



A personal view on a Child, Youth and Family initiative

Pam Lafferty discusses implications of a Differential Response Model for Child, Youth and Family social workers

Background

A Differential Response Model (DRM) is one of Child, Youth and Family's strategic initiatives. It is based on a legislative framework that has been proposed as an amendment to the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 (CYP&F Act). This model has new assessments processes for streaming work and offers significant opportunities for social workers to broaden their relationships with families and other providers, and increase their job satisfaction. It also has the potential to reinforce the investigative skills that Child, Youth and Family social workers have developed.

The DRM project team is visiting Child, Youth and Family sites, community providers and government agencies to talk about the DRM and how it can be developed. Testing elements of the DRM process will begin at a small number of Department sites in 2006.

DRM benefits

In April this year I was seconded to the DRM project team at National Office in Wellington. I can see the benefits not only for children, young people and their families, but also for the Child, Youth and Family social workers who work with them. As a service delivery unit manager in Otara since 1989, I have become increasingly concerned for the wellbeing of

the social workers I work with. Their workload has increased and they work harder with little apparent job satisfaction. Many have expressed to me their discomfort with the roles they undertake and their wish that they could have less acrimonious relationships

with the families they work with. I have also noticed that the social workers who have placed higher importance on their relationships with client families appear to be more satisfied with their work. These social workers who focus on



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An investigation by a social worker is clearly essential to establishing long-term safety in situations of high risk of abuse or neglect to a child or young person, but there is evidence that not all situations are helped by this process. As notifications have increased, all social workers are under more pressure to focus on fact finding and then go on to the next investigation. Their investigative skills are honed at the expense of a more holistic assessment of family circumstances and strengths. Proposed amendments to the CYP&F Act encourage social workers towards assessing the needs of a child or young person and their family in cases where there is low risk but high need.

Opportunities for good practice

A DRM focuses on good practice. To achieve this, the following aims are incorporated in the model:

- enhance family engagement across the spectrum of interventions
- enable understanding of the whole family situation instead of concentrating only on proving the incident of notification or establishing blame
- target service provision to a family's needs
- use expertise across the sector to assess family need or to provide services directly to the family.

There is a significant opportunity to find solutions to problems by ensuring families get the services they need, and working towards prevention of abuse wherever possible.

I arrived in Wellington thinking the DRM was primarily about clearing the bottleneck of cases

awaiting investigation by diverting them to community providers – as occurred with the Demand Management Strategy. I considered this had merit, and was a way to spread the load and share knowledge with the provider sector. As my understanding has increased, I have become aware that this demand management perspective is a very limited view of what can be achieved. The DRM is too great an opportunity to be limited to just sharing the load or contracting out. It really is about better outcomes for children and families and, through this, greater job satisfaction for Child, Youth and Family social workers.

A forensic investigation is an essential part of statutory social work. It can only be done by Child, Youth and Family social workers or the police. A number of high-risk situations require a systematic searching for facts to substantiate that abuse has occurred.

However, some Child, Youth and Family social workers are attempting to use the investigative method for all cases. This is not sound practice and it is now widely accepted that investigations do not always reduce risk and may actually be harmful, as shown by the high level of repeat notifications to Child, Youth and Family. I have often observed social workers distressed by the return of a case when they had done the best they could during the investigation. They probably had completed the investigation soundly, and they may even have arranged for services to the family based on the obvious elements of the original incident. One must be mindful that an investigation is often carried out with a family fearful that the social worker could remove the child or young person. In such cases, an open relationship cannot develop with the family and their needs may be understated

or the family may not allow their needs to be fully assessed.

In such circumstances, a DRM would provide an opportunity for assessment without the threat of a child being removed because the social worker is not focused on proving culpability. Families would also have some choice about who they engage with for the assessment process. A DRM could encourage a more discriminatory judgement at the start of a case so only those with a high risk receive investigation.

Getting the best from assessments

The alternative response – a child and family assessment – would therefore be carried out for those children and families that do not appear to meet the investigative risk threshold. Under a DRM, this response would be determined at the point of a preliminary assessment. In the proposed amendment to the CYP&F Act, Child, Youth and Family must carry out a preliminary assessment for all care and protection concerns reported to the Department, in order to decide the most appropriate course of action. The options include:

- a care and protection investigation by a Child, Youth and Family social worker
- a child and family assessment by Child, Youth and Family or an approved agency
- a referral to other organisations including non-government organisations (NGOs) or other government agencies for provision of services
- other actions or steps to give effect to the CYP&F Act

- a decision that no further action is required.

There must be a rigorous assessment of need so that appropriate services can be set up around the family, and this will require an expansion of social workers' skills across the sector. It will be essential for social workers to develop good relationships with families so there is appropriate support and understanding about what services will best help the family. Some NGO social workers may also be required to expand their skills around risk evaluation.

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A child and family assessment will allow a social worker and family to work together to ensure the wellbeing of the child or young person and their family. The DRM provides an opportunity to improve our responsiveness to the adult behaviour, which underpins notifications of

abuse and family violence. Some overseas studies have found that family responsiveness improves with a differential response because of the greater choices available. A family's strengths can be built on to encourage healthy parenting. With the present demands, Child, Youth and Family social workers don't always discover these strengths.

Overseas research

Different applications and legislation make it impossible to make a direct comparison between overseas studies and a DRM in New Zealand. However, internationally the number of cases judged as needing an investigation is fewer than those directed towards assessment. Under a DRM in this country, Child, Youth and Family and NGO social workers will be completing

child and family assessments, which will bring about a different mix of cases in social workers' caseloads.

The Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation noted that caseloads are not reduced but that social workers had increased contact with families and the families had more contacts with other service providers. Cooperation between families and social workers improved, family flight decreased and family satisfaction increased, and social workers rated the families less hostile throughout their involvement, which contributed to an increase in social worker job satisfaction. This evaluation found no evidence of compromised child safety.

Implications

When I think of the possibilities a DRM offers, I am excited for both the families and for the social workers. There is the opportunity to reduce confrontation between families and social workers. The social workers will increasingly work alongside providers and other agencies, which will assist to develop shared awareness, knowledge and expertise across the care and protection community. This will result in greater learning opportunities across the sector.

By sharing the assessments with the NGO sector, Child, Youth and Family are broadening the services for families. This may be naïve, but a problem shared could be a problem halved. The care and protection of our children and young people needs to be owned by the wider community to achieve long-term impact.

If providers and Child, Youth and Family work together across our communities, maybe we will stop seeing the 'hard' Child, Youth and Family statutory work and the 'easy' NGO work.

Instead, we will have a collective response to vulnerable families.

The transformation to a fully integrated DRM will be organic, and will grow as our relationships develop and emerge. We do have the strengths to build on, but a shift in thinking, away from the current risk-averse practice, is needed to support this growth.

There is a real chance to establish an effective community of interest around the care and protection of children and young people, which will need to be based on mutual trust within the sector.

A DRM legitimises sharing responsibilities for care and protection and it widens the advocacy for vulnerable families. This is a very exciting beginning for a model built on the multiple skills of Child, Youth and Family, government agencies and community providers.

REFERENCES

The Minnesota Alternative Response Evaluation. (2004) Institute of Applied Research. St. Louis.



Pam Lafferty is a SDU manager, at Child, Youth and Family, Otara, but is currently on secondment to the Differential Response Team at National Office.