Wisconsin Tailored Dispositional Orders Project

Mid-Implementation Report – November 2021

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 is being 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

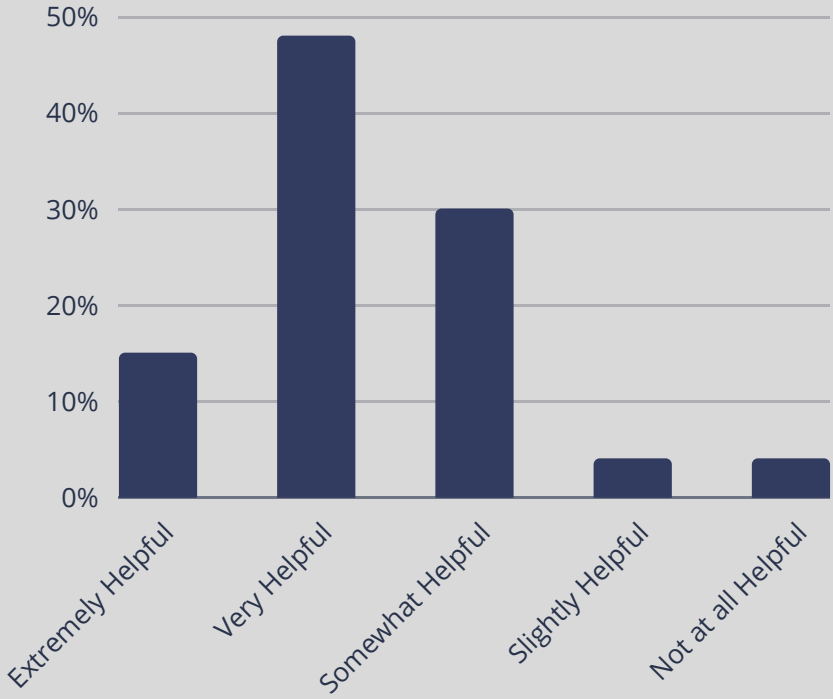
Fall 2020	DCF and CCIP met with a judge, prosecutor, and child welfare leadership from each potential pilot county to explain the project and confirm there is leadership and interest in participating in the project.
November 2020	Barron, Manitowoc, and Waukesha counties were selected to pilot the Tailored 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
November 2021	Module 3 Training: A Parent's Perspective

FEEDBACK ON TRAINING AND RESOURCES

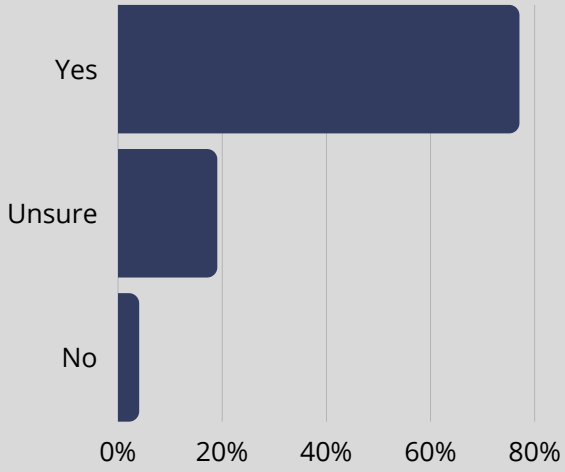
Each innovation zone had their own separate trainings to allow for group discussion and collaboration. The trainings were multi-disciplinary with judicial officers, attorneys, child welfare professionals, and CASA represented. The Module 1 training focused on Child Safety Decision-Making and Tailored 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

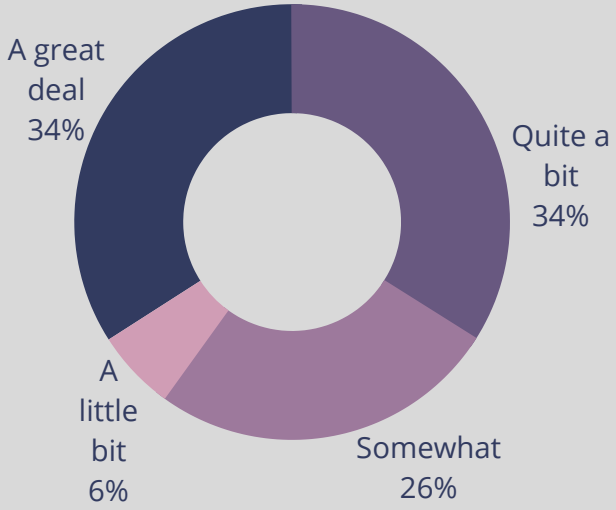
How helpful was the training to your practice?



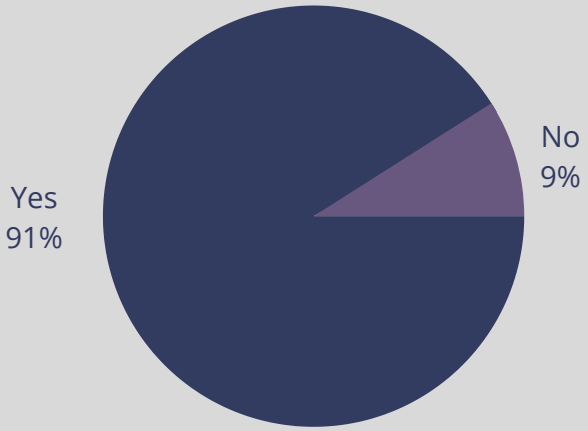
Do you plan to change your practice related to Conditions for Return?



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?

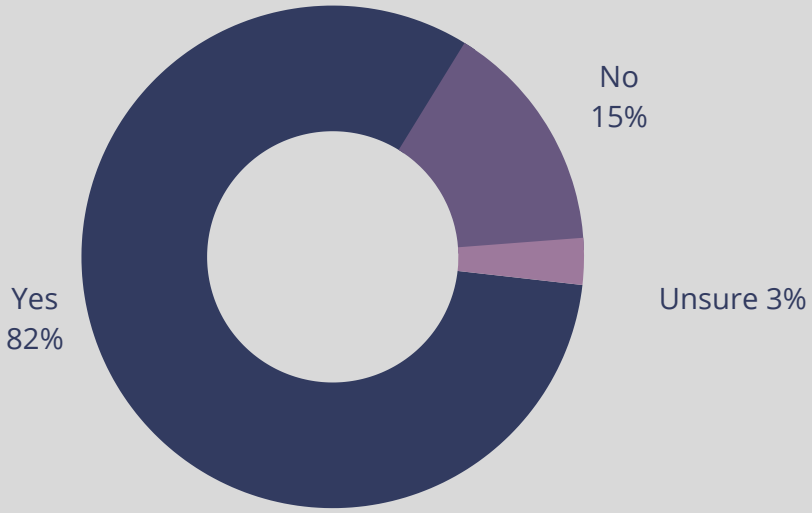


MODULE 2: ENGAGING FAMILIES IN CHILD WELFARE



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. Each innovation zone participated in a short discussion and the combined thoughts are below:

What resonated with stakeholders?

- The power differential between the judge and family and how impactful it can be for the judge to come off the bench and sit at the same level as parents.
- It is important that the CHIPS petition and reports reflect the accuracy of what happened because parents become derailed when there are false allegations.
- The presenter noted that she understood the criminal justice system better than the child welfare system. She emphasized that parents do not always understand what is going on or the differences.
- What is it about the substance use that makes a child unsafe? Focusing on the parent's behavior while using substances.
- The environment impacts how the parent responds to the court system. It is important to think about interactions that occur in court and outside the courtroom. For example, a parent may perceive that the attorney is talking about their case and not about something unrelated.

Areas to implement after Module 3 training:

- It is important to consider which condition is listed first and why.
- Explaining the behavior that brought CPS into the family's life and what needs to change.
- Acknowledging the progress parents have made.
- Having informal hearings such as having the judge come off the bench to talk to families at Permanency Hearings.
- Explaining to parents how a CHIPS case is not a criminal case.
- Understanding what is the specific behavior that needs to be addressed for the child to be safely returned to the home.

IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

The pilot counties have made changes within the county agency's case transfer process from Initial Assessment (IA) to Ongoing.

- 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.
- Discussing the safety assessment and including the ongoing worker in safety staffings.

One county is utilizing the TPC Supplement as a result of the Module 1 training to put into words why the child is unsafe.

Changing child/parent language in Conditions for Return to personal names.

Recognizing that not all Conditions for Return are "SMART". They are working on how to measure Conditions for Return since the timing is typically different for every case.

Additional discussions about Conditions for Return are occurring at pre-trial conferences and hearings and amongst stakeholders – judges, attorneys, and child welfare professionals.

Ensuring new tailored Conditions for Return can be proven at a Termination of Parental Rights, if necessary.

The pilot counties are still determining how to incorporate family voice to improve practice.

Each county is at a different stage of implementation.

One county is implementing new Conditions for Return on a case by case basis with a few workers to allow for adjustments, as needed.

One county plans to begin implementation in January 2022.

One county is utilizing the new tailored Conditions for Return and has a new template on the shared drive for social workers.

LESSONS LEARNED

- 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 can be difficult to engage families in court if the permanency hearing is only scheduled for 15 minutes.
- Tailored Conditions for Return take time!
- It is really important to speak to parents in plain English and not use acronyms, legalease, or CPS language.
- Trainings and resources were helpful to gain knowledge and have a shared understanding of both the legal and child welfare system.
- We should make an attempt to lower the reading level for the Conditions for Return so parents can understand what they need to do to have their child safely returned to the home.
- It is important to manage the expectations of all case participants (ex: parents expecting to automatically get their kids back after completing the class/program ordered by the court.) Expectations must be realistic and consistent.
- There needs to be a balance between a legally sufficient hearing and making the hearing understandable for parents.
- It is important to begin conversations about Conditions for Return earlier with Initial Assessment and the Ongoing worker.

CONFERENCE ON CHILD WELFARE AND THE COURTS

The Tailored Dispositional Orders Project was a workshop session during the September 2021 Conference on Child Welfare and the Courts. Conference attendees were able to hear from pilot participants regarding their experience within this project. This presentation has generated interest in several other counties, which DCF and CCIP will consider as it plans for statewide rollout in 2022. Lessons learned from the three pilot counties will be shared with additional counties who are interested in revising their Conditions for Return.

NEXT STEPS

- CCIP and DCF will share the template of Conditions for Return examples with DCF's Parent Leader group to gain feedback from parents with experience in the child welfare system. The feedback will be shared with the innovation zones.
- Since family voice is a critical component of Tailored Dispositional Orders, counties will explore obtaining family voice through surveys, focus groups, etc. CCIP and DCF would be happy to assist with these efforts.
- Tailored Conditions for Return resources will be shared with all counties once each county feels they have a complete product to share.
- CCIP and DCF will review cases pre and post implementation for the final evaluation report.
- Pilot counties will be asked for input to expand this project statewide.

Please contact county liaisons if CCIP or DCF staff can provide any additional assistance:

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Waukesha County - Alexandra.Mueller1@wisconsin.gov or Kristen.Wetzel@wicourts.gov

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