

Minnesota System of Care Expansion Grant

Ramsey County 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. Ramsey County received its subaward from DHS in January 2019. Drawing on insights from 12 project representatives from the county, provider agencies, local children's mental health collaboratives, and school districts, as well as administrative data provided by the partnering provider agency, this summary describes the county's efforts through July 2020.

System of Care efforts in Ramsey County

Ramsey County applied for a System of Care (SoC) subaward to develop a culturally responsive wraparound approach to support African American children and youth and their families. The county, with input from partners, including the Ramsey County Children's Mental Health Collaborative (RCCMHC), Suburban Ramsey Family Collaborative (SRFC) and their engaged parents, and school district representatives, chose to focus specifically on reaching youth who have had difficulty regulating in school and have then become disconnected from schools due to suspension, expulsion, or parents choosing to homeschool.

Through their efforts, Ramsey County and its partners hope to demonstrate:

- Improved school outcomes, such as improved attendance and academic progress, and fewer suspensions or other disciplinary actions.
- African American youth and families, a population disproportionately underserved by children's mental health services, being engaged and satisfied with the culturally responsive services they receive.

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.

System of Care leadership and governance

Ramsey County convened the Local Partnership committee comprised of representatives from the county, multiple school districts, RCCMHC, SRFC, and the contracted provider agency to inform and help advance work through the grant. Committees or individual roles were established in the following areas to advance aspects of the work, in alignment with SoC principles and to meet the requirements of the grant: Family Engagement, Youth Engagement, Health Equity and CLAS Standards, Social Marketing, Service Implementation, and Evaluation. Both leadership of, and participation in, these committees has changed over time due to staff turnover and shifts in priorities to respond to COVID-19. In addition, as Ramsey County began to shift its focus to considering primarily how to advance work in these areas through the Wraparound service pilot to broader systems change, the collaboratives have become increasingly involved in family engagement activities.

Prior to October 2019, the county's SoC efforts were managed largely by the county staff member responsible for preparing the county's proposal to receive funding from DHS. It is now co-led with another county employee who has a long history as a county social worker and strong community connections. Throughout this change in leadership, meetings have occurred monthly and decision-making has continued to be an open, collective process, with members of the Local Partnership committee regularly receiving information and being asked for input.

While some members of the collaboratives were familiar with SoC principles when the grant began, others began their involvement in the Local Partnership with little background on the values that underlie system of care efforts and the goals of their local grant. Similarly, while there is a history of collaboration among some partners, other relationships are at an earlier stage.

When I first got involved, it was really difficult to understand. I've gotten a lot more clarity as I've been to more meetings and have heard more about what is being utilized and built.

Project reach, scope of influence

Multiple project representatives were unclear how broadly the Local Partnership's efforts are meant to extend beyond the WrapMN service pilot to broader system-level reforms. While SoC principles are intended to be integral components to the Wraparound process, relatively few youth and families are receiving direct services through the county's SoC grant. Multiple people interviewed noted the importance of taking a broader approach, not only to increase awareness of SoC principles, but to more fully assess and improve all types of services available to children and families. However, there were also questions about how the Local Partnership may be redundant to the work of the two local collaboratives if it continues to expand more broadly, particularly now that both groups are more actively involved in family engagement efforts. One project representative noted that more could be done to increase awareness of this work and broader SoC principles across multiple county agencies.

If we can work with the most disconnected and undersupported students with this grant, and we do that well, I believe we'll have a better chance at scaling up the model for other families.

If we continue doing business as usual, there will continue to be problems. We need to have system of care values shaping the full system. Most things happen at the provider level, but it doesn't reach the highest [county and state] level, and that is where it needs to be.

Key partners

Through its Local Partnership committee, Ramsey County has engaged a wide range of partners in its SoC efforts, including both local children’s mental health collaboratives (RCCMHC and SRFC), representatives from multiple school districts, and Change Inc. (now merged with Guadalupe Alternative Programs, or GAP), the agency providing Wraparound (WrapMN) services.

Key activities and highlighted accomplishments

Integration of system of care values

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 the Local Partnership committee described how they see these values being advanced through their work.

- **Family-driven.** The project representatives understood that a key tenant of the Wraparound process is that it is family-led and youth guided. Family engagement is also foundational to the work of the collaboratives. Some parents from the collaboratives do participate as members of the Local Partnership and its subcommittee and RCCMHC is co-chaired by a parent. A few project representatives suggested that for parents to have a stronger voice at the local initiative level, more parents may need to be directly involved. Some also noted that the Local Partnership needs to be thoughtful in developing new positions for parents so that roles are clear and parents can be successful. Virtual resource fairs are a strategy the collaboratives have used to help families become more aware of and access information about services, resources, and technology platforms.
- **Youth-guided.** During the first year of the Local Partnership’s work, Change Inc. was the primary driver of youth engagement efforts. The provider agency created a youth group as part of its existing Council of Black Male Success to create opportunities for African American youth age 11 and older to be more involved and engaged in local advocacy. Just before the COVID-19 pandemic, some work had begun to create a local chapter of Youth MOVE Minnesota to more broadly engage youth. At the time of the interviews, the project representatives closest to this work said a few youth had applied to become involved.
- **Culturally responsive.** The project representatives had varied perspectives about the degree to which the three CLAS standards prioritized through the grant were being advanced, reflecting primarily on the work done within their own school, agency, or department. Multiple members of the Local Partnership said they were familiar with the CLAS standards prior to the grant and described changes made to organizational leadership and to ensure community members are partners in developing policies, practices, and culturally responsive services. Change Inc, for example, spoke to the work the agency has done to help ensure its board of directors better reflects the demographics of the population the agency serves. One of the collaboratives has developed a Cultural Equity Advisor model that includes providing training to youth and paying them to become advisors to the collaborative board. Finally, the team of staff at Change Inc. that is working through the grant to implement Wraparound are African American, ensuring youth and families receive support from coordinators who share their culture.

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.

While there are examples of changes occurring at the agency level, some Local Partnership members noted that at the state level, the individuals leading SoC efforts are predominantly white, as are most of the state's training and technical assistance partners. One Local Partnership member hoped that, through the grant, there would be more opportunities to learn from and connect with leaders and champions working in other parts of the country to provide services and change systems that center the needs, priorities, and culture of African American youth.

I think it's hard for Ramsey County's little project to be part of system of care efforts that are statewide because [the larger statewide initiative] is not specific to race. We have specific issues related to culture and race that need to be dealt with within the system of care model.

Cross-sector collaboration

Representatives of the Local Partnership had mixed impressions of the degree to which the SoC grant has improved cross-sector collaboration. Overall, project representatives felt it was positive to have people coming together regularly, and many felt the grant has helped improve relationships that were already in place, making it easier to refer families for services and share information. A few noted that, as a result of the grant, Change Inc. and the county are working closely together and relationships between school district and the county seem to be improving. Both RCCMHC and SRFC described much stronger collaboration in their efforts, particularly as they worked to develop creative ways to quickly respond to the emerging needs families had as the COVID-19 pandemic began. There was some interest for the Local Partnership to expand provider participation and create more opportunities to hear about the services these agencies provide and further strengthen those relationships. While there are some examples of greater collaboration, the project representatives felt there was still work to be done to ensure all voices are heard and to move into deeper cross-sector collaborative work, such as pooling resources to creatively respond to the needs and priorities of families. One project representative noted that adding some informal opportunities for the project partners to connect is important for relationship-building and can bring greater fulfillment into the work.

We already had a lot of bridges built, but the system of care is making access smoother. We know who to go to more quickly.

WrapMN implementation

Ramsey County described its vision of a local wraparound model that was closely connected to the collaboratives. Through the grant, DHS contracted with the National Wraparound Implementation Center (NWIC) to provide training and coaching to all SoC grantees to train supervisors and wraparound coordinators to implement a high-fidelity Wraparound model, referred to locally as WrapMN.

Capacity and infrastructure

The WrapMN model that DHS is funding through the grant has a number of training and infrastructure requirements to build the capacity of the staff and agencies providing the service. Change Inc. has one WrapMN supervisor who has been consistently involved since receiving introductory training on the model in October 2019. However, there has been turnover among care coordinators who work directly with families, most notably, the agency was without any trained care coordinators soon after the COVID pandemic and stay-at-home orders began. Currently, with two full-time care coordinators in place, Change Inc. has the capacity to serve up to 20 families. Another aspect of the model is ensuring each agency has the infrastructure, including new policies and practices, in place to

support and maintain the service. Change Inc. recently moved from the “pre-implementation” set of agency-level capacity-building activities to focus on “implementation” objectives in summer 2020.

Youth and families served

Initially, the Local Partnership wanted to reach African American youth and families who had disengaged from the school district, and they created strict eligibility criteria for services. However, by October 2019, only one child had been referred for WrapMN services. After broadening the eligibility criteria to include youth still in school, providing presentations and information to potential referral sources about WrapMN, and encouraging all Local Partnership members to submit referrals, Change Inc. engaged 14 more African American youth and their families in services before the end of January 2020.

Through the end of August 2020, 28 youth had been referred to and determined eligible to receive WrapMN services. Referral sources varied widely and most commonly included: a school-linked mental health therapist or other school staff (N=10), child protection service worker (N=7), or juvenile justice or probation (N=6). Six youth (21%) were known to have had an intervention in a residential mental health or corrections setting. To date, 8 of the youth who began to receive WrapMN services have discharged due to the family declining services and no longer responding to communication from the care coordinator. WrapMN is expected to be a 12 to 18 month process, and most families have not yet received services for that long.

All youth and families who receive services are asked to participate in an evaluation where they are interviewed about their experience. Subsequent reports will provide additional descriptive information about youth served and their feedback, as participation in the evaluation increases.

Stakeholder impressions of WrapMN

While representatives of the Local Partnership are very supportive of implementing a wraparound model where families are drivers in determining what services and supports they need, impressions varied regarding how well WrapMN meets the needs of the prioritized group: African American youth disengaged from school and their families. At the time of this summary, only three families who have received WrapMN services have completed interviews about their experiences. As a result, this summary relies on the impressions of the agency and county staff most closely responsible for implementing the model.

Staff from Change Inc. see engagement and relationship building as a strength in their work with youth and families. For most of the families referred for services, the Wraparound coordinator or supervisor connects with them within a few days of receiving contact information. However, Change, Inc. has shared that for some families who have had poor experiences with various systems, moving quickly into a meeting with professionals and informal supports, an expectation of the model, is challenging.

Our challenge is building trust [with families]. And then to our own limitation of imagination and creativity about how we might engage with families.

Many of the Local Partnership members felt there was promise in WrapMN as a strengths-based approach to increase natural supports and give young people a voice in their own plan. Project representatives understood the approach as individualized and more person-centered than traditional case management or other types of services. However, multiple representatives noted that the success families have through WrapMN is contingent on services, supports, and resources available. One representative noted that many of the mental health services available to

youth and families, such as respite care, can only be accessed through county case management and often have waitlists. Representatives identified a need for a stronger crisis and stabilization response service, as well as more trauma-informed African American therapists. Some representatives felt services were generally available, but unknown to youth and families, with one representative referring to the system “resource-rich, but not resource-organized.”

The programming and services that are needed to support families and probably prevent a backslide, the resources just aren't available in the larger system. There's training, but it's not always culturally appropriate and so it's not a high priority for parents. There are other needs like transportation, mentoring, more parent support, and crisis response that can come more quickly [than some therapeutic services].

A few members of the Local Partnership familiar with WrapMN described the model as “fragile” in that it requires considerable training and coaching before new care coordinators are effective in their work with families. Multiple representatives noted that, with only a few people trained in the model, staff turnover is highly disruptive.

Additional challenges

Staff and partners most closely involved in WrapMN implementation clearly described the challenges of piloting a new service model in the current social, economic, and political context. Six months into this first year of implementation, the COVID-19 global pandemic began, impacting health, employment and economic stability, social connections, and the educational experience of the students and families Ramsey County hoped to reach through the grant. Two months later, the community bore witness to George Floyd’s murder, sparking civil demonstrations and protests against police brutality. These events, further confounded by the agency’s two care coordinators leaving, created tension in how to best support youth and families while adhering to the service model. Some families were also unclear about the services they would be receiving, and expected immediate resources and crisis stabilization, rather than being ready to engage in longer-term work to identify family strengths and achieve individualized goals.

We had to modify things to meet the essential needs of our families. New things needed to take place right away, right there, without going through the steps of the Wraparound model.

Within this broader context, Local Partnership members also identified additional service- and system-level challenges that have impacted implementation:

- **Staff turnover.** Some families experienced disruptions in services or delays beginning the WrapMN process when there was turnover among WrapMN care coordinators. In addition, time is needed to help new project partners become familiar with the work, including how to refer youth for services.
- **Concerns about the achievability of outcomes.** Through their local efforts, Ramsey County and the Local Partnership hoped to see measurable changes in school engagement, improved functioning in school, and improved academic performance. Due to a long capacity-building period prior to providing services and with a shift to distance learning during the pandemic, the outcomes initially identified as metrics of success may no longer apply. Some project representatives hoped to review and revise the outcomes to ensure they are meaningful measures.

Unclear expectations as the grant began. Some members of the Local Partnership shared frustrations that the expectations of the grant and the requirements of implementing WrapMN were not clear when they submitted their RFP and began their implementation efforts. While agency-level capacity-building is part of the WrapMN model, there was discomfort among some partners about being measured against metrics that weren’t clearly communicated earlier in the grant.

We could have done a better job, had we known what we were going to be doing with the grant. I don't think we were prepared. We picked it up and we're just moving it along trying to do the very best we can.

- **Uncertain financial mechanisms to sustain WrapMN.** Project representatives most familiar with WrapMN noted that the high degree of training, coaching, and supervision required through the model presented challenges for sustainability. Multiple project representatives shared concerns that the services would not be sustainable beyond the end of the grant period without some type of ongoing financial support or reimbursement mechanism available.

Moving forward

Members of the Local Partnership identified a number of indications of success they hope to achieve by the end of the grant. At a service-delivery level, the project representatives anticipated knowing WrapMN services are effective if families stay engaged in the process and feel they have a voice, students experience fewer suspensions and expulsions due to behavior, and families are successful achieving the goals they set for themselves. Many were optimistic about WrapMN, the ongoing work to improve collaboration across partners, and the likelihood of maintaining system of care values as a strong and growing focus after the grant period ends.

System changes are at work all the time. With every grant, it is an expectation we get better at what we're doing. The grant will help us do better than we have before.

When asked to describe what success at the end of the grant looked like, Local Partnership members also identified a number of system-level changes they hope to see:

- Sustained partnerships and collaboration across systems and with DHS.
- More resources and supports that are culturally responsive and accessible to families.
- Expansion of WrapMN, including supplemental youth mentoring and family peer support services, to meet the needs of more families.
- Leaders and decision-makers at all levels of the system better reflecting the cultural diversity of the population Ramsey County is working to better reach.
- More opportunities for self-care and relationship-building for providers.
- Adequate staff and resources dedicated to continuing the work after the grant period ends.

Funding for this report comes from a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration grant received by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

Wilder Research[®]

Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org

For more information

For information about System of Care efforts in Ramsey County, contact Sue Ilg, 651-210-7736.

For more information about this report, contact Wilder Research at SOC-evaluation@wilder.org.

Author: Melanie Ferris

NOVEMBER 2020