

Marathon County's Community Response Program
A child protective services early intervention

Is the County's investment in the program worth it?

Background:

The Community Response (CR) Program is an early intervention program designed to support families who have risk factors so that they do not enter the formal Child Protective Services (CPS) system. The program promotes self-sufficiency, improves function and increases family social support systems. Families are eligible for CR when they are reported to DSS for child maltreatment concerns that do not rise to the level of screening in for investigation, but they have identified risk factors present. This is a voluntary program and DSS has a 62% participation rate, which exceeds state average program participation.

DSS has operated the CR program from 2008 to present. The program began with grant funding and currently all case management services provided are funded 100% by levy, approximately \$75,000 annually. We acknowledge Greenheck Foundation for also investing in the Community Response Program with flexible funding to support eligible families with essential needs.

In the fall of 2014, Katie Maguire-Jack, MSW, MPA, PhD and Tori Campbell, MSW, completed a study on the effectiveness of the Community Response Program in Marathon County. The report states that the "initial study results indicate that when families participate in Marathon County CRP, they are less likely to experience the formal child protection service system".¹ The finding "provides evidence that the program may effectively prevent CPS recidivism, which has the potential to significantly reduce child welfare costs that occur in the deep-end system."² *Ibid*

The question, then, is the county's investment worth the outcomes we are seeing?

Clear Cost Savings – Analysis through May 2014

Over the span of the program, 177 families participated in CR, as compared to 174 families who declined or were not offered the program. The long term data (2009-2014) clearly shows that families are twice as likely to have children placed in out of home care who do NOT participate in CR than those who do. Comparing the populations, 16 additional children would have been placed in foster care if not for the CR Program.

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Maguire-Jack, Katie, & Campbell, Tori. (2014). Marathon County Community Response: Child Abuse Prevention Findings

The average monthly cost of foster care per month is \$769 and the average annual cost of additional services (such as supervised visitation and parenting classes) to a child and family is \$3,835. This means that each child in care costs about \$7,442 in foster care funds and \$3,835 in services costs, totaling over \$11,275 on average annually. The average length of placement is 9.7 months. Since 16 children were not placed in care who received the CR program, this is a savings of \$180,432. Over the 6 years of full operation of the program, this is a savings of \$ 30,072 annually.

Also factored in to the cost analysis is a projected expense for a percentage of social work time that would have been required to serve children in the CPS system had they not been diverted to CR. This brings the investment ratio of cost savings to DSS is 69 cents per dollar spent for CR. While the investment in the DSS budget may not have 100% return on investment, additional savings can be drawn across more partner systems to have a larger impact.

Other System Savings

It is difficult to measure the cost savings on other systems, although they clearly exist. The Children's Court, Corporation Counsel, and law enforcement are positively affected by the diversion of these 16 children from foster care. There is less demand on those corresponding services over and above the savings in the DSS budget.

In addition, we are at capacity for foster home placements in Marathon County. Had those 16 children needed to be placed, we would have additional costs in recruiting and training new foster parents to address capacity needs.

The Real Savings

The significant savings in the early intervention program are not the dollars saved in foster care, although those are real. The real savings are in the reduction of children involved in the foster care system. We provide excellent foster care placements in Marathon County. At the same time, it is known that foster care inherently impacts children over time, the majority of situations resulting in poor outcomes for children who remain in care long term. Placing children in out of home care is traumatizing. Per federal and state law, it must only be done when safety cannot be controlled for in their family home.

Children in foster care have a higher rate of challenges through life, including utilizing very costly systems such as health care, mental health, and incarceration. The CR program works with families to ameliorate risk and is successful in reducing out of home placements needs for those who participate.

Just as importantly, those who have been served to date (177 families) benefit greatly from the social work assistance they receive in meeting their own goals which strengthen their families. Through support of flexible funds and many referrals and connections to community resources, these families become stronger and clearly have a better chance of not entering the CPS system.

This outcome is immeasurable in terms of long term systems savings over the life of a child; and it is life changing for many of the families who participate in the CR Program.