



Signs of Safety in Minnesota

Early indicators of successful implementation in child protection agencies

DECEMBER 2010

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Contents

Executive summary.....	1
Introduction.....	6
What is Signs of Safety?	6
History of Signs of Safety in Minnesota.....	8
Signs of Safety training initiative	10
Methods.....	13
Findings from interviews with training participants.....	14
Overview.....	14
Training initiative.....	15
Counties’ experiences with Signs of Safety.....	17
Buy-in among workers, supervisors and administrators.....	18
Reshaping Organizational Culture.....	22
Benchmarks to Implementation	26
Issues to consider	33
Next steps.....	35

Figures

1. Minnesota Signs of Safety Intensive Training Initiative schedule and topics 11

Acknowledgments

Wilder Research staff would like to thank Peter Pecora and Susan Ault from Casey Family Programs, and David Thompson and Terry Besaw from the Minnesota Department of Human Services for their contributions in planning this study and advising on the preparation of this report. We would also like to thank Andrew Turnell, Dan Koziolk, Linda Billman, Rob Sawyer, Chad Hayenga and Bill Schulenberg for providing us with important background information on the Signs of Safety approach and Minnesota's early efforts to integrate the model into practice. Finally, we would like to thank the Minnesota child protection managers and practitioners who offered their insights about their experience with the Signs of Safety approach.

Executive summary

Signs of Safety is a strengths-based, safety-focused Child Protection intervention strategy developed by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards in Western Australia during the 1990s. The Signs of Safety approach was designed to give child protection practitioners a framework for engaging all persons involved in a child protection case; including professionals, family members and children. The primary goal for Signs of Safety work is the safety of children.

Signs of Safety in Minnesota

Signs of Safety is one of several family engagement strategies being implemented in Minnesota. The first child protection agencies in Minnesota to implement Signs of Safety were Olmsted County and Carver County, in 1999 and 2004 respectively. In 2009, the Minnesota Department of Human Services developed a Signs of Safety training series in response to the widespread grass roots interest expressed around the state. Counties selected to participate in the initiative were Anoka, Blue Earth, Brown, Faribault, Martin, Hubbard, Isanti, Kandiyohi, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Polk, Scott, St. Louis, Wright, and Yellow Medicine. One tribal organization, Mille Lacs Band Family Services, was also selected to participate. Monthly trainings were offered via Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) and hosted by the Department of Human Services in St. Paul. Training sessions were facilitated by staff from Carver County Social Services and Connected Families, a contracted training organization located in Carver County.

Methods

In Fall 2010, Casey Family Programs contracted with Wilder Research in St. Paul to conduct a research study of the Signs of Safety training initiative offered in Minnesota. The primary goals of this research study were:

1. To assess levels of Signs of Safety implementation among child welfare organizations participating in the training initiative
2. To determine benchmarks of implementation for Signs of Safety work in child welfare organizations

Wilder Research staff conducted five semi-structured interviews with key project stakeholders and 14 semi-structured interviews with child protection program managers and supervisors from counties participating in the training initiative. Wilder also completed three discussion groups with social workers who had participated in the

trainings. Finally, researchers attended the October session of the VPC Signs of Safety training, and conducted a review of available documents and materials on the Signs of Safety approach.

Interview findings

While most training initiative participants had been acquainted with Signs of Safety prior to the grant, levels of implementation varied widely across counties. Nearly all counties expressed a desire for more opportunities to gather and learn from one another, and for increased assistance with on-site consultation. Nearly all supervisors discussed a need for increased training related to a key Signs of Safety strategy, Appreciative Inquiry. Many also asked for help in educating and engaging community partners.

There were many differences among child protection supervisors with regard to how they were implementing Signs of Safety in their agency. Some reported that they had mandated their child protection staff to participate in the training initiative, while others had made it a voluntary opportunity. For some counties, Signs of Safety was initiated from the “bottom up,” with workers learning about the model from colleagues in other counties, and bringing that information back to their supervisors. In other counties, supervisors became interested in Signs of Safety as a new direction of Child Protection in Minnesota, and encouraged or required their staff to participate in training.

Differences also emerged in how Signs of Safety was being interpreted and incorporated. For some, the prospect of this practice change was exciting and fostered a renewed sense of purpose among staff. For a few other staff, the early stages of implementation have been associated with strained relationships with partners, increased fragmentation of casework, and deep divisions among staff in their support for or resistance to the approach. These and other findings are discussed in greater detail in the full report.

Benchmarks

Researchers created a list of eight benchmarks that indicate early levels of success in the implementation of the Signs of Safety approach. Benchmarks are not in sequence, as it is not evident from the researchers’ review that they must be achieved in a certain order. In the full report, benchmarks are followed by a list of indicators and challenges to achieving each. ***Longer term benchmarks, such as increases in family satisfaction, worker retention, and reductions in child protection placements and court involvement, should be considered when Signs of Safety has been implemented in a jurisdiction for three to five years.*** However, because most of the counties participating in the Minnesota training initiative had less than two years of experience or exposure to Signs of Safety, researchers focused on early benchmarks of success.

- Evolution of child protection philosophy from “professional as expert” to “professional as partner”
- Worker confidence in Signs of Safety
- Worker buy-in
- Supervisor buy-in
- Administrative leadership buy-in
- Practice sharing
- Parallel process in supervision
- Involving and educating other partners

Issues to consider

The following themes emerged during interviews with program supervisors. Signs of Safety program leaders and developers may be interested in examining these issues further as they relate to the spread of the Signs of Safety approach in Minnesota.

- Of the counties who participated in the training initiative, researchers observed that those who were earliest along in Signs of Safety implementation were more likely to rate themselves as *further* along in their understanding and integration of the model than those counties who had more experience and exposure to Signs of Safety. This may be attributed to the fact that while the Signs of Safety tools are relatively simple and straightforward, it is using them in practice that results in the real learning and understanding of the model. Individuals who have been practicing Signs of Safety for a longer period of time are more likely to recognize the complexity of the approach and the challenges of fully integrating it into all aspects of their practice. These practitioners and supervisors are more likely to report that they have a long way to go before Signs of Safety is fully realized in their county.
- For counties who were not far along on their implementation journey, several supervisors noted that one of the barriers to implementation was related to their uncertainty about whether and to what degree the Minnesota Department of Human Services would continue to support Signs of Safety in the future. Although some counties were comfortable moving forward in implementing Signs of Safety despite their uncertainty about DHS’s level of commitment, others felt they needed a full and long-term endorsement from the state before they could fully engage in the program.

At the time interviews were conducted, several respondents did not perceive the state as having made this commitment.

- Several respondents remarked about the challenges of integrating Signs of Safety approaches into existing child protection protocols and practices in Minnesota. This was especially true for counties who were still in early stages of implementation, and were looking for concrete ways of integrating the model into their current processes. While it is clear that, philosophically, the Signs of Safety approach fits well within the Minnesota Practice Model, which emphasizes safety through constructive and respectful engagement of families and communities; it may be more challenging to determine how to integrate Signs of Safety practices more deeply into existing practices. One example is related to the Structured Decision Making (SDM) System, developed by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Children’s Research Center, in use in all Minnesota counties. The SDM system includes several tools to assess risk, safety, and wellbeing of children and families. A number of states such as California and Massachusetts are currently working on ways to train workers and collect evaluation data regarding a more integrated application of Signs of Safety and SDM. Going forward, it will be important to continue to examine this issue and make sure information and lessons learned are shared with child protection practitioners and supervisors.
- There is a great deal of interest in more customized training – particularly case consultation and real-time coaching with trainers from Connected Families. Child Protection organizations that had worked with Connected Families one-on-one were very pleased with the result and were hoping for more opportunities like this. However, program leaders and developers may want to consider the capacity of organizations like Connected Families to provide the kind of direct one-to-one consultation that is needed to spread and continually reinforce the Signs of Safety approach. Some counties suggested the idea of training local practitioners who demonstrate a desired level of skill and interest to serve as case consultants for other workers. This “local practice coach” approach is being used in other states like California, and may help broaden the spread of Signs of Safety by improving and increasing access to regular case consultation.

Next steps

Casey Family Programs has agreed to continue collaborating with Minnesota child welfare and other leaders to train child protection managers and practitioners in the Signs of Safety model through 2011. Based on lessons learned from the training initiative of 2010, the Minnesota Department of Human Services has redesigned their training approach to use in-person, regional meetings held at eight different sites each quarter,

followed by quarterly statewide Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) trainings held two months later. The goal is that counties hosting the regional meetings will take on a leadership role in planning and facilitating the training days. DHS and the Signs of Safety training staff from Carver County Community Social Services and Connected Families hope that this model will be a more effective approach for learning and practicing the Signs of Safety tools and techniques. The natural setting of in person regional meetings will hopefully address practitioners' and supervisors' discomfort with speaking and sharing information via the VPC system. The statewide follow-up VPC meetings will allow continued learning and practice sharing across regions, which was of interest to the participating initiative counties.

As trainers plan for next year, they may wish to consider the following recommendations from child protection supervisors and social workers interviewed for this study:

- Several supervisors expressed interest in receiving additional training related to Appreciative Inquiry, as well as more opportunities to interact with program developer, Andrew Turnell. Several participants attributed their own enthusiasm and passion for Signs of Safety to encounters with Turnell.
- Counties would like to learn more about how to engage and educate other professionals in the child protection services continuum, including law enforcement, county attorneys, judges, Guardians ad Litem, etc. They also requested resources and materials to support this work.
- Remote counties are concerned about accessibility for regional trainings or other kinds of gatherings, and hope that training budgets will be allocated to the more distant counties to cover additional staff time and travel costs.

Introduction

In 2010, Casey Family Programs partnered with the Minnesota Department of Human Services to sponsor a training initiative around the Signs of Safety approach to child protection intervention. Eighteen Minnesota counties and one American Indian tribal nation were selected to participate in this initiative, which aimed to teach county staff about the approach and guide them in implementing the practice elements in their child welfare agencies. As part of their investment in this effort, Casey contracted with Wilder Research in St. Paul to interview staff from participating counties and other key stakeholders, with the goal of identifying benchmarks for implementation of the Signs of Safety approach.

What is Signs of Safety?

The Signs of Safety approach is a strengths-based, safety-focused Child Protection intervention strategy. The approach was created by Andrew Turnell, social worker and brief family therapist, and Steve Edwards, child protection practitioner, in partnership with 150 child protection caseworkers in Western Australia during the 1990s. The model has evolved over time based on the experiences and feedback of child protection practitioners. It is currently being implemented in at least 32 jurisdictions in 11 countries around the world.¹

The Signs of Safety approach was designed to give child protection practitioners a framework for engaging all persons involved in a child protection case; including professionals, family members and children. The primary goal for Signs of Safety work is the safety of children. Andrew Turnell, Signs of Safety program developer, identifies three core principles of the Signs of Safety approach:²

1. Establishing constructive working relationships between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves
2. Engaging in critical thinking and maintaining a position of inquiry
3. Staying grounded in the every-day work of child protection practitioners

¹ www.signsofsafety.net

² Turnell, A. (2008). Adoption of the Signs of Safety as the Department for Child Protection's Background Paper. Prepared for the Government of Western Australia Department of Child Protection. Also see Turnell (2010). *The Signs of Safety: A Comprehensive Briefing Paper*, p. 8 - 10. Retrieved December 3, 2010 from www.signsofsafety.net/briefing-paper

Risk assessment framework (Mapping)

The Signs of Safety approach uses a risk assessment framework that includes four components: 1) danger and harm, or worries, 2) existing safety, or strengths, 3) agency and family goals for future safety and 4) a safety judgment. The Signs of Safety program developers offer two templates for mapping this information with families, but agencies can also modify and adapt the templates to fit the needs of their individual organizations. Most critical is that this process is completed with the family so it is understandable to the family, and that workers understand that the completion of the safety assessment is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a way to help both practitioners and family members think through a situation of child maltreatment, and it is to be used to guide the case from beginning to end.

Involving children

The Signs of Safety approach also offers concrete tools and strategies for engaging children in the risk assessment and safety planning process. This component of Signs of Safety was developed more recently, and like other elements of the approach, continues to evolve as social workers use and refine the tools. Besides employing a wide range of appreciative inquiry, critical thinking, strengths-based assessment and other clinical skills, the current strategies for engaging children are: 1) Three Houses tool, 2) Wizards and Fairies tool, 3) Safety House tool, 4) Words and Pictures, and 5) Child Relevant Safety Plans.³ The Three Houses tool and the Wizards and Fairies tool were both developed by child protection practitioners in the field as ways to engage children in the standard risk assessment process. Using different words and symbols, each tool encourages children to identify what is working well, what needs to change, and what they want for the future. The Safety House is another method for encouraging children to articulate their worries and concerns, and also plan for future safety. Words and Pictures is a strategy used to help children understand a child protection situation and have a role in developing their own safety plan through the use of their own words and illustrations.

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a process of improving organizational practices by studying what works well in the organization. The Signs of Safety approach was initially developed through a process of engaging child protection workers in a conversation around what worked well in their practice. The model continues to grow and change based on the experiences and wisdom of child protection workers and supervisors doing day to day work with families. Signs of Safety program developer, Andrew Turnell, asserts that

³ Turnell, A. (2010). *Signs of Safety briefing paper*. Resolutions Consultancy. www.signsofsafety.net/briefing-paper

most child protection policies and procedures were developed in order to avoid situations that went wrong in previous cases, or are based on the research of academics and policy makers who usually function at a significant distance from the every-day experiences of child protection workers.⁴ In a direct parallel to the manner in which the Signs of Safety approach asks practitioners to pay careful attention to what is working in the families they work with, Turnell argues that agencies need to build a culture of appreciative inquiry around frontline practice by focusing on good case practice. Turnell believes that by focusing on what works, families and organizations are more willing to acknowledge and address problematic behaviors or practices.

History of Signs of Safety in Minnesota

Over the past 10 years, Minnesota's child welfare practice model has shifted from a "parents as the problem" model to one that sees parents, family and community as the source of child safety and well-being. This change in approach was formalized in 2009 with the development of the Minnesota Practice Model. The Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) along with county and community stakeholders, identified a set of values and principles intended to guide child welfare policies, programs and practices. The Minnesota Practice Model emphasizes safety through constructive and respectful engagement of families and communities. It recognizes that families and communities have strengths and capacities that can be applied to keep children safe and assure their well-being.⁵

In addition to Signs of Safety, Minnesota operates four other family engagement programs that are based in this approach. These programs are: 1) Family Assessment Response, 2) Family Group Decision Making, 3) Parent Support Outreach Program, and 4) MFIP-Family Connections. Despite this shift in practice models, child and family safety remain the number one priority. However, in the family engagement practice models, the intervention approach shifts from one where professionals are the expert authority to a collaborative partnership with families and community taking an active role in determining their future.

The Signs of Safety model is in line with this shift in practice and fits well with other family engagement strategies occurring in Minnesota. Signs of Safety was first adopted in Olmsted County 10 years ago, and within a few years the interest in this model began to spread to other Minnesota counties. The first child protection agencies to implement

⁴ Turnell, A. (2010). *Signs of Safety briefing paper*.

⁵ The Minnesota Practice Model can be viewed under related pages on the Minnesota Department of Human Services web-site, www.dhs.state.mn.us.

Signs of Safety were Olmsted County and Carver County, and their history sets the stage for the spread of Signs of Safety across much of Minnesota.

Olmsted County

Olmsted County was the first county in Minnesota to adopt the Signs of Safety approach, and to date is the longest running and most complete implementation of the Signs of Safety approach in a single jurisdiction in the world.⁶ In 1999, leaders from Olmsted County contacted Andrew Turnell to learn more about the model. They were interested in adopting a strengths-based, family centered approach to their child protection work, and were intrigued by what they had read about Signs of Safety. Over the next five years, Olmsted County and Andrew Turnell worked together to train practitioners and discuss cases. Leaders and practitioners learned together and the model evolved. By 2005, Olmsted County began to see reductions in the number of children in out of home care and the number of cases requiring court involvement. Today, Olmsted County has designed their own unique approach to child protection casework. They acknowledge that their approach was influenced by Signs of Safety and other practice models, and adapted to fit the needs and circumstances of their staff and the families they serve.

Carver County

Carver County first became interested in Signs of Safety in 2004. Carver County child protection managers heard of the positive outcomes being achieved by Olmsted County, and were interested in learning more about their approach to child protection work. In 2005, through their connection to Olmsted County, Carver County leaders invited Andrew Turnell to host a week-long training on the Signs of Safety approach for their county child protection staff. Since that time, Carver has continued to maintain an ongoing relationship with Andrew Turnell where he provides biannual trainings and regular case consultation. Through a previous partnership, Carver County child protection managers also invited staff from a local nonprofit organization in their county, Connected Families, to participate in the early trainings. Several staff from Connected Families have gone on to receive additional training and consulting from Turnell, and now provide training and consultation to child protection jurisdictions in the United States and Canada.

Statewide interest and concerns

Over time, child protection departments in other Minnesota counties became interested in Signs of Safety. In 2008, in response to this interest, Carver County began hosting regular meetings of child protection workers from across the state to learn more about the Signs of Safety approach and discuss it in practice. Staff from the Minnesota Department

⁶ Turnell, A. (2010). *Signs of Safety briefing paper*.

of Human Services attended some of these meetings and learned of the growing statewide interest among county practitioners. At the same time, DHS also received complaints about the Signs of Safety approach from other stakeholders involved in child protection service delivery, including some Guardians ad Litem and county attorneys. They were concerned that the Signs of Safety model relied too heavily on informal processes and was putting children at greater risk. In 2009, the Minnesota Department of Human Services developed a Signs of Safety training series in response to the widespread grass roots interest expressed around the state. In doing so, DHS sought to provide accurate information concerning Signs of Safety practice, and to support integrating Signs of Safety principles and practices within the existing systems of protection for children. Signs of Safety was not intended to replace existing protections for children but rather to enhance and complement those protections by creating additional safety alternatives.

Signs of Safety training initiative

The Department of Human Services invited all Minnesota counties and tribes to apply to participate in the training initiative. In order to be eligible, jurisdictions had to demonstrate that they had the support of their administration. Supervisors from responding jurisdictions also needed to commit to being “practice leaders” by participating in additional training, modeling the approach, and training their staff. They were also required to attend at least 85 percent of the trainings.

In all, 18 counties and one tribe were selected to participate in the initiative. Counties selected were Anoka, Blue Earth, Brown, Faribault, Martin, Hubbard, Isanti, Kandiyohi, Lincoln, Lyon, Murray, Nobles, Pipestone, Polk, Scott, St. Louis, Wright, and Yellow Medicine. The tribal organization selected to participate was the Mille Lacs Band Family Services. Each organization received access to the monthly training series and \$3,000 to support their work. Monthly trainings were offered via Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) and hosted by the Department of Human Services in St. Paul. The trainings could be accessed at 14 sites across the state, which allowed most counties to participate without having to travel. Training sessions were facilitated by staff from Carver County Social Services and Connected Families, a contracted training organization located in Carver County.

Trainings occurred from November 2009 through December 2010. From the beginning of the initiative through July 2010, separate trainings were conducted for social work practitioners and practice leaders. Practice leader trainings were hosted once per month, and social worker trainings were hosted once every other month. In August, the trainings were combined in order to offer social workers more opportunities to participate in trainings.

The Signs of Safety trainings were day-long sessions comprised of core concepts, case presentations, and small and large group discussions. Trained facilitators selected the training content and topics based on the needs and interests of the group. Table 1 below provides an overview of training topics covered during the initiative.

1. Minnesota Signs of Safety Intensive Training Initiative schedule and topics

Date	Audience	Topic/Content covered
November 2009	Practice leaders	Introduction to Signs of Safety, Signs of Safety impact in Minnesota, mapping your team, building Signs of Safety skills, appreciative inquiry EARS process
December 2009	Social workers	Introduction to Signs of Safety and trainers, Signs of Safety impact in Minnesota, mapping workers' views of Signs of Safety, skills sharing
January 2010	Practice leaders	Appreciative Inquiry and EARS process, solutions-focused approach to questioning, mapping
February 2010	Practice leaders	Mapping, practice principle and core elements of Signs of Safety
March 2010	Social workers	Safety planning, using Signs of Safety in investigations
March 2010	Practice leaders	Mapping with staff social workers, parallel process in supervision
April 2010	Practice leaders	Harm and danger statements – practice and discussion
May 2010	Social workers	Safety planning
June 2010	Practice leaders	Partnering around disagreement, case examples
July 2010	Social workers	Mapping difficult cases, high risk families, county case presentations
August 2010	Practice leaders and social workers	Using mapping for assessment and case management
September 2010	Practice leaders and social workers	Finding time for Signs of Safety amidst other job responsibilities, addressing other concerns, case examples
October 2010	Practice leaders and social workers	CFSR outcomes, safety assessments and planning
November 2010	Practice leaders and social workers	Words and pictures, appreciative inquiry and EARS process, mapping
December 2010	Practice leaders and social workers	Appreciative inquiry and mapping

Planners and trainers from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Carver County, and Connected Families recognize that training is useful as a first “exposure” to the Signs of Safety approach, but that it is not an effective strategy for helping workers and supervisors build their own skills and gain comfort with the model. For this reason, training facilitators attempted to build in significant amounts of time for small discussion, case examples, and other forms of practice sharing. While this level of sharing can make some child protection workers feel uncomfortable or vulnerable, it is a critical component of program implementation (this idea is discussed further in later sections of this report).

Child protection organizations have a tendency to equate the provision of staff training as the beginning and end of implementation, when in fact training staff in new ideas and practices is simply the first step of organizational learning and implementation. For training to make a difference, the ideas and practices must be supported by supervision and ongoing organizational processes that support and embed the new training and practices. While the first step in implementing the Signs of Safety framework and practices will necessarily involve training for all staff, meaningful implementation across all of an agency’s child protection casework requires sustained organizational commitment to an organization-wide ‘learning journey’ of at least five years duration.

–Excerpt from Signs of Safety Briefing Paper, Turnell, December 2010, p. 40-41

Methods

Casey Family Programs contracted with Wilder Research in St. Paul to conduct a research study of the 2010 Signs of Safety training initiative offered in Minnesota. The primary goals of this research study were:

1. To assess levels of Signs of Safety implementation among child welfare organizations participating in the training initiative
2. To determine benchmarks of implementation for Signs of Safety work in child welfare organizations

In order to complete this study, Wilder Research staff conducted five semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders including staff from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Carver County, Olmsted County, and Connected Families, as well as Signs of Safety program developer Andrew Turnell. Information from these interviews was used to inform the background section of this report, and provided important contextual information for researchers completing this study.

Wilder Research staff also conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with child protection program managers and supervisors from counties participating in the training initiative, and three discussion groups with social workers who had participated in the trainings. All interviews and discussion groups were conducted between October and November 2010.

Finally, researchers attended the October session of the VPC Signs of Safety training, as well as an overview training offered for non-initiative counties. Research staff also conducted an extensive review of documents and materials on the Signs of Safety approach, and participated in monthly conference calls of the Signs of Safety training initiative advisory team.

Findings from interviews with training participants

Overview

The interviews conducted for this report included conversations with a wide range of training initiative participants. This included child protection supervisors, Signs of Safety practice leaders, social workers focused on traditional investigation and family assessment, and children's mental health workers, who shared insights about their own experiences with the training initiative, specifically, and with Signs of Safety in general. While most training initiative participants had been acquainted with Signs of Safety prior to the grant, levels of implementation varied widely across counties. Despite these differences, nearly all counties expressed a desire for more opportunities to gather and learn from one another, and for increased assistance with on-site consultation.

There were clearly many differences among child protection supervisors with regard to how they were implementing Signs of Safety in their agency. Some reported that they had mandated their child protection staff to participate in the training initiative, while others had made it a voluntary opportunity. Some counties began to implement Signs of Safety through a word-of-mouth, bottom-up approach, with workers learning about the model from colleagues in other counties, then bringing that information back to their supervisor and fellow workers. Other supervisors explained that they realized Signs of Safety was the new direction of Child Protection in Minnesota, and they felt they needed to get staff trained on the approach.

Differences also emerged in how Signs of Safety was being interpreted and incorporated. For some, the prospect of this practice change was exciting and fostered a renewed sense of purpose among staff. For others, the early stages of implementation have been associated with strained relationships with partners, increased fragmentation of casework, and deep divisions among staff in their support for or resistance to the approach. These findings, along with others related to the training initiative and overall Signs of Safety implementation, are discussed in greater detail below.

Training initiative

As a new worker, the training initiative helped jumpstart us into Signs of Safety. Without the initiative, the new workers might not have been able to grasp the concept as much as we did. I think it helped to sharpen the skills related to Signs of Safety – seeing the questioning approach modeled in the VPCs and having the PowerPoint’s of different safety plans, and also the modeling. That’s helped to concrete the skills more from being a good idea in a book to being something we can really apply.

Participation

In nearly all participating counties, all child protection workers and their direct supervisors have at least been introduced to Signs of Safety. While levels of participation in the training initiative vary considerably from worker to worker in counties that offered the training as a voluntary activity, most supervisors indicated that all their child protection workers had participated in at least a few of the VPCs. In addition to Family Assessment and Traditional Investigation child protection workers, many counties also invited children’s mental health workers in the VPCs, as well as workers in the areas of truancy, child welfare, and screening and intake.

Training attendance was typically lower among supervisors compared with workers. Supervisors interviewed for this report explained that, while they would have liked to attend all of the trainings, intense workloads and staff shortages prevented them from doing so.

In nearly all counties, participation in the VPCs was seen as mandatory, or at least expected, of most child protection staff. Typically, staff were excused from training only if case demands or personal conflicts made it impossible for them to attend. Supervisors explained that their team had decided Signs of Safety was going to be implemented by their agency and, therefore, staff would need to participate in relevant training opportunities. This was even true of counties where the interest in Signs of Safety had originated from workers.

The way it evolved was, it started with a couple of workers being interested in it from taking some VPCs that were offered through the state. And then we thought we’d take it back to other child protection workers. And we provided some in-house trainings. And then the grant opportunity came about and, as a unit, we decided to apply for it. Our supervisor did make it something that was mandatory to attend.

For many counties, participation in the training initiative was seen as an opportunity to standardize practice among workers and supervisors who had varying levels of experience

and comfort with the framework. As commitment levels increased among workers and supervisors prior to the training initiative, and investments in time and training grew accordingly, there were increased expectations related to Signs of Safety for all staff – even those who had not expressed interest in or support for the practice change.

Value of training initiative

Many supervisors explained that, although the VPC format was not ideal, it did succeed in moving them further along the “journey” of implementing Signs of Safety in their agency. Participants appreciated having a set time each month to devote to Signs of Safety. There were certain features of the training initiative that supervisors felt were most helpful, including opportunities to practice mapping cases, and that supervisors and workers were able to learn and share together. They also remarked that the training initiative itself demonstrated a certain level of commitment to the Signs of Safety approach on the part of the state. Similarly, their involvement in the initiative made some supervisors feel confident that others within the county, including their administration and child protection workers, were making a commitment to the Signs of Safety approach.

Weaknesses of the training initiative

While many workers were required to attend the VPC training sessions, supervisors remarked that they were often disappointed in the level of participation among training participants. A lack of engagement in the trainings was attributed to several factors cited by respondents:

- **Limitations of the Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) format.** Respondents remarked that the VPC format seemed impersonal, and was not conducive to sharing and small group discussion required by the training. For example, small group discussions were not feasible in sites where only one or two workers were in attendance. In addition, several respondents remarked that the trainings were too long for the VPC format. Finally, participants were frustrated they did not receive agendas and supplemental materials prior to the trainings.
- **Content not always relevant to audiences at different stages of implementation.** Some participants felt they were too inexperienced to share information with a state-wide audience. Other respondents remarked that the content was too basic or redundant for counties further along in implementation. This is a common challenge in many kinds of practice implementation processes that must be addressed.
- **Differences among counties.** Some respondents felt that differences among counties made it difficult to relate to each other with regard to some of their practice

experiences (e.g., rural vs. urban contexts, differences in staff size and resources, differences in the availability of formal supports and services).

- **Discomfort in practice sharing.** Respondents remarked that the practice sharing format of the training was difficult – not only because of the VPC format, but because many workers felt uncomfortable with appreciative inquiry and sharing strengths. Several remarked that they perceived this as, “tooting their own horn.”

Learning beyond the training sessions

There is a great deal of variability across counties when it comes to making time to discuss Signs of Safety, and to work on skill development and knowledge sharing outside the training sessions. Supervisors described the following methods of processing and learning related to Signs of Safety outside of the activities associated with the DHS training initiative:

- Informal discussions among staff
- Weekly group mapping of a case
- A formal group devoted to Signs of Safety
- Performance appraisals between an individual worker and supervisor
- As-needed guided mapping assistance from supervisor when worker is “stuck”
- Ongoing attempts to incorporate Appreciative Inquiry into staff communication & culture

Counties’ experiences with Signs of Safety

We’re working harder to keep kids in their homes using their safety networks. We’re also thinking outside the box more as far as how kids can be safer in their homes. In the past it’s been more fear-based and reactionary. We’re thinking more critically about the situation now, thinking about alternatives to foster care, using the Signs of Safety tools that lead us to keep kids safe.

Benefits of the approach

When asked about the most helpful aspects of Signs of Safety, supervisors and workers identified specific strategies or “tools,” as well as over-arching changes in practice and philosophy, such as an increased focus on family strengths and a shift away from a paternalistic approach to work with families, in favor of a partnership with parents.

In counties that have just begun their journey with Signs of Safety, supervisors were more likely to consider specific strategies – most commonly mapping and safety networks – as the most helpful aspects of Signs of Safety. In these counties, the benefits associated with Signs of Safety tools were improved communication with children and parents, and help getting “unstuck” when progress with a family was difficult to achieve.

The most helpful aspects of the program identified by counties implementing Signs of Safety for one year or more were long-lasting practice changes around agency structure, worker attitudes, and outcomes for families. More experienced counties described changes in child protection philosophy, greater professionalism among staff, changed organizational cultures that are more positive, supportive, and collaborative, and improved relationships with partners.

In addition to the benefits described above, counties that were furthest along in their implementation journey identified outcomes that were more measurable, positive, and demonstrative of systems that were more effectively serving children and families. These counties, often identified as leaders by other participating counties, associated Signs of Safety with increased safety for children, decreased workload and job stress for employees, shorter case duration, and improved relationships with families.

Buy-in among workers, supervisors and administrators

As we began to hear more about Signs of Safety it became an opportunity to increase our credibility, and that really resonated with staff. That helped build momentum and support for Signs of Safety. Certainly now staff are the drivers for the case and the communication in the courtroom in a way it wasn't happening before. Judges and attorneys are now asking for the safety plan.

Among the 14 agencies interviewed for this study, all seem to have at least some staff members who are strong proponents of the Signs of Safety framework. These workers, the resident “cheerleaders” for Signs of Safety, have often been the impetus for incorporating aspects of Signs of Safety in a formal way within their departments. In the early phases of implementation, commitment to the framework can be difficult to maintain in contexts that are often hostile to change. Many supervisors and workers alike describe struggles balancing the desire to move forward with Signs of Safety, with the limitations presented by workers, supervisors and administrators who are reluctant to embrace the new approach.

Buy-In among workers

[Most of my staff] are pretty fired up about it and anxious to learn more and use it more; I've got one worker that is clearly – but honestly – struggling with it a little bit. It's difficult for her to embrace. She's trying to get on board.

In agencies with strong worker support of Signs of Safety, there seems to be a great deal of momentum driving implementation. Workers interviewed for this study demonstrated overwhelming enthusiasm for the approach, and a genuine sense of obligation to share what they were learning with other professionals in their unit and in the field. For many workers, Signs of Safety has had a profound impact on not only the way they work with families, but also how they communicate with colleagues, supervisors, and their own friends and family. Utilization of Signs of Safety has, for many workers, manifested itself in a shifted system of *belief*, impacting how they think about power, difference, truth, and change.

However, even counties furthest along in implementation, enthusiasm for Signs of Safety is not universal. Several supervisors described early investment among workers that seemed to ebb and flow, depending on the particular case. Many supervisors expressed frustration with the slowness of implementation, and the challenges that arise when there are differences in levels of commitment among staff.

In most counties, the degree to which workers are able to fully implement a Signs of Safety approach to practice was limited by several factors, including: 1) the newness of the approach; 2) lack of support from colleagues and partners; 3) lack of confidence in using new skills; 4) shortage of time to focus on skill development and training; and 5) fear of increased risk for children. Among child protection workers, engagement in and support for Signs of Safety is sometimes perceived as greater among Family Assessment workers, compared to those workers handling traditional CP investigations.

Mapping, Safety Plans, Danger and Harm statements and Three Houses were mentioned commonly as strategies that workers use most frequently. These strategies seem to act as Signs of Safety skill “entry points” for both workers and supervisors. By practicing these strategies in group mapping exercises, less-experienced staff learn from veteran staff, and gain confidence in their own ability to apply the strategies in their work. Through this group process, workers have often been able to move from a point of frustration and inaction to a meaningful, trusting relationship between worker and family. These stories, shared among workers and passed along by supervisors, appear to be the single most effective tool for moving workers along the Signs of Safety continuum in the early phases, especially for the most resistant workers.

Active resistance to Signs of Safety

In many counties – at both ends of the implementation spectrum – supervisors described dynamics among staff that included active resistance among some workers to the Signs of Safety approach. This resistance, especially when concentrated among the most senior staff, can present real challenges for supervisors and workers as they seek to shift a unit’s overall approach to child protection. Many supervisors expressed frustration with workers who were contributing to a unit culture that stifled the adoption of Signs of Safety among workers who are more excited about the approach. Supervisors typically identified two distinct characteristics associated with this resistance:

- **A general discomfort with practice change.** This kind of resistance is associated with workers who are often very experienced, and who have a lot to lose if their unit’s approach to child protection is upended. For senior workers, a fundamental shift in practice can be seen as devaluing the good work they have been doing for so many years; a “new way” implies that the “old way” was flawed. For workers dedicated to the welfare and safety of children, accepting that years of cases, and hundreds (sometimes thousands) of children, were not afforded the most effective support implies that the workers, themselves, somehow failed the children in their care. Not surprisingly, approaching such a shift in practice with an open mind can be a formidable challenge – especially for the most experienced workers.
- **Skepticism related to the efficacy of the approach.** A few workers and supervisors associated some fundamental aspects of Signs of Safety with *increased* risk for children, particularly safety plans and safety networks. While the other Signs of Safety strategies were typically seen as helpful aids to case management, some workers and supervisors were concerned about relying on Safety Networks and Safety Plans as an alternative to out-of-home placement. Supervisors described workers’ reticence to rely on the network of individuals who are associated with struggling parents, assuming these individuals could not be relied on to keep the child safe given their relationship to the parents. Additionally, there was a strong backlash among many training participants at the prospect of burdening a child with the responsibility of ensuring his/her own safety.

For some workers, resistance to Signs of Safety is reinforced by their work with other professionals (law enforcement, court system, child advocates, Guardians Ad Litem) who share their concerns. This can make it especially difficult for workers and supervisors who are more comfortable with Signs of Safety to move forward in utilizing the approach with their clients. And it underscores the importance of educating and securing early support by key groups such as law enforcement, court system, child advocates, and Guardians Ad Litem.

Supervisors

There's a lot of buy-in at the worker level. And increased amount of buy-in as time goes by for our supervisor – at first she was apprehensive, thinking it was another practice fad – she's been in social work for about 30 years. As she's learned more about it, and saw that the workers are pretty excited about it, I hear her thinking more positively about it. The director, also, is supportive and has seen the positive results, particularly the numbers, with the most obvious one being out-of-home placement.

Nearly all supervisors described their own level of commitment to Signs of Safety as very high. There is some variability among supervisors, however, in their sense of how heavily to rely on the approach. For some, Signs of Safety is a powerful game-changer, and represents the driving force behind their vision for a sweeping overhaul of child protection practice and supervision in their unit or agency. For others, Signs of Safety is one of many strengths-based approaches which offers valuable tools to improve the way workers engage with families. Still others, while recognizing that the approach has promise, were less able to convey genuine enthusiasm or confidence in the model. It was these supervisors, whose apprehensive tone often exposed a level of skepticism, who were most likely to describe struggles convincing staff to truly engage with the training initiative.

The conversations with supervisors about their approach to implementation, and their sense of workers' level of investment in the approach, highlighted the importance of focusing training energy on Signs of Safety approaches to supervision. ***Despite the value in a truly grassroots, worker-to-worker transmission of the Signs of Safety philosophy, the role of direct supervisors in conveying confidence and enthusiasm for the practice seems central to a successful implementation.*** While most supervisors were glad when their trainings were combined with the workers' trainings, it seems that a valuable opportunity for supervisors to share strategies specific to their own roles was lost. Many supervisors expressed much more confidence in their workers' skill level and familiarity with Signs of Safety than with their own.

In counties with less Signs of Safety experience, supervisors rarely identified the use of Appreciative Inquiry or parallel process in supervision. Similarly, the supervisors who expressed the greatest degree of frustration with resistant staff were the *least* likely to convey genuine enthusiasm and engagement with the model themselves. In fact, these supervisors conveyed both frustration at the lack of time and energy they could devote to Signs of Safety and guilt for not having taken the work further. For many supervisors, not having the time or energy to devote to their own Signs of Safety learning has led to a lack of comfort and confidence in the approach, which limits utilization of the practice among workers. Thus, additional training focused on the implementation journey for

supervisors might help to close the gap between the most engaged workers and those who are the least invested in the approach.

Administrators, DHS & Other Partners

I have a lot of support. The director is very much in favor of us using this approach. She's so impressed with it that we're going to use a similar approach to try to do a management goal-setting [exercise].

In addition to direct, verbal expressions of support; supervisors and workers gauged support and buy-in from administrators by their allocation of funds for training, as well their use of Signs of Safety practices for internal processes. When asked about the level of buy-in among professional partners, supervisors described partners in court and law enforcement that considered mapping, safety plans, and safety networks when outcomes for families were being determined. Other indications of buy-in among partners were:

- Inquiries about the approach
- Presence at mapping meetings, when invited by case workers
- Adoption of language related to signs of safety
- Presence at trainings related to the practice
- Interpretation of reductions in out-of-home placements (seen as a positive change)
- A shift from a power-based, punitive approach to working with families to a child-centered, safety-focused approach

Reshaping Organizational Culture

With Signs of Safety, you talk to others to grow and learn, but not everyone is coming from the same framework. That can be risky because increased transparency can mean silent critiques. Workers are worried about talking behind their backs.

Trust has emerged as a key factor in successful implementation. Trust between workers and supervisors, across professionals within a county, and between workers and parents came through in every interview and group discussion that was undertaken as a part of this research. The degree of trust within an organization, and a corresponding quality of trust and security among workers, supervisors and administrators, appears to be absolutely central to a county's prospect at fully implementing a practice such as Signs of Safety.

In some counties, regardless of where they are in their implementation journey, a quality of professionalism, energy, and collegiality was apparent in interviews with supervisors. People were excited to talk about Signs of Safety; supervisors were impressed with staff, and often deferred to staff as “experts” on the topics raised in the interviews. Workers seemed truly empowered, and there was a good deal of cohesion among staff and supervisors. In one county, workers described a process of implementation that was truly initiated by a few workers who had learned about Signs of Safety from workers in another county, and brought it back to their supervisor, who entrusted them with the task of learning more and sharing their recommendations with the unit. The workers who were the proponents of Signs of Safety in their county had been working to educate their colleagues and their supervisor about the approach, and had begun modeling various aspects of the approach early on.

Many supervisors conveyed a quality of vulnerability and compassion when discussing their own implementation journey. This appears to be correlated with staff engagement and empowerment, as supervisors engage in a parallel process of expressing worries and exposing points of confusion and concern that often stifle understanding.

For the unit, I think it has provided a tool where we all started from the same beginning spot. We were all going to have to risk to do this work. I was going to have to risk being vulnerable to show my inadequacies with workers, and workers were going to have to be vulnerable with families. Because of that, we were able to form a space among us that’s like a sisterhood. Part of it is a result of Signs of Safety, starting to learn this approach, having to be okay with not doing good work right away and being patient with each other and helping one another along with this approach. We’ve been able to do this work without feeling criticized by each other, feeling very supportive by one another.... There’s no competition among everybody with this.

In contrast, some supervisors who described their own level of engagement as high expressed frustration with the Signs of Safety approach, and a lack of confidence in implementation among their staff. In these cases there was a notable disconnect between the practices they were expecting staff to adopt and their own management style. These supervisors seemed to have a much more adversarial relationship with staff, compared to those that were, as one supervisor described, more “relationship-based.” There is a dramatic cultural shift that counties are trying to make through this implementation, but some do not seem equipped with the requisite optimism, dedication, and trust in order to move forward in a genuine way.

Struggling with Appreciative Inquiry

Many workers have the answers themselves. As their supervisor, I need to help them pull this out from themselves. I need to help my staff understand what to do with a family, based on what they already know

Many workers and their supervisors are fundamentally uncomfortable with one of the central practices of Signs of Safety: Appreciative Inquiry. Utilizing a strengths-focused questioning process is not only difficult for the questioner but, when practicing A.I. internally, it seems to challenge the culture of social work practice that Child Protection workers are accustomed to. Supervisors and workers alike described their discomfort when asked to focus on practice they are proud of and believe to be effective. Supervisors, especially, felt that this was one of the strongest areas of need in terms of additional training, consultation, and modeling. There appears to be significant value associated with Appreciative Inquiry as a supervisory tool, but the comfort and familiarity level remains low for almost all participating counties.

Practice sharing

We could have easily said, ‘we got this information and we can just continue on by ourselves. But it’s made us put some of our work out there. That was a big risk, a big challenge for our workers to do that. That brought some confidence and affirmed some of the work we were doing. It has made us do a lot of thinking about improving our own practice.

The sharing of successes is an important part of the worker-to-worker knowledge development that is so integral to Signs of Safety. But, when asked how to improve the level of engagement in trainings, many workers and supervisors described a culture in the field of social work that is not conducive to practice sharing.

Some workers explained that they were especially reticent to talk about cases that had gone well, often because successes in child protection can be followed by grave tragedy for children. There is also a sense that talking openly about cases is disrespectful to the families – even if the details being shared are positive developments in a case.

There is also evidence of an overriding insecurity among many workers and within many agencies that stifles knowledge sharing, especially across counties. Despite the value associated with hearing other workers’ experiences using Signs of Safety, and the benefits of reviewing actual cases and maps described by training participants, many workers and supervisors felt ill-equipped to discuss their own experiences, questions, or insights with people from other agencies.

Impact on agency structure

For some agencies, implementing Signs of Safety has led to changes in internal structure. Within one child protection unit, case management responsibilities were made more fluid by removing the disruption caused when a family is moved from an assessment worker to an ongoing worker by granting dual responsibilities to each social worker. In the new system, a single worker initiates work with a family, and continues to guide the case regardless of whether the case is routed to traditional investigation or family assessment.

In another county, mapping processes serve as a bridge from one worker to the next. However, in some counties, the structure of an agency – even the forms and specific processes the agency utilizes – can be slow to change. This can make things difficult for workers, and less effective for families, as a mismatch between structure and approach stifle full implementation.

Working with partners

We've talked with Guardians Ad Litem, judges, other departments in the agency: children's mental health, we've talked with commissioners about it, the director of family services, the fiscal supervisor, we talked about it at our CJI meetings, with foster parents, court administration staff, and county attorneys. [...] We have invited GALs to unit meetings to map cases, and workers have submitted safety plans to court.

One of the most common needs identified by training participants was assistance educating other community professionals about Signs of Safety. Each of the participating agencies interviewed for this report had taken at least an initial step to share information about Signs of Safety with other professionals at the county level. Experiences with partners were extremely varied; some child protection units had simply mentioned the training initiative at a group meeting at which partners were present. Others had offered trainings, had regularly involved Guardians Ad Litem and law enforcement in mappings, and had observed changes in court processes as a result of Signs of Safety. Some counties described partners that were hostile to Signs of Safety, citing fears of decreased safety for children, and attributing decreases in Terminations of Parental Rights (TPRs) to desires to cut costs on the part of the county.

While the level of engagement with partners varied from one county to the next, it is clear that increased familiarity and confidence with workers' and supervisors' own use of the framework correlates with more frequent and meaningful discussions with partners. For those counties that had made significant in-roads with law enforcement and the courts, the outcomes for children and families have been powerful and positive. Workers describe court processes that are more safety-focused, and hearings that are much more accessible and considerate of the families involved.

Benchmarks to Implementation

Based on the lessons learned from interviews with Signs of Safety stakeholders and supervisors implementing this work, as well as a review of existing materials on the Signs of Safety approach, researchers created a list of eight benchmarks that indicate early levels of success in the implementation of the approach. These benchmarks are not in sequence, as it is not evident from the researchers' review that they must be achieved in a certain order. However, each benchmark is followed by a list of targets that may help assess whether an agency has achieved a particular benchmark. In addition, each benchmark also includes a list of potential challenges or obstacles. *Longer term benchmarks, such as increases in family satisfaction, worker retention, and reductions in child protection placements and court involvement, should be considered when Signs of Safety has been implemented in a jurisdiction for three to five years.* However, because most of the counties participating in the Minnesota training initiative had less than two years of experience or exposure to Signs of Safety, researchers focused on early benchmarks of success.

1. Evolution of child protection philosophy from “professional as expert” to “professional as partner”

Indicators:

- Workers and supervisors believe that parents want what is best for their children
- Workers and supervisors believe that parents can meaningfully participate in planning and implementing safety for their children
- Workers feel positive about releasing some degree of responsibility for case outcomes
- Workers find value in equalizing power differentials between parents and county workers
- Relationships with parents are fully transparent: worries are explicated, hopes and expectations are discussed, and risks are documented
- Workers feel like there is significant value associated with children staying in parents' homes

Challenges to changing the overall child protection philosophy in a unit/agency:

- Workers are operating under a “guilt by association” framework, whereby they do not trust that the family has relationships with people who might be able to offer safety and stability to the child. This limits the viability of a safety network
- Workers equate services with safety, assuming that parents’ participation in services results in greater safety for children.

2. Worker confidence in signs of safety

Indicators:

- Workers and supervisors feel like Signs of Safety is associated with increased safety for children
- Workers feel they have control and autonomy in the way they implement Signs of Safety in their own practice
- Workers feel that Signs of Safety is associated with more trusting relationships with parents
- Workers feel confident in their own judgment about when a safety plan is “safe enough”
- Workers and supervisors feel comfortable talking about their own misgivings, concerns, and mistakes with people they perceive as more powerful
- Workers and supervisors have a shared understanding of what to expect throughout the Signs of Safety implementation journey
- Workers feel their supervisor’s primary role is to support them in their work with families

Challenges to achieving worker and supervisor confidence in Signs of Safety:

- Workers and/or supervisors are worried that Signs of Safety puts children at risk
- Workers and/or supervisors are uncomfortable placing responsibility for a child’s safety on the children themselves
- Workers do not feel comfortable “trying out” strategies before they feel fully competent
- Unspoken fears when a child is returned home can degrade the level of investment in the safety plan and framework

3. Worker buy-in

Indicators:

- Discussions related to Signs of Safety are dynamic; staff are engaged.
- Workers accept the possibility that practice change is positive
- Philosophy and practice are transformed; the framework becomes how we know and understand both our work and our world, and the lessons we have gained are embedded and resilient
- Workers exhibit enthusiasm, energy and excitement about Signs of Safety
- Workers feel they are a driving force for Signs of Safety within the agency/unit

Challenges to worker buy-in

- Workers do not feel their supervisors and/or administrators have made a long-term commitment to Signs of Safety
- Workers do not feel Signs of Safety is effective at ensuring safety for children
- Heavy caseloads can make practice change seem overwhelming

4. Supervisor buy-in

Indicators:

- Supervisors exhibit enthusiasm, energy and excitement about Signs of Safety
- Supervisor prioritizes Signs of Safety learning opportunities/trainings
- Supervisor is engaged in regular meetings, discussions, and/or mapping sessions with staff
- Staff time is devoted to discussing Signs of Safety
- Signs of Safety tools and strategies are used for internal processes
- Signs of Safety becomes embedded throughout all departmental procedures and processes; scheduling “Signs of Safety time” is no longer necessary, as structures and systems have been informed and reshaped to better fit the integrated use of the practice framework

Challenges to Supervisor Buy-In

- Supervisor is not confident in the efficacy of Signs of Safety in ensuring safety for children
- Supervisor does not have enough time to devote to learning the approach

5. Administrative buy-in

Indicators:

- Agency is using mapping to understand structural issues and internal processes
- Forms are developed or revised to better suit the strategies associated with the framework
- Procedures & formal expectations are revised to better suit Signs of Safety practice
- Administration demonstrates support for the framework by devoting funds, considering restructuring of agency/department, soliciting information about the approach, and using the approach to guide internal processes
- Administration considers revision of agency structure & systems to respond to opportunities for improvement that have been illuminated through adoption of the framework

Challenges to administrative buy-in:

- Administrators have not been educated about Signs of Safety
- Concerns among other stakeholders may lead to concerns about preserving collaborative relationships with other partners
- Administrators are resistant to institutional change
- Reduced out-of-home placements are associated with increased risk for children
- Shorter-term investments in training and consultation are hard to justify if positive, measurable outcomes are not readily apparent

6. Practice sharing

Indicators:

- Workers are willing to share knowledge and experiences
- Workers volunteer their cases for group mapping exercises
- Workers feel a sense of responsibility to share their knowledge and experiences with others (outside the county and across agencies)
- Workers discuss their cases in forums that include people from other counties and/or agencies
- Unit shares its innovations (new forms, procedures, etc.) with other counties
- Workers feel comfortable sharing their successes
- There is a general culture in place that seeks out success stories and uses these experiences as learning tools

Challenges to Practice Sharing

- Workers are not comfortable identifying and/or discussing their own successes
- Workers worry about how to handle a negative outcome with a case they have identified as a “success” (confidence in the approach, sense of professional support, and transparency within a unit/agency)
- Some workers who are interested in Signs of Safety are not comfortable discussing ways to use it in their practice, because of resistance to the approach among colleagues

7. Parallel process in supervision

Indicators:

- Supervisors are using mapping to guide their supervision of staff (re: staff performance appraisals, professional development, etc.)
- Supervisors actively practice Appreciative Inquiry in their supervision of staff
- Supervisors position themselves as both teachers *and* learners

- Supervisors are willing to implement Signs of Safety even before they feel fully competent in their skill level
- Supervisors are goal- and future- focused when it comes to the implementation journey; they are optimistic about workers’ ability to change their practice, regardless of how resistant staff are initially
- Supervisors have found ways to recognize the value associated with “old ways” while still making the case for practice change
- Supervisors response to workers’ resistance of Signs of Safety honors their perspective, while helping to clarify worries and elucidate hopes
- Staff are comfortable discussing their worries associated with implementing the Signs of Safety practice framework
- Supervisors are optimistic about implementation
- There is a holistic “we” approach to the implementation journey

Challenges to utilizing a parallel process in supervision:

- Supervisors do not have sufficient time to devote to learning
- Supervisors take an adversarial and/or punitive approach to staff supervision
- Supervisors do not trust the intentions of staff when it comes to implementation
- Supervisors are not comfortable utilizing Appreciative Inquiry as a staff guidance tool
- Supervisors are not fully engaged with training opportunities related to Signs of Safety

8. Involving and educating other partners

Indicators:

- The unit has made a commitment to sharing all information among stakeholders, including parents, children, and others engaged with the family
- County Attorneys, Judges, Guardians Ad Litem, and Police Officers are engaged in mapping processes
- Partners are utilizing some components of Signs of Safety in the way they work with families

- Partners come to rely on the information that the Signs of Safety practice framework produces

Challenges to involving and educating other partners:

- Partners associate increased control with increased safety
- Child Protection Unit does not feel comfortable enough with Signs of Safety to defend the approach when met with resistance
- Partners attribute use of Signs of Safety with a focus on cost-saving, due to decreased placement rates

Issues to consider

The following themes emerged during interviews with program supervisors. Signs of Safety program leaders and developers may be interested in examining these issues further as they relate to the spread of the Signs of Safety approach in Minnesota.

- Of the counties who participated in the training initiative, researchers observed that those who were earliest along in Signs of Safety implementation were more likely to rate themselves as *further* along in their understanding and integration of the model than those counties who had more experience and exposure to Signs of Safety. This may be attributed to the fact that while the Signs of Safety tools are relatively simple and straightforward, it is using them in practice that results in the real learning and understanding of the model. Individuals who have been practicing Signs of Safety for a longer period of time are more likely to recognize the complexity of the approach and the challenges of fully integrating it into all aspects of their practice. These practitioners and supervisors are more likely to report that they have a long way to go before Signs of Safety is fully realized in their county.
- For counties who were not far along on their implementation journey, several supervisors noted that one of the barriers to implementation was related to their uncertainty about whether and to what degree the Minnesota Department of Human Services would continue to support Signs of Safety in the future. Although some counties were comfortable moving forward in implementing Signs of Safety despite their uncertainty about DHS's level of commitment, others felt they needed a full and long-term endorsement from the state before they could fully engage in the program. At the time interviews were conducted, several respondents did not perceive the state as having made this commitment.
- Several respondents remarked about the challenges of more deeply integrating Signs of Safety approaches into existing child protection protocols and practices in Minnesota. This was especially true for counties who were still in early stages of implementation, and were looking for concrete ways of integrating the model into their current processes. While it is clear that, philosophically, the Signs of Safety approach fits well within the Minnesota Practice Model, which emphasizes safety through constructive and respectful engagement of families and communities; it may be more challenging to determine how to integrate Signs of Safety practices more deeply into existing practices. One example is related to the Structured Decision Making (SDM) System, developed by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Children's Research Center, in use in all Minnesota counties. The SDM system includes several tools to assess risk, safety, and wellbeing of

children and families. Integrating Signs of Safety and SDM is an issue recognized by program leaders and developers in this field. A number of states such as California and Massachusetts are currently working on ways to train workers and collect evaluation data regarding a more integrated application of both practice approaches. Going forward, it will be important to continue to examine this issue and make sure information and lessons learned are shared with child protection practitioners and supervisors.

- There is a great deal of interest in more customized training – particularly case consultation and real-time coaching with trainers from Connected Families. Child Protection organizations that had worked with Connected Families one-on-one were very pleased with the result and were hoping for more opportunities like this. However, program leaders and developers may want to consider the capacity of organizations like Connected Families to provide the kind of direct one-to-one consultation that is needed to spread and continually reinforce the Signs of Safety approach. Some counties suggested the idea of training local practitioners who demonstrate a desired level of skill and interest to serve as case consultants for other workers. This approach, currently being implemented in some northern counties in California and other states, may help broaden the spread of Signs of Safety by improving and increasing access to regular case consultation.

Next steps

Casey Family Programs has agreed to continue collaborating with Minnesota child welfare and other leaders to train child protection managers and practitioners in the Signs of Safety model through 2011. Based on lessons learned from the training initiative of 2010, the Minnesota Department of Human Services has redesigned their training approach to use in-person, regional meetings held at eight different sites each quarter, followed by quarterly statewide Virtual Presence Conferencing (VPC) trainings held two months later. The goal is that counties hosting the regional meetings will take on a leadership role in planning and facilitating the training days. DHS and the Signs of Safety training staff from Carver County Community Social Services and Connected Families hope that this model will be a more effective approach for learning and practicing the Signs of Safety tools and techniques. The natural setting of in person regional meetings will hopefully address practitioners' and supervisors' discomfort with speaking and sharing information via the VPC system. The statewide follow-up VPC meetings will allow continued learning and practice sharing across regions, which was of interest to the participating initiative counties.

As trainers plan for next year, they may wish to consider the following recommendations from child protection supervisors and social workers interviewed for this study:

- Several supervisors expressed interest in receiving additional training related to Appreciative Inquiry, as well as more opportunities to interact with program developer, Andrew Turnell. Several participants attributed their own enthusiasm and passion for Signs of Safety to encounters with Turnell.
- Counties would like to learn more about how to engage and educate other professionals in the child protection services continuum, including law enforcement, county attorneys, judges, Guardians ad Litem, etc. They also requested resources and materials to support this work.
- Remote counties are concerned about accessibility for regional trainings or other kinds of gatherings, and hope that training budgets will be allocated to the more distant counties to cover additional staff time and travel costs.