
Strengthening Families through
Enhanced In-Home Support in
Child Protective Services

Preliminary Evaluation: Implementation

September 2008

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Strengthening Families through Enhanced In-Home Support

Executive Summary

The passage of Senate Bill 758 authorized the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to implement a program delivering family preservation and reunification services to families impacted by poverty leading to neglect. The unique feature of the program was the provision of additional monetary benefits made available through a fund of \$9.2 million federal Texas Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) dollars. The intent of the initiative was to prevent removals of children from their homes or, when removals were necessary, to speed their reunification. In the months following the conclusion of the 80th Legislative Session, the Department has implemented the innovative program in fifteen counties that represent all eleven regions of the state.¹

The rules established to guide the program include income and neglect criteria. Families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level and whose allegations of neglect are confirmed as a primary problem for the family are eligible for the new services². While the families continue to receive any traditional purchased or contracted services available through the Department, they may also receive a combined total of \$3,250 for specific purchases to remedy conditions leading to the neglect. Two forms of assistance are available. The first is a **Family Enhancement one-time cash payment of \$250** that is available during the first four months of service. The second form of financial assistance is a **Family Empowerment benefit of up to \$3,000 of in-kind purchases** over the life of the in-home services. The items or activities to be purchased are identified during a family meeting attended by DFPS staff and the family's extended support system and must be specified in the family plan of service.

The new program, referred to as the Strengthening Families Initiative (SFI), began serving families in January 2008. During the first six months of the initiative a total of 417 families (1,429 children) have received \$53,500.00 in Family Enhancement support

¹ The specific counties are: Lubbock/Potter, Taylor, Tarrant, Bowie/Gregg/Jefferson, Harris, Travis/Williamson, Bexar, Ector, El Paso, and Hidalgo/Nueces.

² Additional criteria include the fact that a parent must be related by blood, marriage, or adoption or have been appointed as managing conservator of the child who is the victim of or at risk of neglect; and involve a child who is a U.S. citizen or a qualified legal alien.

and \$279,780.63 in Family Empowerment expenditures. Insufficient time has lapsed to determine long-term benefits of the program; however, the outcomes for families and the services they receive are being tracked and will be compared to an analogous group. Subsequent reports will evaluate the success of the initiative with regard to reductions in removals, decreased lengths of stay in foster care, reductions in cost, and family satisfaction.

Prior to implementation of the Strengthening Families Initiative, projections were made regarding the number of families who could be served given the available dollars. To date, the numbers of families actually served has fallen short of the stated goals. In order to better understand the dynamics contributing to this shortfall, the Department has conducted several conference calls and site visits to review program operations. Case reviews were also conducted of 90 family preservation cases that appeared to meet the eligibility criteria and were opened to traditional in-home services rather than Strengthening Families services. The results indicate that more efforts need to be made to increase awareness of the program among CPS investigation staff and to increase the participation of Strengthening Families workers at case staffings. Additionally, greater efforts will be made to further train staff on the benefits and service delivery techniques of the more intense services characteristic of the Strengthening Families Initiative.

Strengthening Families through Enhanced In-Home Support

Overview

With the conclusion of the 80th Legislative Session and the passage of Senate Bill 758, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) was authorized to implement a pilot program to deliver family preservation and reunification services to families with neglect issues arising primarily from poverty. The intent of the initiative was to prevent removals of children from their homes or, when removals were necessary, to expedite reunification. The bill also charged the Department to evaluate the program to determine its success in keeping families together. This report is the first phase of the on-going evaluation and provides information on the development and implementation of the pilot program. Outcomes for families participating in the program will be tracked in order to determine the impact of the unique services provided to them. The results of the evaluation will be made available in subsequent reports.

Following passage of Senate Bill 758, it was determined that \$9.2 million of federal Texas Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funding would be available for the pilot program which was named Strengthening Families through Enhanced In-Home Support. The program expands upon existing Family Based Safety Services and came to be commonly referred to as the Strengthening Families Initiative (SFI). SFI provides more intensive intervention services augmented by the delivery of funds and purchased services designed to speed reunification. These funds and purchased services are for non-recurring, non-traditional expenses that can be offered prior to placing a child in care, or at any time prior to, during, or after reunification after a foster placement.

Program Development

Operationalizing the pilot program involved the careful planning and cooperation of numerous divisions within DFPS and HHSC. Additionally, the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) contributed significantly in the development of rules, determining how to administer monetary funds, and forecasting projected numbers of families to be served.

Prior to the proposal of rules, it was necessary to determine how the TANF funds could best be distributed to individuals. After thorough research, it was determined the use of the HHSC Pro-Card plan, with claims processing as a backup procedure was the most viable option. The administrative costs associated with claims processing;

however, posed the possibility that significant portions of the available funds could be expended in administrative costs; and, thus, was to be used only when other options failed.

By the end of September 2007, sufficient understanding of the payment and auditing processes allowed preparation of proposed rules to guide the criteria for program eligibility. Late in October 2007, draft rules were presented to the DFPS Council and were ultimately finalized and adopted March 1, 2008.

Eligibility criteria focus on identifying families in which risk of neglect to a child is causally linked to circumstances precipitated by poverty. Eligible families must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty guideline. In addition, eligibility is further indicated by the level of assessed risk and a current finding of Reason to Believe (RTB) for one or more types of neglect excluding sexual abuse. Cases involving sexual abuse are not appropriate for SFI services.

Protocols for referring families to the pilot program were developed with the assistance of a statewide Family Based Safety Services workgroup. Best practice guidelines for working intensively with in-home family services were reviewed and step-by-step procedures for authorizing payments were developed in conjunction with DFPS Auditing staff. By the end of November 2007, sufficient understanding of the program operations were clear enough to begin identifying necessary alterations to the automated case tracking system, IMPACT (Information Management Protecting Adults and Children through Technology). Requests for system changes were implemented periodically through April 2008.

Armed with a broad understanding of the pilot program, Regional Directors identified specific direct delivery staff who would participate by early November 2007. Training of all staff was completed by December 31, 2007. Since existing staff were selected and no new positions were associated with this initiative, many identified staff had full caseloads of traditional Family Based Safety Service cases that would have to be reassigned over the subsequent months. The Strengthening Families Initiative was implemented on January 1, 2008. The program dedicates 73 caseworkers across the state who offer services in the following 15 counties, which represent all eleven regions: Lubbock/Potter, Taylor, Tarrant, Bowie/Gregg/Jefferson, Harris, Travis/Williamson, Bexar, Ector, El Paso, and Hidalgo/Nueces.

Program Description

Philosophy

The program developed by DFPS stresses the importance of tailoring all services to the unique needs and characteristics of each family. The following assumptions and strategies for intervention were developed.

- Each family is unique.
- Interventions must be developed with the assumption that parents want to improve the quality of care for their children, but lack personal, financial, or supportive resources.
- All parents have strengths. The caseworker must help the family identify those strengths in the assessment process and build interventions upon those strengths.
- Fathers, as well as mothers, in neglectful families must be engaged and involved in the intervention process.
- Interventions must be culturally sensitive.
- It is essential to develop goals with the family that are time limited and achievable, as well as clearly stated, and focused on child safety. The parents, the child, and the caseworker should collaborate to determine goals based on the identified problems. The causes of the problems and any barriers to their resolution must also be identified.
- It is sometimes necessary to present the parent with the reality or possibility of the removal of the child. Legal intervention should only be used as a last resort after other reasonable efforts have been attempted.
- Neglectful parents may be impoverished or lack access to resources. Therefore, an intervention plan must include brokering and advocacy to mobilize concrete formal and informal resources. Successful mobilization of outside resources to meet the family's identified priorities helps to overcome the family's hopelessness, resistance, and distrust of professionals.
- Family-focused interventions that target the family system, not just the parent, are often the most successful.
- A facilitated family meeting will be used to engage the family and their support systems in problem solving.

Eligibility Criteria

Families in the designated service counties who meet the following criteria are eligible for the Strengthening Families program:

- Must be referred by DFPS staff for Family Preservation or Family Reunification services; and,
- The family must agree to the services; and,
- Either,

- Have a child living in the home or voluntarily place in a safe home any child who is at risk of removal if the neglect and poverty-related conditions persist OR
- Have a family service plan that recommends the return of the child to the home in the near future but poverty-related issues are a potential barrier; and,
- Have a household income at or below 200% of the federal poverty income limits; and,
- Have a current validated finding of at least one type of neglect that does not involve validated sexual abuse; and,
- Must include a parent by blood, marriage, or adoption or a managing conservator of the child who is the victim of or at risk of neglect; and,
- Have an identified problem (a significant underlying cause of which is poverty) in the home environment or family that has contributed to neglect and can be remedied or mitigated by the benefits and assistance of this program; and,
- Involve a child who is a U.S. citizen or a qualified legal alien who meets or is exempt from the five-year bar of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act; and,
- Have had a risk rating at a level of concern of “Somewhat” or higher.

Service Provisions

Due to the intensive intervention services inherent in the Strengthening Families Initiative, DFPS stipulated that only specially trained family preservation caseworkers may provide services in the pilot. Additionally, caseload size and composition, frequency of contacts, and service planning requirements are specific to the Strengthening Families Initiative.

Size and Composition of Caseload: **Strengthening Families caseworkers may not carry more than ten cases at a time and may not work other additional traditional Family Based Safety Services cases.** (However, accommodations were made during implementation for caseworkers to transition from their existing caseload to a pure Strngthening Families caseload.)

Frequency of Contacts: On average, a **Strengthening Families worker is expected to spend 7 to 10 hours per month in face-to-face contact with each assigned family.** Each child and each parent or caregiver receiving services is seen at least twice a week in face-to-face contacts, the majority of which should occur within the home. Increases in contacts should correspond to increases in risk that may develop while working with the family.

Duration: The average Strengthening Families case should be **resolved within 60 to 120 days**.

Service Planning: The **Family Plan of Service must be completed by the 21st day** following the opening of the family preservation stage and must be developed in the context of a family meeting (consistent with the principles of Family Group Decision Making) that is held prior to the 21st day. The focus of the meeting is to engage and partner with the family in identifying the problems they are experiencing, potential solutions that include goals and objectives, how funds may be used (including restrictions and limitations), and time frames for actions and activities. All use of funds associated with this program must be identified in the Family Plan of Service and must be related to the problems, goals, and objectives identified in the plan.

Financial Assistance

Assistance and benefits provided under the Strengthening Families program are provided as enhancements to traditional services. In other words, services available through CPS contracts and community services are to be utilized first while the resources of the Strengthening Families program should meet needs not met elsewhere. Additionally, the expenditures should be targeted at services that promote family stability and must be specifically identified in the Family Plan of Service. **Five broad objectives were identified as promoting family stability:**

1. prevent removal or speed reunification;
2. maintain the safety of the child;
3. meet the child's needs;
4. relieve family stress; or
5. enhance family strengths and functioning.

The funding has two components:

- *Family Enhancement* - a cash assistance component in the amount of \$250 which must be provided (if needed) during the first 4 months of a case opening; and
- *Family Empowerment* and/or Purchased Goods and Services - up to a cumulative amount of \$3,000 to pay for activities and/or goods and services.

Family Enhancement

This monetary assistance can be used for what the family deems necessary to address one of the five objectives listed above, within the guidelines of policy. Examples include but are not limited to:

- groceries;
- medication prescribed for a family member who has no other means of purchasing;
- payment of rent on a non-recurring basis;
- purchase of auto repairs.

Family Empowerment and/or Purchased Goods and Services

These funds are used to address one of the five objectives listed above within the guidelines of policy. They can, for example, be used to enhance a parent's ability to provide normalization activities for the children, as well as to improve family functioning and child well-being. The family identifies the goods and services that best meets their needs³. These funds may be used, for example, to pay for:

- YMCA membership for the family;
- summer camp for a child;
- sports activities, fees, equipment, and uniforms for a child;
- educational/enrichment or remediation for a child;
- scouts and scouting uniforms for a child;
- GED costs for the parents;
- babysitting;
- one-on-one parent coaching.

Preliminary Results: The First Six Months

It is too early in the process to assess the primary measures in comparison to a control group; prevention of removals, time to permanency, and child safety. Nevertheless it is important to assess measures related to implementation of the program. The current status of the implementation of the SFI pilot is reflected in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 displays the expenditures of the program from November 2007 through July 2008 and Table 2 provides a breakdown of cases served relative to original program expectations.

Table 1. Strengthening Families Initiative Expenditures

Strengthening Families Through Enhanced in-Home Support (SFI)

³ Funds may not be spent on anything that is illegal to purchase, possess, or use. Other prohibited items include alcohol, tobacco, pornography, dating or escort services, or automobiles.

Enhancement (Enhance.) and Empowerment (Empower.) Benefits Received

Data as of 07/07/2008

Month SFI Service Started	Families Served By SFI	Families With No Benefits	Families Who Received Enhance. Services	Enhance. Payments	Families Who Received Empower. Services	Empower. Payments	Average Empower. Payment Per Recipient Family	Total Payments
Nov 2007	2	1	0	\$ -	1	\$ 2,399.12	\$ 2,399.12	\$ 2,399.12
Dec 2007	4	2	1	\$ 250.00	2	\$ 3,876.33	\$ 1,938.17	\$ 4,126.33
Jan 2008	40	2	24	\$ 6,000.00	37	\$ 57,722.92	\$ 1,560.08	\$ 63,722.92
Feb 2008	76	12	44	\$11,000.00	59	\$ 84,556.89	\$ 1,433.17	\$ 95,556.89
Mar 2008	81	15	52	\$13,250.00	56	\$ 62,106.65	\$ 1,109.05	\$ 75,356.65
Apr 2008	77	13	44	\$ 11,000.00	49	\$ 49,672.08	\$ 1,013.72	\$ 60,672.08
May 2008	68	33	24	\$ 6000.00	25	\$ 16,787.81	\$ 671.51	\$ 22,787.81
June 2008	69	44	24	\$ 6,000.00	5	\$ 2,658.83	\$ 531.77	\$ 8,658.83
YTD Totals	417	122	213	\$53,500.00	234	\$279,780.63	\$ 1,195.64	\$333,280.63

Table 1 displays the number of families served by SFI as well as the associated expenditures of the program. As of the end of June 2008, 417 families (1,429 children) have participated in the Strengthening Families Initiative. The total expenditure for the program proper has been \$333,280.63, but an additional \$46,363.58 in traditional purchases services have been expended in support of the pilot families. The majority of the SFI money was spent on Empowerment expenditures at \$279,780.63 (234 families), with the remainder, \$53,500.00 (213 families), being spent on Enhancement services. The primary focus of the SFI has been on family preservation services. Roughly 89% of both the Empowerment (\$248,353.86) and Enhancement (\$47,750) expenditures were made in family preservation. SFI families provided family reunification services received a total of \$31,426.77 in Empowerment and \$5,750 in Enhancement dollars. Since the implementation of the Strengthening Families pilot, numerous monthly reports have been created by DFPS to monitor both the service and monetary expenditures of the program. While the program has shown steady growth, the expansion of the program has been much slower than originally anticipated. Prior to the initiation of the pilot program, staff were provided monthly target numbers of families to be served in

order to fully expend the available dollars. Additionally, analyses of historical data was conducted to assist in setting eligibility criteria and to assure that sufficient numbers of families existed to meet that criteria.

Table 2 represents the current status of the SFI with regard to program goals and families who may have been eligible for SFI services but were served through traditional in-home services. Statewide, as of May 31, 2008, 2,855 cases were determined to meet neglect and income criteria while only 259 cases had actually been included for service by the initiative. This leaves an estimated shortfall of about 741 cases if the program is to meet expected targets of service.

Table 2. Strengthening Families Initiative Cases Eligible vs. Cases Served by Region

Region	County	Total Opened to FPR	Number Meeting Neglect Only Criteria	Number Meeting Neglect & Income* Criteria	Actually Worked as SFI**	Adjusted Number of Cases Expected to Meet Goal	Number Short of Goal
1	Lubbock/Potter	368	239	236	23	53	30
2	Taylor	111	83	80	9	42	33
3	Tarrant	668	402	382	64	182	118
4 & 5	Bowie/Gregg/Jefferson	116	88	85	12***	56	44
6	Harris	600	446	435	25	168	143
7	Travis/Williamson	346	231	218	25	127	102
8	Bexar	1028	710	700	41	260	219
9	Ector	115	67	65	12	28	16
10	El Paso	296	193	190	8	14	6
11	Hidalgo/Nueces	687	468	464	40	70	30
Statewide Total		4335	2927	2855	259	1000	741

* Income = \$40,549 or less

***No SFI worked in Bowie County

** SFI stages were opened from INV closed to open as REG/MOD/INT FPR stages

Some regions are further behind in meeting expectations than others. Through regularly scheduled conference calls and two site visits (and two more site visits scheduled), DFPS determined that several factors have contributed to this slower than expected growth of the program. One anticipated complication was the commitment to

keep caseloads of SFI caseworkers low and limited only to SFI cases. By default, this requirement meant that traditional family preservation service caseworkers would have to bear heavier workloads. However, the amount of time it took SFI caseworkers to transfer existing traditional cases exceeded expectations. This was exacerbated by high vacancy rates among both the traditional and SFI caseworkers.

Additionally, concern developed that the eligibility criteria may have been overly restrictive and therefore was contributing to the failure to identify expected numbers of cases. To better understand the dynamics, the Department undertook a review of eligible cases that were not included in the SFI pilot. A random sample of these cases was read by State Office and Regional personnel. Their feedback regarding reasons for exclusion is summarized below and will be used by DFPS to plan increased utilization of the program.

At the end of May, 2,855 families were deemed eligible for inclusion in the SFI pilot⁴, but only 259 families had actually been served. Several efforts have been launched to bring the pilot closer to the service target. These have included (in chronological order and level of intensity) policy alerts to staff, conference calls, training provided by Casey Family Programs, and having the SFI Program Specialist travel to the sites to provide assistance⁵.

Recently, calls were made to each region and discussions held to determine the reasons for the low number of families served. Participants on these calls included caseworkers, regional directors, program directors and administrators as well State Office contract personnel and regional administrative technicians. The feedback from regional personnel focused on three reasons why the service targets had not been achieved:

- the presence of substance abuse in the family was a discouraging factor in the decision to offer SFI services;
- regional personnel needed more training to become familiar with the scope and purpose of SFI; and
- regional personnel turnover inhibited implementation of the initiative.

⁴ This is a less restrictive indicator of eligible families as it represents only the minimum criteria of having a reason to believe disposition of some form of neglect and appearing to have an income below 200% of poverty and does not add policy considerations.

⁵ Staff has been highly enthusiastic about both the training with Michelle Graff (sponsored by the Casey Family Programs) and the onsite efforts of the Program Specialists. The effects of these efforts are not yet available due to delays in data entry into IMPACT.

Subsequent to the conference calls, **an Eligibility Survey was conducted** to gain more insight into the processes that contributed to the less than expected number of families served in the pilot. A random sample of 90 cases that met the minimum SFI eligibility criteria, but were not included in the initiative, were read by State Office personnel and regional program directors and administrators. The findings were entered into an on-line survey and then summarized. The results of the Eligibility Survey are highlighted here. One hundred and five participants responded to the survey.

The respondents were about evenly split with regards to considering the cases appropriate for SFI services with 41% reporting “Yes” and 48% reporting “No.” Ninety two percent of respondents indicated that the investigator appropriately identified the need for Family Based Safety Services. However, a substantial percentage of respondents (88%) indicated the investigator was not sufficiently knowledgeable about the SFI program. These findings contradict each other and suggest the case readers feel there is a need for more training to educate field staff. More training to enable staff to work more effectively with families was the third most reported reason speculated by the case readers as to why cases were excluded from the SFI pilot. More evidence of training needed is attested to by the positive feedback of the participants in the Casey Families sponsored workshops held in June of this year.

The most cited reason for a case not being accepted into the program was that SFI services were thought by staff not to have the potential to remedy the family’s situation in the two to four month time frame expected. Every family is unique in its needs and particular circumstances and case workers must be adept at qualifying families for inclusion and understand how SFI services can improve the family’s ability to care for the children. The expected outcomes for eligibility when the policy criteria were written are incongruent with what is happening in practice. The discrepancy between policy criteria and the interpretation and practical application of those criteria by field staff need to be addressed more thoroughly. State office has deployed an SFI program specialist to those regions having the most difficulty to directly address these issues with staff.

The second two most cited reasons for exclusion were insufficient information from either the investigation and the family assessment as it concerned SFI eligibility decisions. More evidence supporting the assertion that SFI related discussions were lacking in the case files was reflected in the qualitative responses. Two items addressed reasons why a case was excluded and the most cited response to those items was that SFI related discussion regarding eligibility or suitability were not always present in the case file. The absence of SFI related discussion might suggest that field

workers are not always considering SFI as an appropriate response to the family's situation. This again suggests the need for increased efforts at educating field staff about SFI and its availability as a resource to families. Further evaluation of this issue is forthcoming.

The results also suggest that substance abuse is an important reason for excluding cases from SFI, although the guidelines of the program state this is not an appropriate exclusion criterion. Substance abuse was the most commonly cited concern about a caregiver's level of competence and functioning. This concern influenced a large percentage of the readers' decision to exclude cases from SFI as it was the second most cited reason why a case was excluded. This is an important point to make because 72% of the respondents indicated that parental substance abuse was associated with the case in some fashion. Respondents indicated that they were aware that substance abuse should not disqualify a case (44% indicated that substance abuse was not a factor in excluding a case), however, it was the second most cited reason in the qualitative data for excluding a case. Readers seem to find some other "substance abuse related" reason to exclude cases, be it due to safety concerns for the child due to compromised caretaker competence or some other reason.

Next Steps

While the Strengthening Families Initiative has successfully navigated the details of delivering cash and in-kind monetary assistance to eligible families, the inclusion of more families into the program remains a primary goal. Additional steps are being taken to assure greater awareness of both the program's benefits and the family characteristics suitable for SFI. Careful tracking of the families who are provided services through the Strengthening Families Initiative will continue. As SFI cases close, each family will be asked to complete a satisfaction survey to gauge, from the client's perspective, how helpful the delivered services were; how helpful the family meeting was; and how helpful the financial benefits were.

In addition to data regarding satisfaction, specific case measures will be gathered on the families receiving Strengthening Families services and will be compared to the same case measures within the 15 pilot counties prior to the implementation of SFI. Because the Strengthening Families Initiative has been in place for a relatively brief period of time, subsequent reports will address the key questions to be asked of this program; such as:

- Do children remain safe?
- Have removals been reduced?
- Has time in care been reduced?

- Have costs of care been lowered?
- Is this true of all children, regardless of race or ethnicity?

The final evaluation report, expected in December 2009, will respond to these questions, summarize the types of services provided through the Strengthening Services Initiative, provide any lessons learned during the delivery of this innovative program, and make recommendations about the future of Child Protective in-home services designed to strengthen families and improve child functioning.