

Minnesota System of Care Expansion Grant

Northwest Minnesota Progress Summary

In 2017, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) received a four-year System of Care Expansion Grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to strengthen the state's children's mental health system. DHS gave subawards to 13 communities (counties, regions, and one tribal nation) to pilot new services and adopt system of care principles. The Northwest region, made up of Kittson, Mahnomon, Marshall, Norman, Polk and Red Lake counties, received its subaward from DHS in fall 2018. Drawing on insights from nine project representatives from the county and local collaborative and administrative data provided by partnering provider agencies, this summary describes the region's efforts to date.

System of Care efforts in Northwest Minnesota

Northwest Minnesota (Northwest) has a long history of working towards a system of care in the children's mental health (CMH) system, having been a grant recipient in the 2006-2011 SoC initiative. Through these earlier efforts, Northwest developed the Family Partner program, which provides peer support for families of youth struggling with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges and now has family and consumer representatives on the Board of Directors of the Northwestern Mental Health Center.

Northwest set out to build on the family-driven, youth-guided work of their previous SoC efforts by establishing two full-time Family Partners in three school districts: Ada-Borup District in Norman County, Win-E-Mac School District in Polk County, and eventually in Mahnomon School District (in Mahnomon County).

Northwest also continues to support the inclusion of family voices on committees and governing boards, advocating for groups to include family representatives and providing training and support for youth and caregivers to participate. Northwest has provided trainings for mental health and other service providers on engaging youth and families in decision-making and using the principles and values of the wrap-around models of service delivery.

What is a system of care?

A system of care is defined as a spectrum of effective, community-based services and supports for children with mental health needs and their families that is culturally responsive, organized into a coordinated network, and builds meaningful partnerships with families and youth to help youth function better at home, in school, in the community, and throughout life.

Minnesota's System of Care for Children's Mental Health initiative is focused on creating better outcomes for youth and their families in Minnesota by bringing together the work of many partners across the state. The goal of the initiative is to create an accessible and collaborative network of mental health care, grounded in system of care principles, that enables families to connect to the right level of care at the right time and place, which lessens the need for more restrictive and costly interventions.

In addition, the region is working to improve the provision of culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS), guided by a CLAS plan that was adopted in 2020. Northwest's system transformation efforts are guided by the following long-term vision:

- The CMH system is more responsive and inclusive of family voice and choice and reflects the values, traditions, customs, beliefs, heritage, practices, and identities of those being served.
- The CMH system centers health equity by intentionally addressing disparities in mental health care.
- The CMH system is an active learning community and uses research and evidence-based practices to inform its work.
- Families fully participate in discussion and decisions across all levels of the system of care.
- Children exhibit improved social-emotional, and behavioral well-being.

System of Care leadership and governance

System of Care efforts in the Northwest region are led by several agencies. Tri-Valley Opportunity Council (TVOC) provides the administrative functions and staffing, including supervision for the Family Partners. Norman County Social Services is the fiscal host and provides project oversight and grant reporting. Additionally, Northwestern Mental Health Center and the Ada-Borup, Win-E-Mac, and Mahnomen school districts are involved in the implementation.

Above the day-to-day operations, Northwest's work is guided by a steering committee of representatives from each of the implementing agencies and school districts, as well as family representatives who meet on a quarterly basis to monitor and provide guidance on the implementation.

Northwest also revitalized its Local Advisory Council (LAC), which serves Norman and Polk counties but includes a parent representative from each of the eight counties in the region. The group serves to...

Lastly, the work is supported by the Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives. The Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives has been around for over 20 years and is made up of representatives from each of the eight local county collaboratives in the region. Members include people from social services, mental health, primary health care, public health, law enforcement, corrections, school districts, and county governments, as well as youth and family representatives. Members of the Northwest SoC team attend the collaborative meetings to provide updates, gather input from the group, and explore further opportunities to strengthen the system of care.

Stakeholders felt that the variety of perspectives and sectors represented on the Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives was a strength of the group, especially having youth and family representatives. While the group sometimes struggled with attendance and addressing needs across such a wide geography, some noted that moving meetings to a virtual platform after COVID hit has made participation easier. The longevity of the group has also helped support the sustainability of different initiatives, even as staff and leaders turn over.

[The Northwest Council of Collaboratives is] based on the values that we're all in this together. It has no legal standing as entity. ... Each agency brings strengths and assets and shares the load, and leaders emerge depending on the content.

We are very committed to working together to bringing resources into the community. We have very knowledgeable people and we have engagement at the legislative level. Locally, regionally, and across the state.

Key activities and highlighted accomplishments

Through the SoC grant, DHS has emphasized the importance of integrating system of care values into local efforts by providing training and technical assistance and requiring grantees to develop a local cultural and linguistic competence plan focused on three of the National CLAS Standards.¹ Representatives from Northwest described how they see these values being advanced through their work.

Family-driven. The Family Partner program is the focal point of Northwest’s SoC work, with the goal of supporting and engaging families as advocates for their child’s mental health care. The Family Partners are individuals with lived experience with the CMH system who work with caregivers of children with severe emotional disturbances (SEDs) to provide emotional support, connections to resources, and help with advocating for their child’s needs. Representatives from Northwest’s SoC work reported hearing positive feedback from caregivers about the program. Because Family Partners have lived experience with the children’s mental health system and operate outside of the school district and county social services, families are more willing to trust them and see them as advocates for their needs within those institutions. The two Family Partners also received training as Certified Family Specialists which allows them to bill for part of their work.

Northwest has also worked to engage families through a variety of governing bodies, including the Steering Committee, the LAC, and the Northwest Minnesota Council of Collaboratives. As a result of these efforts, project representatives reported seeing greater parent participation in meetings with their child’s care team and at collaborative meetings. They have also seen impacts on other boards and agencies. In addition to the consumer representatives on the Northwestern Mental Health Center’s governing board, stakeholders reported increased buy-in for family engagement among county commissioners.

In my personal experience as a parent with youth with mental health issues, most of us are afraid to ask for help. If the Family Partner helps you ask for help, it takes a big load off. It's hard to ask for help.

[Parents] see Family Partners as not the county and not the school and so it's somebody they're not afraid of. Of course we're mandated reporters, ... but families trust me more than others. Schools will say I can't get in touch with so and so, when I talk with her every day.

In the last year, we have seen several commissioners change. They went from asking why they should involve parents/consumers, to asking why they hadn't been doing that all along.

Youth-guided. Although the primary focus of Northwest’s SoC is with parents and caregivers, Family Partners have worked with some older youth who do not have an active guardian in their lives. Northwest has also worked with existing youth groups to gather input, including a homeless advisory group and a youth commission through Polk County Public Health.

Culturally responsive. In 2020, Northwest developed a robust CLAS plan to increase their capacity to provide culturally responsive services across the county. The plan includes establishing Cultural Guide positions to support their CLAS work; partnering with paraprofessionals, natural healers, and interpreters; and working with local colleges and universities to improve provider training programs related to CLAS.

¹ The National Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health and Health Care (the National CLAS Standards) were developed by the United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health.

Challenges

Northwest faced some initial challenges getting the SoC and the Family Partner program started, but through proactive communication and planning were able to mitigate any ongoing issues. Project stakeholders identified the following challenges they faced in their work.

Confusion about the Family Partner role. Representatives from Northwest's SoC work shared that, early on, there was some confusion among staff at schools and other sites about the role of the Family Partners. Some had questions or concerns about overlap with existing services such as social workers or guidance counselors. This lack of role clarity also impacted referrals because site partners did not always feel clear about the types of clients and families that would be appropriate for the program. Northwest staff noted that consistent messaging and taking the time to clear up confusion, as well as developing promotional materials, was helpful in getting established. Although representatives felt that the Family Partners are better known now, continued outreach and communication will be important.

Identifying a financially sustainable service model. Northwest has sought creative ways to ensure the Family Partner program will be sustainable. Family Partners were trained as Certified Family Specialists, which would allow them to receive some reimbursement for their services. Although this was a promising first step, project representatives indicated that they are still seeking additional funding sources to support and expand the program long-term.

Meeting the needs of all residents in the region. Some representatives mentioned the challenges of serving such a wide geographic service area, including scheduling meetings that were accessible to all, especially for family and youth representatives, and meeting the varied needs of the different counties. The expanded use of videoconferencing during the COVID pandemic has made participation easier. Others noted that the Northwest region has relatively small populations of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with even fewer staff representing the communities, which can make it more difficult to provide appropriate services. Staff are optimistic that their CLAS plan will provide a roadmap to better meet the needs of all residents of the region.

Grant requirements and communication. Several representatives shared that they struggled with the SoC grant requirements to only serve families of children with SEDs because they felt a wider group of families could benefit from the program. Some also mentioned confusion during the initial roll-out of the grant, and turnover among DHS and its partners made it difficult to get some of the technical assistance they needed, especially around social marketing. The Northwest team was able to proceed regardless, but noted they would have appreciated the additional help.

Moving forward

In the final year of the grant period (through September 2021), Northwest is planning to expand the Family Partner program by hiring an additional person for the role to serve the Mahnommen school district. They are also hoping to begin implementing their CLAS plan. In addition, Northwest has been working with Wilder Research to evaluate the impact of the Family Partner program through interviews with parents and caregivers and partner sites. They continue to explore additional funding sources to ensure the program is sustainable long-term, potentially in collaboration with the Northwest Mental Health Center.

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