

Innovations in Child Protection Services in Minnesota **Research Chronicle of Carver and Olmsted Counties**

Signs of Safety® is a strengths-based, safety-organized Child Protection intervention strategy designed to give practitioners a framework for engaging professionals, family members, and children. Casey Family Programs, in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Human Services, contracted with Wilder Research to conduct an evaluation and chronicle of two jurisdictions within Minnesota with long histories of implementing the Signs of Safety framework: Carver County and Olmsted County. The purpose of this study was to understand how these jurisdictions went about implementing the model and to examine the extent to which the model has resulted in better outcomes for families within the Child Protection system.

Methods

Wilder Research staff completed the following activities for the research chronicle:

- Document review and personal consultation with staff from both counties
- Telephone interviews with key stakeholders in both counties (N=15)
- Analysis of key child welfare indicators measured over the period of implementation of the model in each county

Chronicle of model implementation

Olmsted and Carver Counties both operate within the same state and national context, yet their implementation of the Signs of Safety model has been quite different. Olmsted County was first introduced to the Signs of Safety model in 1999, and began incorporating some of the model's elements into their work, in combination with several other child welfare strategies. Olmsted child protection leadership engaged in ongoing training and consultation with program developer Andrew Turnell until 2006. Given their very early interaction with the model, Olmsted was influential in shaping the development of the framework. In 2006, the county ended their consultation agreement with Turnell and continued to develop and refine the model in a county-specific context. After significant leadership transitions in 2009, the county re-engaged with Turnell and is currently participating in another series of ongoing trainings and consultations with the developer.

Carver County was first introduced to the Signs of Safety model in 2005, and has since engaged in regular and ongoing consultation and trainings with Turnell. Their implementation has been slower, but more consistently reflects the evolving practice associated with Signs of Safety. A complete history and timeline for both counties is included in the full report.

Outcomes

Wilder Research completed an analysis of statewide administrative data to determine whether Olmsted and Carver Counties observed any changes in key indicators over the course of their implementation of Signs of Safety. Additionally, several stakeholders provided qualitative descriptions of outcomes they had observed over time as a result of their county's adoption of the Signs of Safety model.

Findings from the analysis of key child welfare indicators are difficult to interpret, but there may be some evidence to suggest that Signs of Safety may be related to a reduction of out-of-home placements for new cases, fewer children re-entering placements after being reunified in their homes, and fewer cases re-opening for services within 6 months of case closure. Additional studies of these indicators employing a larger sample size would be beneficial to establish a link between Signs of Safety model implementation and these desired outcomes.

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Wilder Research staff also spoke with 15 stakeholders from Olmsted (N=8) and Carver (N=7) Counties. Stakeholders were identified by county staff as individuals who had at least 10 years of experience working with the county's Child Protection system, but who were not child protection staff (e.g., attorneys, judges, doctors, law enforcement, school staff, Guardians ad Litem). Through the course of their interviews, stakeholders identified a number of changes they had observed over the past 10 years with regard to their county's child protection system in general, and, where relevant, the introduction of Signs of Safety. These changes, identified below, are described in detail in the full report.

- Increased or improved collaboration with their county's Child Protection department
- Increased family involvement in identifying solutions to improve safety for children
- Greater transparency with and respect for families
- Implementation of safety networks (family, friends, and neighbors) to provide a support system for families
- More organization, efficiency, and standardization in child welfare practices
- Increased use of evidence-based or research-driven practices
- Better outcomes for families: lower recidivism, increased safety and permanency

During their interviews, stakeholders also identified several concerns about the Signs of Safety model:

- Overemphasis on keeping children with their families, sometimes at the expense of their safety
- Ineffectiveness in addressing chronic neglect cases
- Unknown or unclear consequences for children or families who do not follow-through on plans
- Difficulty in maintaining rigor and discipline to the model among workers
- Uncertainty about the stability of safety networks after case closure
- Inability for workers to maintain objectivity in identifying concerns about parents

Implications for other jurisdictions considering Signs of Safety

Several lessons emerged from the chronicling of child welfare outcomes in Carver and Olmsted Counties and their experiences with Signs of Safety. It may be helpful for jurisdictions considering implementing the Signs of Safety approach to take into account the following implications:

- **Implementing Signs of Safety is a culture change for agencies.** Signs of Safety is a culture change in child protective practice and, as such, it is important to keep in mind that the model takes time to implement, it works better by attracting rather than mandating workers to participate, it changes the agreed upon ways of doing things, and it has implications for the other service systems it touches. How have county or state agencies that implemented new practice approaches through a mandate been successful with Signs of Safety?
- **More education about Signs of Safety is needed, especially for social workers, to improve consistency in practice.** This education and training could extend to partners in other systems (e.g., courts, schools, public health) to ensure consistency across systems for families. Partners who have a better understanding of the model may be more likely to support the decisions made by the worker and family.
- **Flexibility is important; the model will not look the same across all jurisdictions.** Because each county is different – with different histories, leaders, and practices – potential implementers of Signs of Safety must be willing to be flexible; for Signs of Safety to be successful in a specific jurisdiction, leaders must be willing to adapt the model, as needed, to their local context. This includes considering the pace of implementation, and the voluntary/mandatory nature of introducing the model to workers and supervisors.
- **Jurisdiction leadership has an impact on the implementation of Signs of Safety.** Differences in leadership style appear to not only influence the initial adoption and implementation of the model by workers and external stakeholders, but also impact the model's sustained change and

growth. Although there have not been any major changes in leadership in Carver, it seems less likely that a leadership transition would have a significant impact on sustaining Signs of Safety -- given their initial approach to implementation, and process for obtaining buy-in from workers and supervisors.

- **Disputes about the originality of Signs of Safety may be moot.** While there may be disagreement about the originality or origins of the ideas presented in Signs of Safety, it is clear that Signs of Safety, in general, and Andrew Turnell, in particular, have a way of energizing child welfare workers – such as getting them to think critically about their work and encouraging them to practice differently. This may be effective precisely because Andrew Turnell is a relative “outsider” to the agency. He is also a charismatic speaker, and skillfully packages and markets his product. While some feel that Signs of Safety is simply rewording practices that were already available elsewhere or in place, others argue that “packaging” intervention strategies is a good way to standardize child welfare practices and make them more accessible for everyone.
- **There are no silver bullets.** Families in the Child Protection system, and the challenges they face, are complex and not easily “solved.” While Signs of Safety is a valuable and important practice, it is not a cure-all. Perhaps the real value of Signs of Safety is in the interaction with families. For example, as one stakeholder noted, although the outcomes in some cases might be the same as before Signs of Safety (such as a Termination of Parental Rights), there are fewer nasty court battles. Now, families, workers, and judges reach an amicable agreement based on a mutual understanding of the best interests of the child.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the *Innovations in Child Protection Services in Minnesota Report*. For more information about this report, contact Monica Idzelis Rothe at Wilder Research, 651-280-2657.

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