Beth Smetana who has a background in child welfare. Attendees were provided resources regarding Stages of Change, Principles of Partnership, and Solution Focused Strategies. The combined evaluation results from all three innovation zones for each training are on the next page.

MODULE 1: CHILD SAFETY AND TAILORED DISPOSITIONAL ORDERS

Do you plan to change your practice related to Conditions for Return?

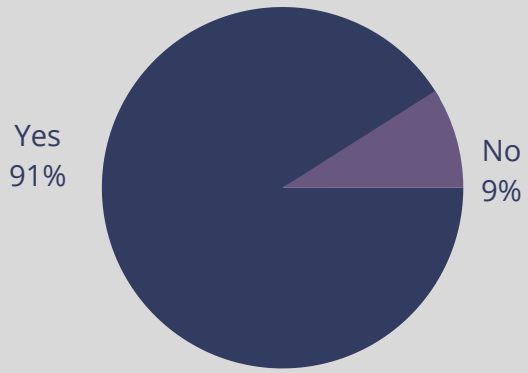


To what extent will using the SMART goal analysis when drafting Conditions for Return help parents understand what they need to do to have their child returned to the home?

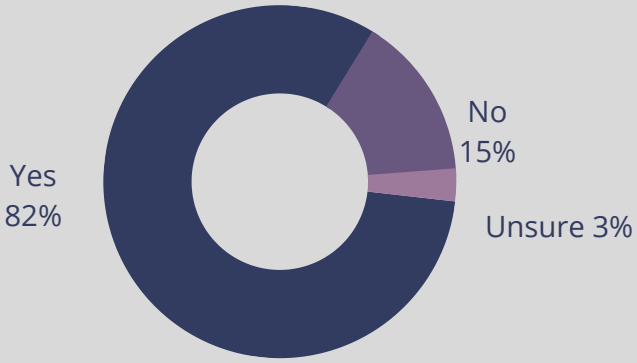


MODULE 2: ENGAGING FAMILIES IN CHILD WELFARE

Do you plan to incorporate these principles and strategies into your practice?



Do you plan to utilize the resources and handouts in your practice?



FACILITATED DISCUSSION

Each county participated in a multi-disciplinary Facilitated Discussion led by Kim Kelly from the Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System with the key stakeholders after the Module 1 training to identify action steps within this project. Each county received a written action plan that they could continue to utilize to make progress within the project. The discussion grounded stakeholders in the purpose of the project, identified what works well, and recognized challenges. Counties found the discussion helpful to bring everyone together to explore current practice and identify where gaps lie.

MODULE 3: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

The Module 3 training focused on learning a parent's perspective. Alishia Agee-Cooper shared her experience as a parent in Washington's child welfare system as well as suggestions to think about when drafting Conditions for Return and engaging families in child welfare proceedings. Wisconsin's lived experience coordinator, Bregetta Wilson, also shared Wisconsin's efforts to enhance parent voice and lived experience.

Key Points from Module 3

- It can be very impactful for the judge to come off the bench and sit at the same level as parents for Permanency Hearings.
- The CHIPS petition and reports should accurately reflect what happened because parents become derailed when there are false allegations.
- Parents do not always understand that a CHIPS case is not part of the criminal justice system.
- Keep in mind that interactions in court and outside the courtroom can impact how the parent responds. For example, a parent may perceive that their attorney is talking about their case and not something unrelated.
- Caseworkers should explain the behavior that brought CPS into the family's life and the specific behavior that needs to be addressed for the child to be safely returned to the home.
- Stakeholders should think beyond a parent using substances and focus on what is the parent's behavior while using substances that makes the child unsafe.
- It is important to consider which Condition for Return is listed first and why. This can be used as a roadmap for parents.
- Parents should be acknowledged regarding the progress they have made.

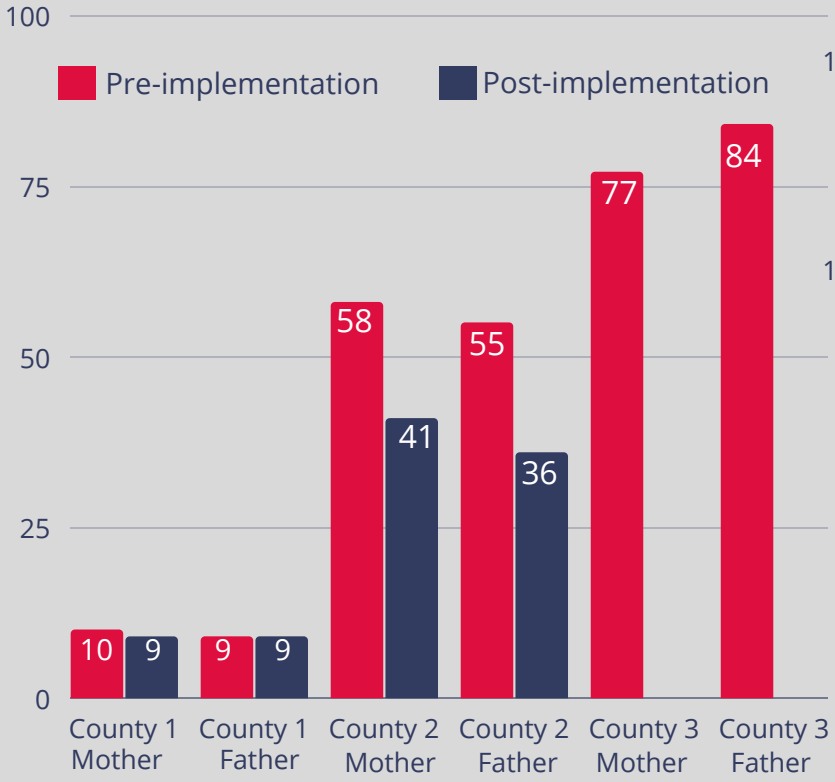
IMPLEMENTATION OF TAILORED CONDITIONS FOR RETURN

In general, all of the pilot counties decreased the total number of conditions for each parent, as well as lowered the reading level of the language used for the Conditions for Return. Some additional actions taken by the pilot counties include the following:

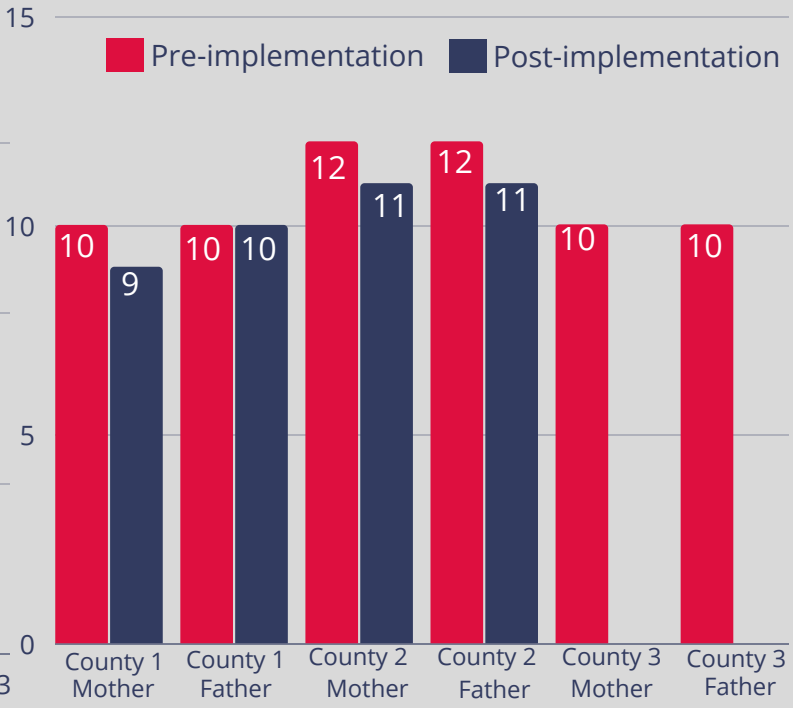
* Two of the pilot counties made changes within the county agency's case transfer process from Initial Assessment (IA) to Ongoing. This included: identifying case transfers are now a team approach to draft the Conditions for Return, assigning an ongoing worker earlier once IA identifies that a case is likely to need ongoing services, and discussing the safety assessment and including the ongoing worker in safety staffings.
* One county is utilizing the Temporary Physical Custody (TPC) Request Supplement as a result of the Module 1 training to put into words why the child is unsafe. The language of the conditions changed from child/parent to personal names.
* Additional discussions about Conditions for Return are occurring at pre-trial conferences and hearings and amongst stakeholders – judges, attorneys, and child welfare professionals.
* Additional cases post-disposition had tailored conditions related to identified danger threats and enhancing protective capacities.

Each county implemented at different times due to county specific reasons such as turnover, addressing the agency's case transfer process, and stakeholders being unable to meet due to busy calendars. County 3 did not have any post-implementation out-of-home cases reach Disposition prior to the project being evaluated by the UW-Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP).

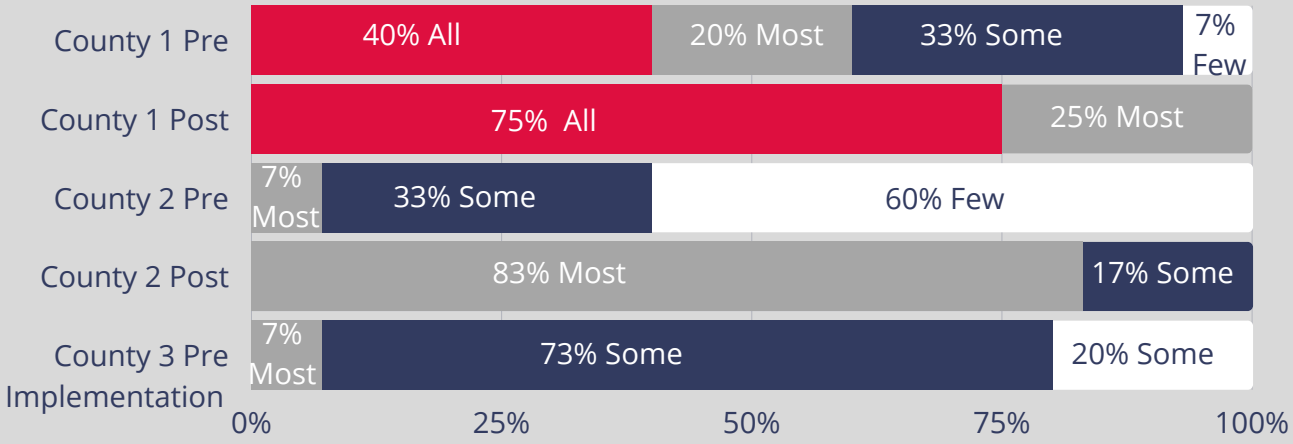
Average Number of Conditions for Return pre and post-implementation.



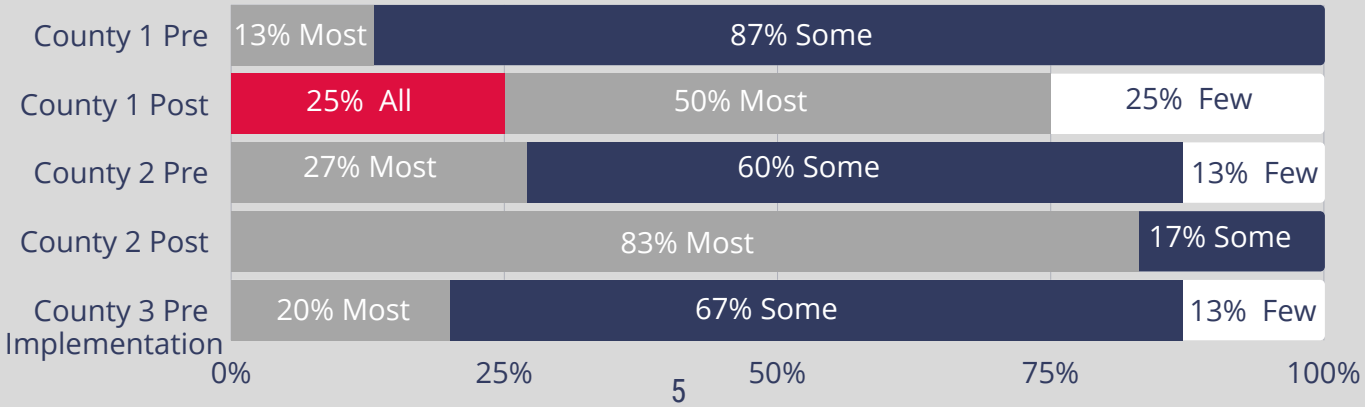
Average Reading Grade Level of Conditions for Return pre and post-implementation.



Percentage of cases where Mother's Conditions for Return were related to identified danger threats.



Percentage of cases where Mother's Conditions for Return were intended to enhance protective capacities.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER COUNTIES INTERESTED IN TAILORING THEIR CONDITIONS

- It was helpful to have an existing long-standing collaborative relationship amongst judges, attorneys, and child welfare professionals to dive right into the project and work together.
- It is important to begin conversations about Conditions for Return earlier with Initial Assessment and the Ongoing worker.
- Multi-disciplinary trainings and discussions were helpful to gain knowledge and have a shared understanding of both the legal and child welfare systems.
- It is really important to write conditions in plain English and not use acronyms, legalease, or child welfare language.
- Tailored Conditions for Return take time!

STATEWIDE EXPANSION

CCIP and DCF are excited to share the Tailored Dispositional Orders Project with additional counties and tribes throughout Wisconsin!

We can provide a multi-disciplinary training to judicial officers, attorneys, and child welfare professionals on Child Safety Decision-Making and Tailored Dispositional Orders. The training will provide stakeholders with an overview of child safety decision-making to understand how impending danger threats should be connected to conditions for return. Stakeholders will also learn how SMART goals provide a framework to draft conditions for return and discuss examples that may be used as a starting point towards tailoring the county's conditions for return. The training also includes time for a facilitated discussion to begin planning steps to implement the Tailored Dispositional Orders Project.

The length of the training can be determined by the county. Continuing education credits are offered to judicial officers, attorneys, and child welfare professionals.

Please contact Kristen.Wetzel@wicourts.gov if your county is interested in the Tailored Dispositional Orders Project.

Thank you to Barron, Manitowoc, and Waukesha counties for participating in the Tailored Dispositional Orders Pilot Project!