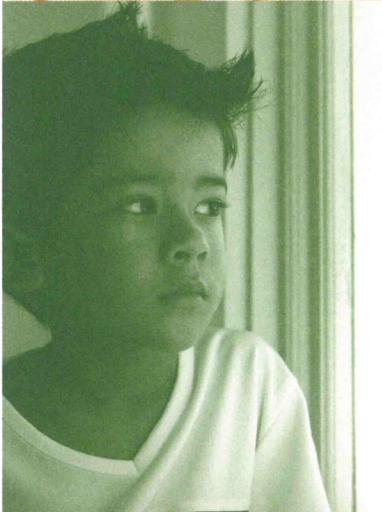


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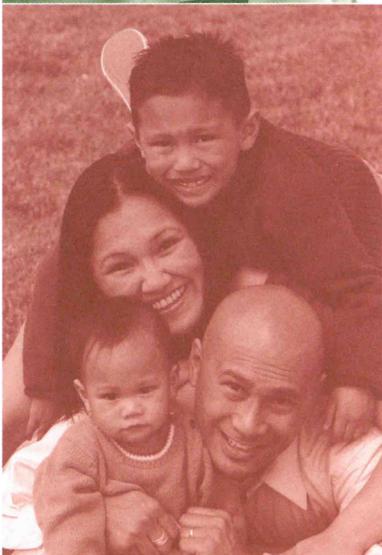


# Innovations in Child Protection Services in Minnesota

*Research Chronicle of Carver and  
Olmsted Counties*



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*Research chronicle of Carver and  
Olmsted Counties*

**January 2013**

**Prepared by:**

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# Executive summary

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.

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.

# Introduction

One of the more recent efforts to reform child welfare work with families is the Signs of Safety® approach, a strengths-based, safety-organized Child Protection intervention strategy. In early 2012, Casey Family Programs (Casey), 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 current evaluation builds on previous work around the implementation of Signs of Safety in Minnesota, including a study of the early benchmarks of successful model implementation and an evaluation of parents' personal experiences with child welfare within a Signs of Safety context.

The current study aims to take a deeper look at the implementation process for Signs of Safety. This includes examining the relationship between the implementation journey and changes in child welfare indicators, and exploring how stakeholders involved in systems that intersect with child welfare view the framework, and its impact on child welfare practice and families.

Carver and Olmsted Counties were selected as case studies for this chronicle. Although their individual histories and experiences with the model are unique relative to one another, the two jurisdictions are often identified as two of the longest-term implementers of the Signs of Safety framework anywhere in the world. This long history with the model provides an opportunity to trace the dynamics involved in implementing a Child Protection intervention strategy such as Signs of Safety, and identify lessons learned for other jurisdictions interested in doing so.

In order to examine the implementation process of Signs of Safety in Carver and Olmsted Counties and its impact on children, families, and child welfare practice, Wilder Research: (1) reviewed documents and spoke with staff from both counties in an effort to develop a chronicle, or timeline, of Signs of Safety implementation, (2) conducted telephone interviews with key stakeholders in Carver and Olmsted Counties to capture their historical knowledge of and observations about Signs of Safety implementation and use, and (3) analyzed key child welfare indicators measured over the period of implementation of the model in each county. Staff from Casey, both counties, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and Wilder Research worked together to identify indicators that could potentially speak to the impact Signs of Safety is having on children and families involved with Child Protection.

The following report traces the counties' Signs of Safety implementation history, details results of the indicator data analysis from both counties, and highlights the key findings from the stakeholder interviews. Additionally, this information is used to generate a number of issues for other jurisdictions to consider when planning for or implementing Signs of Safety.

# Model description

## *Signs of Safety*

The Signs of Safety approach is a strengths-based, safety-organized 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 case workers 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 ([www.signsofsafety.net](http://www.signsofsafety.net)).

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 co-developer, identifies three core principles of the Signs of Safety approach (Western Australian Department for Child Protection, 2011):

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 everyday work of Child Protection practitioners

The following summarizes some of the key elements of the approach:

### **Risk assessment framework (Mapping)**

The Signs of Safety approach uses a risk assessment framework that involves “mapping” four components with a family: (1) worries, including harm, danger, and complicating factors; (2) what’s working, including existing strengths and safety; (3) what needs to happen, in terms of agency and family goals for future safety; and, (4) a safety judgment. Practitioners typically complete the map with the family so it is understandable to them. 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 commencement to closure.

## **Involving children**

The Signs of Safety approach also offers a suite of specific tools and strategies for engaging children in the risk assessment and safety planning process. These tools and methods for direct child involvement have been drawn from and created by international professionals who have been using and influenced by the Signs of Safety. These methods, like the Sign of Safety approach itself continue 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, current strategies for engaging children use a variety of specialized tools including: (1) Three Houses, (2) Wizards and Fairies, (3) Safety House, (4) Words and Pictures, and (5) Child Relevant Safety Plans (Turnell, 2010).

## **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Inquiry is a process of improving organizational practices by studying what works well in the organization. According to Signs of Safety program developer, Andrew Turnell, 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 everyday experiences of Child Protection workers (Turnell, 2010). 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 with whom they work, 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.

## **Development and evolution of the model**

It is important to note that although the model was originally developed in the 1990s, it has evolved over time as a result of the practical experience of workers and supervisors using it in the field. The developers readily acknowledge that the Signs of Safety framework has been informed by jurisdictions trying out the model in the context of their own existing practices, policies, and leadership. The model as described here depicts a more fully formulated and articulated framework than was true at the time either Olmsted or Carver Counties first implemented the model, and as such, some elements of the model were not integrated into the counties' implementation of the Signs of Safety framework (particularly in Olmsted County).

# Implementing Signs of Safety

The Signs of Safety approach is being implemented in at least eleven countries. The research base is slowly growing but has not been able to keep pace with the substantial increase in practitioners being trained in the approach. Studies have been completed in Western Australia, Canada (including the First Nations peoples of Metis and Ktunaxa), Denmark (Copenhagen), Finland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (Gateshead), and the United States (Minnesota).<sup>1</sup> Studies have addressed areas such as training impact, worker interactions with families, decision-making and case planning behaviors, perceived “ease of practice”, child safety, foster care placements, staff retention and morale, and parent reports of practice changes.

Outcome studies suggest that careful, thorough, and sustained implementation of the model is linked to lower rates of child maltreatment re-referral, fewer placements at assessment, and fewer involuntary terminations of parental rights, as well as increased worker and supervisor job satisfaction, and reduced worker turnover.<sup>2</sup>

Given the increasing prevalence of this approach, and initial evidence of its positive impact on families and agencies when fully implemented, it is important to understand what it takes to implement Signs of Safety with rigor for a sustained period of time.

## *Chronicling implementation*

The longevity with which Carver and Olmsted Counties in Minnesota have been practicing Signs of Safety make them ideal case studies for examining the implementation of the model. Of course, while these counties have been implementing Signs of Safety, local, statewide, and national policies, initiatives, and other events were taking place that had a significant impact on child welfare practices in those jurisdictions. **It is therefore important to examine the broader context in which Signs of Safety implementation occurred,** in addition to identifying specific activities directly related to implementing and sustaining Signs of Safety practice.

The following timelines depict the sequence of events leading up to and during the implementation of Signs of Safety in both Carver and Olmsted Counties, highlighting local as well as statewide and national changes in child welfare practice. Further context about the unfolding of these events in each county is also provided in order to provide a richer understanding of the trend data presented in the section that follows. Timelines

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<sup>1</sup> See Skrypek, Otteson, & Owen, 2010; Skrypek, Idzelis, & Pecora, 2012; and Turnell, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Christianson & Maloney, 2006; Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993; Turnell, 2010; Turnell, Elliott & Hogg, 2007; Turnell, Lohrbach & Curran, 2008.

were developed using materials and information provided by current and former directors and managers within Carver and Olmsted Counties.

## ***Implementation of Signs of Safety in Olmsted County***

The Signs of Safety framework was first introduced to Olmsted County in 1999. It was one of the first jurisdictions anywhere in the world to implement the model, and as such, played a large role in shaping the evolution of the model itself.

Prior to the introduction of the Signs of Safety framework, Olmsted County was already engaged in several innovative child welfare efforts. Between 1993 and 1996, upon the recommendation of Olmsted’s community social services advisory board, the County increased its focus on select child welfare indicators – namely, child safety, child functioning, and permanency for children. In 1995, workers and supervisors participated in the Child Abuse Prevention Studies (CAPS) training program through the University of Minnesota with the intent of building program capacity by using research to guide practice. In that same year, Olmsted became a pilot county for Differential Response,<sup>3</sup> and then one of the first counties in Minnesota to implement Structured Decision Making™ in 1996.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the County, Family Service Rochester (a contracted provider), and families directly involved in the child welfare system developed a collaborative project known as Family Works, a no-fault program to which high-risk families could be referred for multi-family group, family-based counseling, and case planning family conferences.

Sue Lohrbach, a licensed mental health clinician, began providing clinical supervision and practice leadership for the County in 1997 (and continued to do so until 2011). In 1998, Olmsted came across Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards’ article, “Aspiring to Partnership: The Signs of Safety approach to child protection” and contacted Turnell for more information. The following year in 1999, the County had their first one-day training with Turnell and Larry Hopwood, a therapist and consultant. Turnell and Hopwood focused on the principles of Signs of Safety, solution-focused brief therapy skills, and cases of denied child abuse, among other topics.

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<sup>3</sup> Differential Response is an approach that allows for multiple response options to abuse and neglect allegations. Typically, for high risk reports, an investigation ensues while for low- and moderate-risk cases with no immediate safety concerns, a family assessment is conducted which gauges the family’s needs and strengths (American Humane Association, n.d.). It is also known as Alternative Response, and in Minnesota, as Family Assessment Response.

<sup>4</sup> As applied to child protection, Structured Decision Making is an approach that uses “clearly defined and consistently applied decision-making criteria for screening for investigation, determining response priority, identifying immediate threatened harm, and estimating the risk of future abuse and neglect” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

During this time, Olmsted County continued to undertake other innovative child welfare practices. For example, the County instituted an organizational structure and process in which a team approach was to be used to determine whether a case warranted a family assessment or investigative response. The multi-disciplinary RED Team was established to review all reports alleging child maltreatment and decide the most appropriate response option for intervention: traditional investigation, alternative response, or a domestic violence-specific response. The County also developed a family case conferencing approach in the juvenile court system, known as the Parallel Protection Process (P3), which uses a family case planning conference (FCPC) to settle child protection matters before the court. The collaborative approach aimed to increase family involvement in the court process, decrease adversarial courtroom battles, and produce a settlement to which all parties could agree (see Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004; Sawyer & Lohrbach, 2005a; and Sawyer & Lohrbach, 2005b, for more information on these initiatives).

Meanwhile, from 1999 to 2006, Turnell conducted annual trainings in Olmsted County that included overviews of the Signs of Safety approach and sessions on specific child welfare best practices and other topics. Visits lasted from a few days to several weeks. In 2004, Turnell began a new consultation process focused on the ‘life of the case’ with the goal of using partnership-based collaborative practice to document the impact of the process on children, families, social workers, and the overall service system.

Olmsted brought in other consultants and experts during this period as well. For example, the County asked Hopwood to attend their yearly trainings, in-between those facilitated by Turnell. Hopwood’s trainings focused on solution-focused brief therapy skills, motivational therapy, mindfulness, and other topics. The County also had significant consultation with and training annually with experts on topics such as domestic violence, death reviews, kinship care, and diversity. During this time, outside jurisdictions were also regularly coming to Olmsted to learn about the practice shifts happening in the county – shifts promoting collaborative practice (e.g., family group meetings and group supervision), but informed by Signs of Safety and other research.

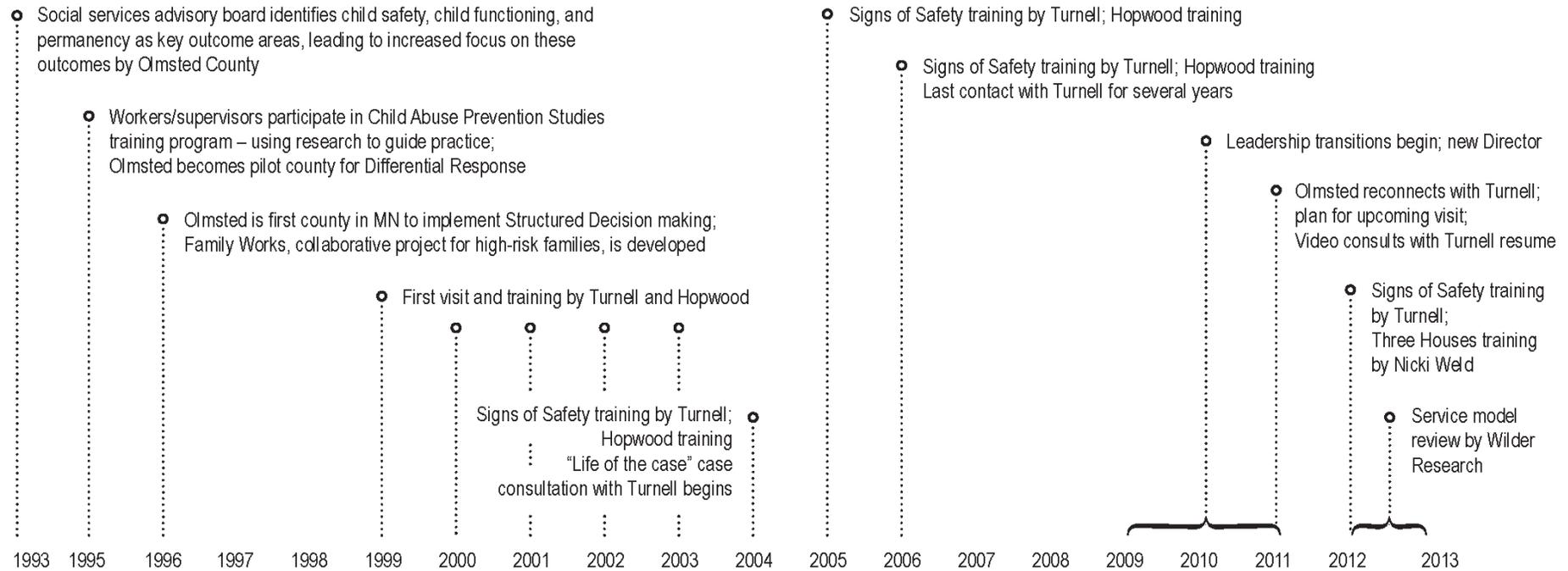
Contact between Olmsted County and Turnell ceased in 2006 for several years, although the County did send staff to a Signs of Safety training offered by Carver County and Connected Families in 2008. During this time, there were not only additional demands on Turnell’s time, but County leaders felt that their consultations with Turnell were no longer moving the work forward. Between 2009 and 2011, the County underwent a number of significant leadership transitions, and in 2011, the new Division Director reconnected with Turnell in an effort to expand the practice model with families. Initial consultation and planning around the County’s needs began, and later that year, video consults with Turnell resumed. Turnell returned to Olmsted County in the spring of 2012, and held day-long trainings and meetings with supervisors and the Director to

determine next steps. In preparation for the training, kick-off events were held with staff to re-orient them to Signs of Safety and how it could fit into their current practice. Three weeks of planning followed the Turnell visit, aimed at determining next steps for building rigor into the work. The County rolled out a pilot implementation process through practice groups that included cross-unit representation. In the fall, Nicki Weld, a social worker from New Zealand and one of the original developers of the Three Houses process, conducted a one-day training with leaders and supervisors, and a two-day training with staff around Three Houses.

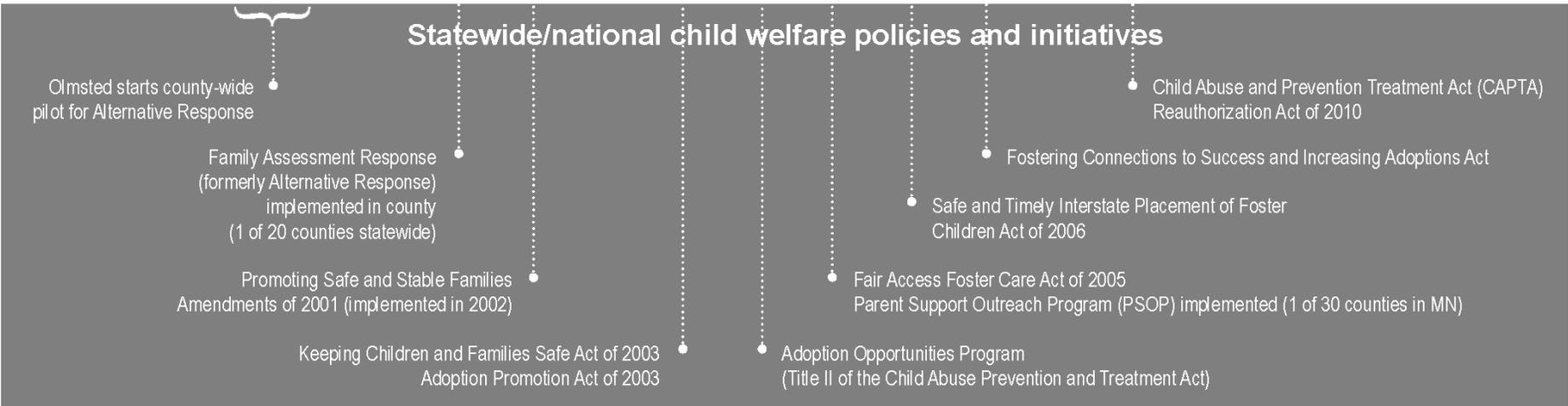
During this period of transition, Olmsted also made an effort to shift their practice back to a group consult model and the use of family involvement strategies. Trainings during this period were not mandatory, yet the County reports significant buy-in and standing-room only availability at the latest training Turnell hosted. The County is currently planning additional training with Turnell in the spring of 2013, and anticipates a five-year journey with the Signs of Safety co-creator. See Figure 1 for a timeline illustrating Olmsted County's implementation journey with Signs of Safety, and other significant changes in practice and policy that occurred during this period.

# Olmsted County: Timeline of child welfare events (1993 – 2013)

## Signs of Safety trainings and implementation



## Statewide/national child welfare policies and initiatives



## ***Implementation of Signs of Safety in Carver County***

Although Signs of Safety practice first began in Carver County in 2005, staff point to several significant events, prior to that point, which laid the groundwork for the eventual adoption of the framework. One such event was the Breakthrough Series Collaborative hosted by Casey Family Programs in 2002. Several Carver County Child Protection and Connected Families staff (a contracted provider) participated in this year-long learning project, which focused on the issue of recruitment and retention of resource families. It was during this process that several Carver County staff were exposed to concepts and ideas that later set the stage for Signs of Safety – for example, enacting a plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle of change, encouraging people closest to the problem to come up with solutions, and breaking down goals into small steps.

Necessity also led Carver County to seek out alternative ways of doing the work. In 2003, Carver County Community Social Services experienced the first in a series of annual budget cuts that prompted the County to explore new, more cost-effective methods of providing a reasonable response to families and reducing the number of children who end up in placement.

The County's first exposure to Signs of Safety came the following year in 2004 when one of the supervisors participated in a week-long Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) in Olmsted County. Carver's Child and Family Manager had heard of the positive outcomes being achieved in Olmsted County and elected to have one of his staff volunteer to participate in Olmsted's review in order to learn more. After hearing positive feedback from his staff who attended the review, Carver's Child and Family Manager sought out and read Andrew Turnell's first book, "Signs of Safety: A Solution and Safety Oriented Approach to Child Protection Casework."<sup>5</sup> Later that summer, Olmsted provided two free spaces for two Carver County supervisors at a two-day workshop with Andrew Turnell. Following that workshop, several Carver County staff began to try the practice with challenging cases. That fall, Olmsted offered Carver one of the two weeks of training they had scheduled with Andrew Turnell for the following year. Prior to the training, Carver's Child and Family Manager exchanged email correspondences with Turnell about Carver's interest in Signs of Safety.

In the spring of 2005, Turnell and Larry Hopwood, a therapist and consultant, conducted a week-long, Signs of Safety training with Carver County staff; the training was voluntary so while staff were encouraged to attend, it was not mandatory. At the end of the week, Turnell met with supervisors to develop a Signs of Safety implementation plan, using a mapping format, which outlined their goals and methods for measuring their progress

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<sup>5</sup> Turnell and Edwards, 1999.

toward these goals. Following this training, the County began its foray into Signs of Safety. Workgroups were formed around various Signs of Safety concepts, such as mapping. The Child and Family Manager purchased Turnell's book for each unit, and discussed interest in implementing the approach after they committed to having Andrew come to Carver County in late 2004.

The County participated in additional training with Turnell in the fall of 2005. After the second training, workers began to feel better prepared to try the new approach. Turnell returned to Carver County in the spring and fall of 2006 to provide additional training and case consultation. Monthly telephone case consultations began later that year, during which Turnell helped workers identify strengths and think through next steps on cases. Social workers, therapists, and supervisors were all invited to participate on the consultations.

In the spring of 2007, hosted by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota, Andrew held a three-hour webinar broadcast across Minnesota. He also led a discussion with state child welfare leaders that afternoon. In August of that year, Andrew led a two-day public workshop with 100 participants and has since lead a two-day workshop for over 200 participants each time he has returned to Minnesota. Carver County staff participated in these events, which led to the spread of Signs of Safety across the state.

In August 2008, two social workers, two Connected Families therapists, and a Carver County supervisor and manager presented their casework at the Second International Signs of Safety Gathering in Gateshead, England. Meanwhile, Turnell continued to visit with and train Carver County staff twice a year through 2009. During this time, workers began to describe their progress and findings to colleagues in other counties. Then, in 2010, workers had the opportunity to present their experiences with Signs of Safety at the Third International Signs of Safety Gathering, held in Carver County. These presentations appeared to generate a great deal of energy and enthusiasm among Carver County staff, as well as participants from other parts of Minnesota, the United States, and Canada.

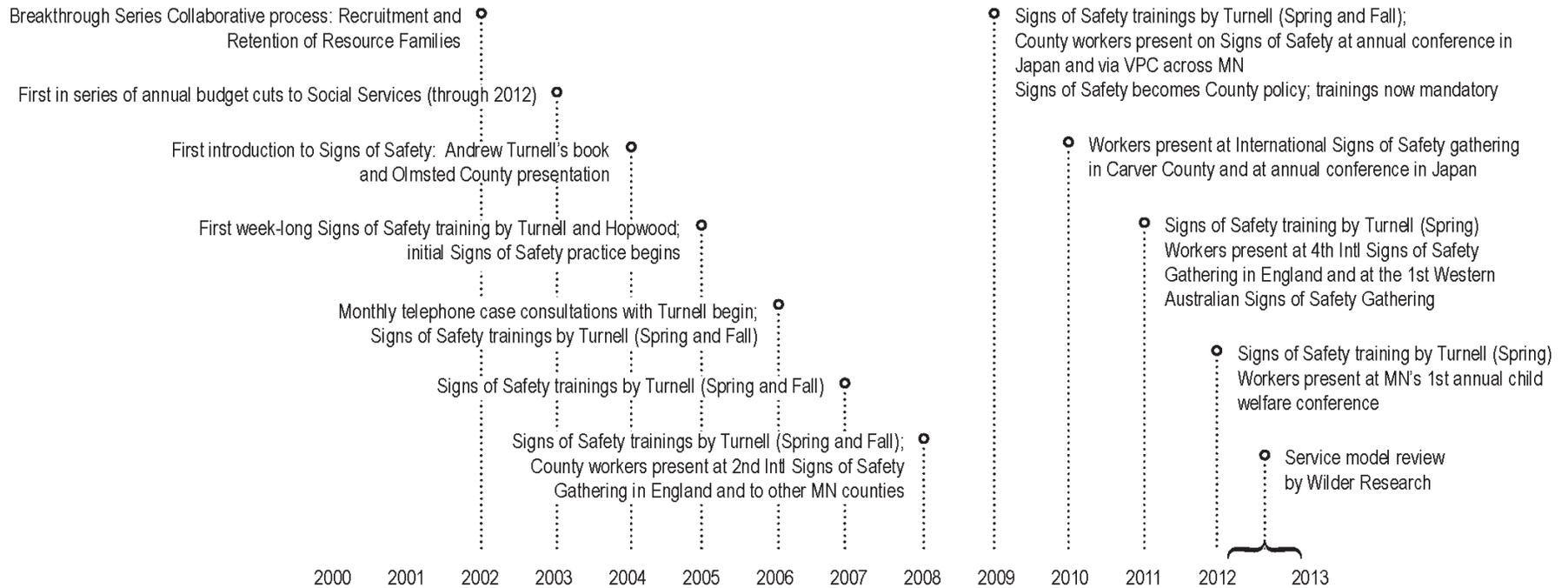
In 2009, Carver County administrators determined that the majority of its social workers were implementing Signs of Safety and decided to make the framework part of its policy, and consequently, attempted to make the training mandatory. The decision backfired; some workers participated in the training, but did so with resistance and were utterly disengaged. The decision to require trainings was reversed.

In the spring of 2011 and 2012, Turnell visited Carver County and facilitated an additional training for County staff. Parts of the trainings were also open to the public. At the same time, the County continued to participate in consultation calls with Turnell every other month. As of 2012, approximately seven years after Carver began implementing the

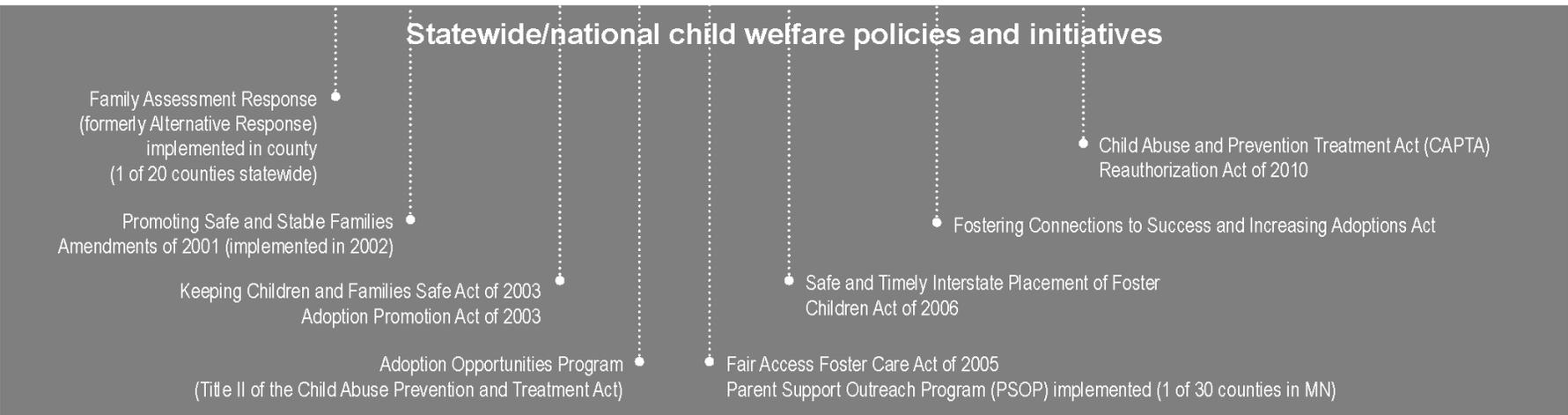
Signs of Safety framework, it is estimated that workers are using this framework in about 90 percent of cases. Cases that are not wholly guided by Signs of Safety still use some elements of the model. Carver County reports that, at minimum, all cases now have some sort of safety plan and a safety network established before the assessment is closed and casework services end. See Figure 2 for a timeline illustrating Carver County's implementation journey with Signs of Safety, and other significant changes in practice and policy that occurred during this period.

# Carver County: Timeline of child welfare events (2000 – 2013)

## Signs of Safety trainings and implementation



## Statewide/national child welfare policies and initiatives



## ***Carver and Olmsted: Similarities and differences***

While this chronicle documents the implementation journey of two Minnesota counties operating in the same state and national context, the differences between them are arguably more notable than the similarities. Most significant, perhaps, is the acknowledgement and recognition of their adoption of the Signs of Safety framework. Olmsted was the first of the two to come across the model, but did so early in the development of the Signs of Safety framework. The county was already engaged in other innovative practices during that period, such as Family Group Decision Making and implementing Alternative Response, practices that the county identifies as having a significant impact on their system and outcomes. For Olmsted, Signs of Safety was one of several influences and, given their very early interaction with the model, was itself influential in shaping the development of the framework.

Carver's introduction to the model came a few years later, and the approach was adopted more fully. Although also influenced by other statewide and national initiatives, Carver County dedicated itself to learning as much as possible about the model and fully implementing it countywide. As a result, Carver County's journey with Signs of Safety might be considered more consistently reflective of the evolving practice of the model.

# Outcomes in Carver and Olmsted Counties

Social workers and counties who have adopted Signs of Safety as a primary practice model for addressing child maltreatment often report anecdotal evidence that the model's strategies result in improved outcomes for families involved in Child Protection. The program's developer, Andrew Turnell, and other Signs of Safety champions claim similar outcomes after the model has been implemented for an extended period of time. Pre-post research studies cited earlier have also found similar results. In particular, Signs of Safety is suggested to result in fewer out of home placements for children, fewer re-reports and re-entries into the Child Protection system after case closure, and fewer cases requiring court involvement.

The data reported in this section show changes in child welfare outcome areas in Olmsted and Carver Counties from the year that Signs of Safety was implemented to present. For Carver County, implementation occurred in 2005; regular, ongoing trainings and case consultations with Andrew Turnell took place up to the time of this report. For Olmsted, county leaders were first exposed to Signs of Safety in 1999, with initial trainings and implementation beginning in 2000. It is important to note that, while Carver County claims a complete adoption of the Signs of Safety model, Olmsted reports employing a modified version that incorporates key Signs of Safety elements into their own unique practice model.

The specific child welfare outcomes or indicators examined in this evaluation were selected by staff from Casey, both counties, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and Wilder Research. The data were provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Safety and Permanency Division and the Minnesota Judicial Branch, both of whom provided consultation around which indicators would work well and be appropriate for analysis. The indicators chosen include:

- Number of accepted Child Protection reports
- Number of children entering placement within 45 days of a report\*
- Length of placement (for first placement only)
- Number of children who re-entered placement within 6 months\*
- Number of children who re-entered placement within 12 months
- Number of CHIPS petitions filed\*

- Percent of cases re-reported within 6 months\*
- Percent of cases re-reported within 12 months
- Percent of case management cases re-opening for services within 6 months\*
- Percent of case management cases re-opening for services within 12 months
- Number of families who had parental rights terminated (TPRs)

Researchers reviewed and analyzed data for all indicators and ultimately selected five of the above 11 indicators to be included in this final report (shown with an asterisk above). The selected indicators reflect the outcome areas most likely to show change as a result of Signs of Safety implementation, according to program developer Andrew Turnell, and those with a clear expected direction and rationale for change. Although the last indicator related to TPRs falls into this category, the available data represented filings, not final dispositions, and the number of filings by child rather than family. Furthermore, there was no discernible trend with regard to TPR filings in either county. As a result, this indicator was also excluded.

Although some trends are encouraging, readers are cautioned against drawing firm conclusions about the direct relationship between Signs of Safety and the outcomes presented. Even in Carver County where Signs of Safety has been adopted agency-wide, other confounding variables exist. In particular, Minnesota has recently adopted a strengths-based, family-centered practice model that includes many elements similar to those included in Signs of Safety. Additionally, the study time period corresponds with the full operationalization of Alternative Response, which also has practice components that overlap with the Signs of Safety model. Many outcomes are improving statewide as well as in the counties that have not yet implemented Signs of Safety, perhaps as a result of these other practice changes.<sup>6</sup>

Statewide data for select indicators are presented for comparative purposes when percentages are presented. ***In some cases, the Ns for several indicators are too small to present as percentages. For these indicators, the County Ns are plotted instead and statewide data are excluded, as statewide numbers would dwarf county numbers and result in flat trend lines for the Counties.***

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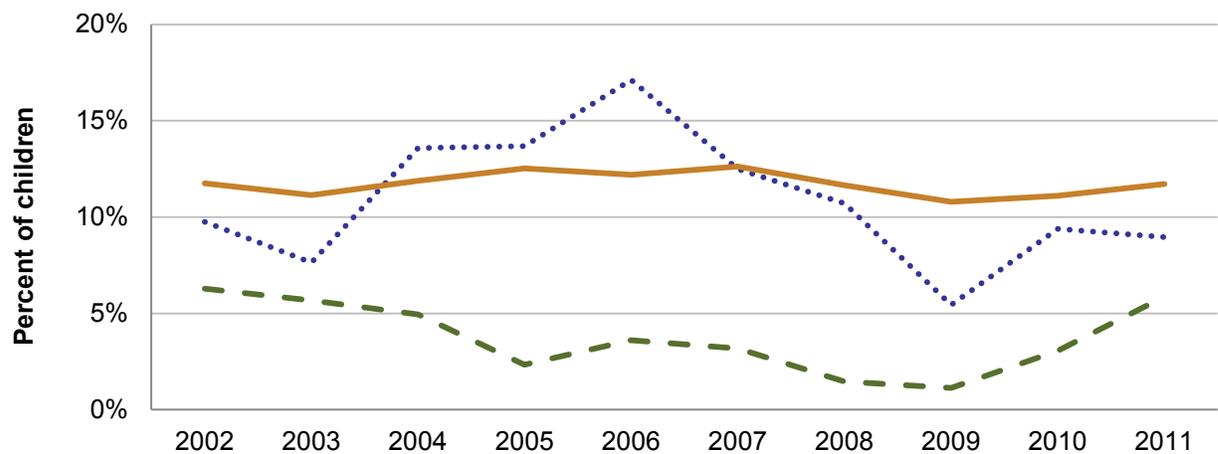
<sup>6</sup> The “Minnesota Practice Model” formally adopted in 2009, emphasizes safety through constructive and respectful engagement of families and communities. It recognizes that families and communities have strengths and capacities that can be applied to keep children safe and assure their well-being. The Minnesota Practice Model can be viewed on the Minnesota Department of Human Services website, [www.dhs.state.mn.us](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us).

Finally, while it would be useful to examine data prior to 2002, particularly for Olmsted County, Minnesota’s statewide automated child welfare information system was not mandatory before 2002, so data before this time are unreliable and, therefore, not reported.

### *Out of home placements*

Figure 3 shows the percent of children placed in out-of-home care within 45 days of entering the Child Protection system.<sup>7</sup> The denominator in these figures is the total number of children open for investigation or assessment, not including those cases already transitioned to case management. Olmsted County has consistently remained below the statewide average since 2002, although the county saw its lowest rates in 2008 and 2009 (1% of children entering placement). This could indicate that Olmsted’s practice model, in part influenced by Signs of Safety, is resulting in fewer out-of-home placements for children. Since implementation of Signs of Safety in 2005, Carver County experienced a slight increase in the percentage of children entering placement in 2006 (17%) but that number has since declined, remaining below the statewide average since 2007. The increase in 2006 could be indicative of workers adapting to a new model. Results since that time period are encouraging for Carver, suggesting that Signs of Safety may be resulting in fewer out of home placements for new cases.

### 3. Children placed out of the home within 45 days of case opening



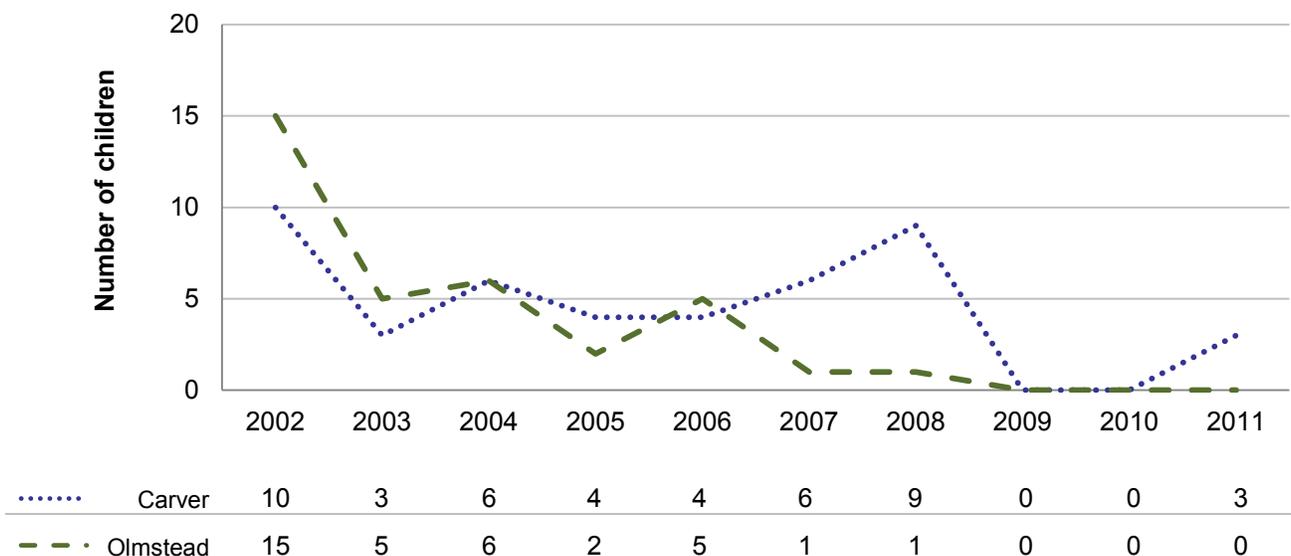
.....	Carver	10%	8%	14%	14%	17%	13%	11%	5%	9%	9%
- - -	Olmstead	6%	6%	5%	2%	4%	3%	1%	1%	3%	6%
—	Statewide	12%	11%	12%	13%	12%	13%	12%	11%	11%	12%

<sup>7</sup> This includes reports of child maltreatment that were screened in for investigation or assessment. Reports are screened out if there is not sufficient evidence to warrant an investigation or assessment.

Figure 4 shows the number of children who re-enter out-of-home placement within 6 months of being reunified with their family after a previous placement. Because the number of children in this circumstance is so small, researchers elected to report actual numbers rather than percentages. Despite a spike in 2008 for Carver County, both counties show a decline in the number of children re-entering placement overtime. The Carver County Director believes that the spike in placements was due, in part, to the fact that some safety plans were not rigorous enough, and because staff were in the middle of their learning journey.

In addition, neither Carver nor Olmsted had any children re-enter placement within 6 months in 2009 or 2010. Olmsted also had no children re-enter placement in 2011. These results are encouraging, and suggest that changes in county practices, including the adoption of Signs of Safety methods, could be resulting in more stable family reunifications because of more effective safety plans. It should be noted that the statewide percentages have also been steadily declining, from 15.5% in 2002 to 7.5% in 2011. [Note: changes in percentages over this same period are 25% in 2002 to 13% in 2011 for Carver County, and from 19.7% in 2002 to 0% in 2011 for Olmsted County, although fluctuations in county percentages should be interpreted cautiously given the small number of children in question.]

#### 4. Children re-entering placement within 6 months of reunification

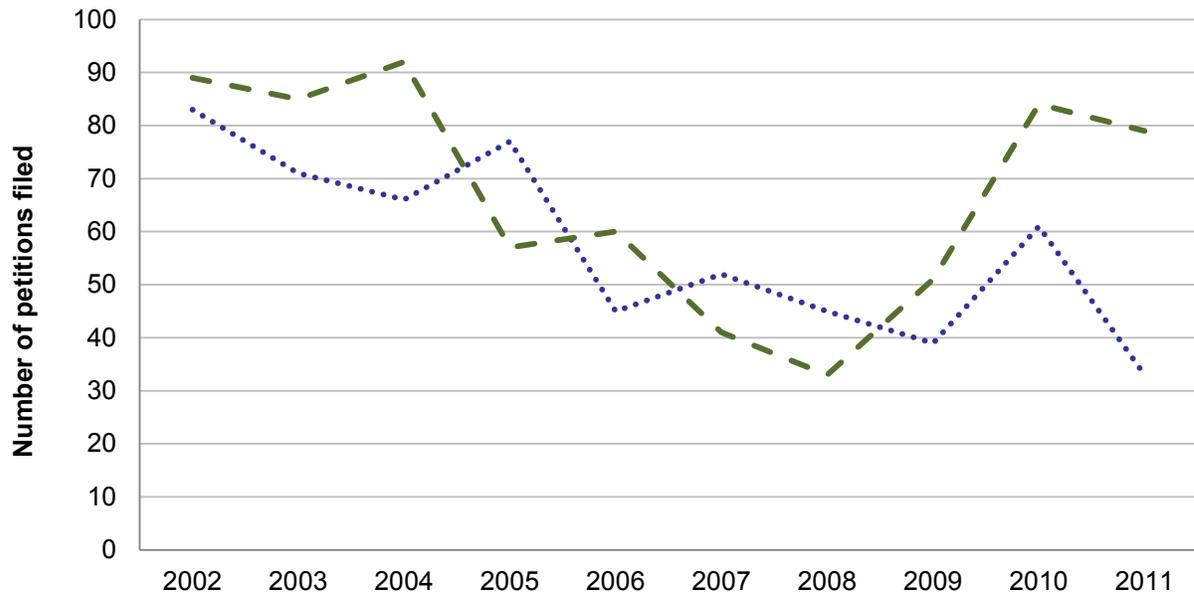


## ***Court involvement***

Figure 5 shows the number of child protection cases that resulted in a CHIPS (Child in Need of Protective Services) filing in court. In other words, the child protection agency felt these cases required court involvement in order to keep the child safe. One of the goals of Signs of Safety is to communicate with families in an honest and straightforward way -- building their trust and helping them understand what they need to do in order to close their child protection case. In theory, this upfront work to build a relationship and clarify expectations should eliminate the need to mandate their participation in the process through a court order. Thus, the number of CHIPS petitions filed is expected to go down after Signs of Safety implementation. Percentages are not available for these data and cannot be reliably calculated. However, the actual number of CHIPS petitions filed in each county does show some potential changes over time.

In Carver County, the number of CHIPS petitions filed dropped from 77 in 2005 to 45 in 2006, and has continued to trend downward with the exception of one peak in 2010. In Olmsted, CHIPS petitions declined to 33 in 2008, but have since gone up again, reaching 84 in 2010 and 79 in 2011. It is thought that the increase of CHIPS petitions in Olmsted is related to increased oversight and review of safety planning by stakeholders, and some confusion among staff about what elevated a case to a CHIPS petition.

### **5. CHIPS petitions filed in court**



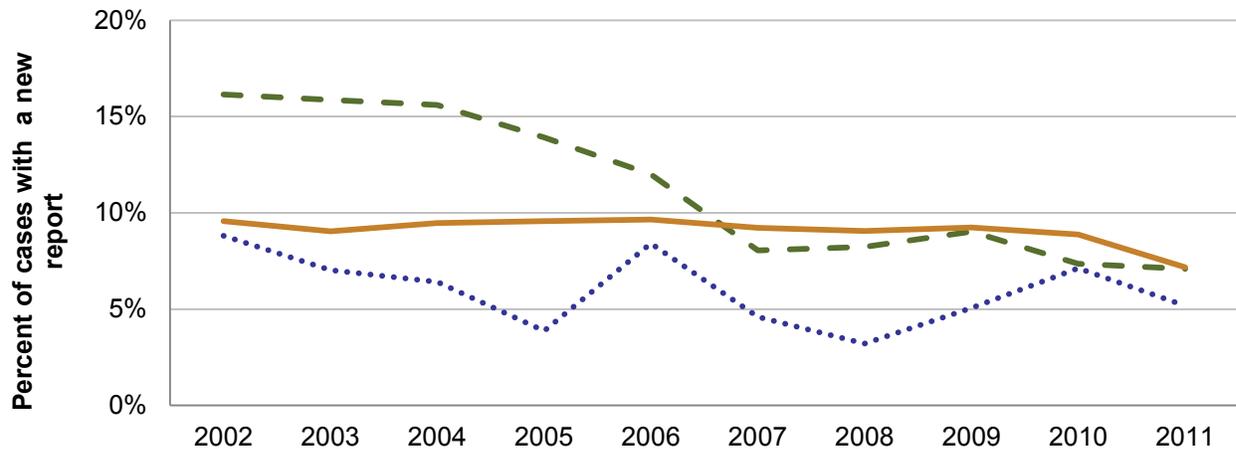
.....	Carver	83	71	66	77	45	52	45	39	61	33
- - -	Olmstead	89	85	92	57	60	41	33	51	84	79

## *Re-entering Child Protection after case closure*

Another key element of the Signs of Safety model is the development of the safety network, which is an informal network of family and friends who participate in case planning and agree to provide ongoing support to the family after their child protection case is closed. With a reliable safety network in place, families should be less likely to re-enter the child protection system. Figure 6 shows the percent of cases that are re-reported for maltreatment within 6 months of a previous case closing.

Since their Signs of Safety implementation in 2005, Carver County has maintained a re-report rate consistently below the statewide average. However, the rate itself does not show any particular pattern. In contrast, Olmsted shows a fairly steady decrease over time in the percent of cases that are re-reported for maltreatment within 6 months of case closure. In 2007, Olmsted's rate fell below the statewide average, and has remained below since that time. Neither county's rate indicates a pattern consistent with their implementation of Signs of Safety, but results still show that both counties are showing positive outcomes in this area.

### **6. Cases re-reported for maltreatment within 6 months of case closure**

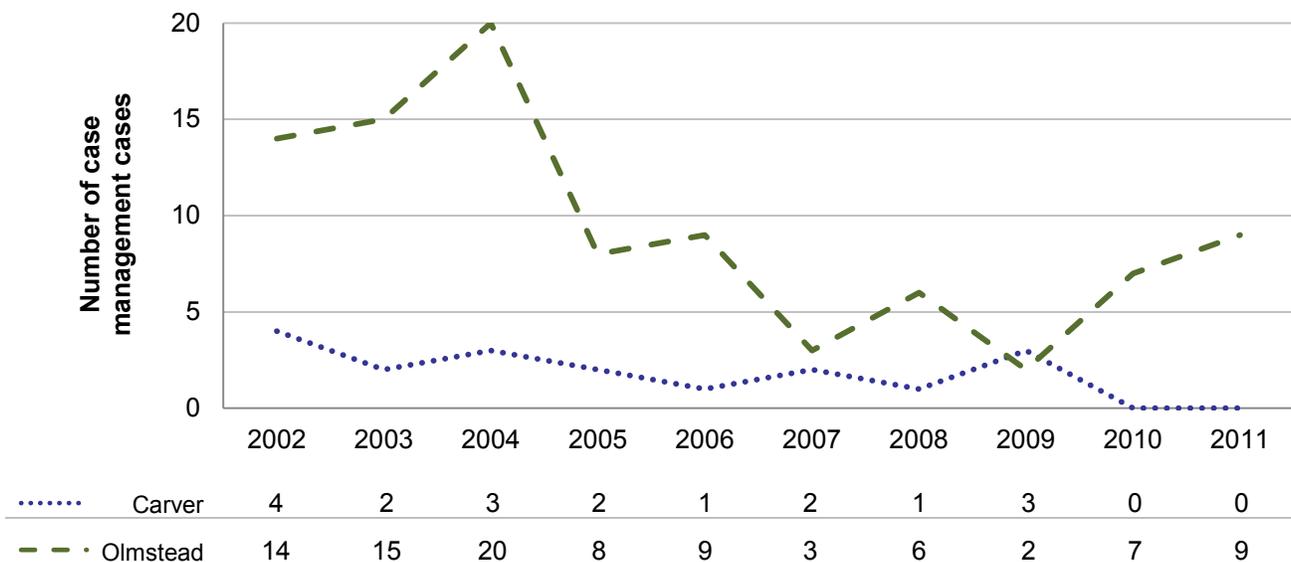


	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
..... Carver	8.8%	7.0%	6.4%	3.9%	8.4%	4.6%	3.2%	5.1%	7.1%	5.2%
- - - - - Olmsted	16.2%	15.9%	15.6%	13.9%	12.0%	8.1%	8.2%	9.0%	7.4%	7.1%
———— Statewide	9.6%	9.0%	9.5%	9.6%	9.7%	9.2%	9.1%	9.2%	8.9%	7.2%

Perhaps a better indicator of the strength of the safety network than re-reports is the percent of cases that actually re-open for services within 6 months of case closure (Figure 7). In other words, a case that re-enters the child protection system within 6 months of closing which requires additional services is likely to indicate that the safety network established in the previous case was not adequate to support the safety needs of the child.

Given the small number of cases, plotting percentages would be misleading so Figure 7 illustrates the number of cases that re-opened within 6 months in both counties. This represents very few cases in general in Carver County (no more than four in any given year) and since the implementation of Signs of Safety in 2005, the number of re-opened cases has varied from 0 to 2. In Olmsted County, the number of re-opened cases did generally decline over time (with the exception of a peak in 2004), but appears to be slightly rising in recent years. The data are not depicted here, but statewide, the proportion of cases that re-opened within 6 months of case closure remained fairly flat.

### 7. Cases re-opening for services within 6 months of case closure



Overall, the results suggest that there is some promise in the application of selected indicators as useful metrics in assessing gains achieved through Signs of Safety. In particular, out of home placements, re-entry into placement, and case re-openings may be well-aligned with Signs of Safety goals and sensitive enough to show progress in model implementation. However, these indicators may also be sensitive to *other* Child Protection improvements not directly related to Signs of Safety. In addition, larger sample sizes would provide greater confidence in the trends over time, so monitoring these performance indicators in larger counties is crucial.

# Stakeholder perspectives

Signs of Safety has been a key piece in what we've done [in Child Protection], but I don't think it's the only piece. Our practice has evolved based on a number of things that came along at the same time – structured decision making, micro-skills, etc. – all things that come along with Signs of Safety. We've been putting them together in an organized fashion, so we can train and continue to improve. (Olmsted)

In theory, [Signs of Safety] makes perfect sense. When you combine all of the facets of Signs of Safety, it should be a better way of protecting kids, reaching resolutions in cases, and steering a case in the right direction. There is definitely a tension between Signs of Safety theory and concerns about protecting a child when there are ongoing concerns about drug addiction, physical/sexual abuse, etc. How much safety is enough, is the question. In reality, it's not quite as pure and simple. (Carver)

## *Sample*

In order to get a fuller picture of the long-term implementation and impact of Signs of Safety beyond the confines of the Child Protection system itself, Wilder Research conducted telephone interviews with key “external” stakeholders in Carver and Olmsted Counties in Minnesota. Researchers spoke to stakeholders with 10 or more years of professional experience in systems which are outside of, but intersect with Child Protection, such as the judicial system (judges, attorneys, guardians ad litem), law enforcement, schools, foster care, and public health. Stakeholders were therefore able to provide a historical perspective on child welfare practices in each county and speak to any changes observed from their vantage points. By tapping into the perspectives of these external system stakeholders, we can assess the extent to which the Signs of Safety framework has permeated systems outside of child welfare.

## *Methodology*

Potential interviewees were identified by Child Protection Services department leaders in Carver and Olmsted Counties. Of the 18 stakeholders originally identified, a total of 15 participated in the interviews – 8 in Olmsted and 7 in Carver – between July 18 and September 20, 2012. All three of the non-participants were from Carver County; two declined to participate, and one could not be reached despite multiple attempts. As a result, the perspectives of stakeholders from certain systems were not represented in the Carver County interviews.

It is important to note that these interviews are considered qualitative research, designed to learn about the general attitudes of these individuals. Given the small number of

interviews conducted, it is important to note that results do not necessarily reflect the opinions of other professionals in these systems or others involved with child welfare practices in Carver and Olmsted Counties. The selected observers, however, do represent critical perspectives within each county's service system.

### ***Stakeholders' understanding of Signs of Safety and changes in child welfare practices***

The stakeholders interviewed have a range of exposure to and opinions about Signs of Safety. Many are familiar with the details of the model, while others have only heard the term. A few of the stakeholders said they had never heard of Signs of Safety, but spoke about new or changing child welfare practices using language that seemed to indicate at least some exposure to the model, such as safety plans. It may be the case that Signs of Safety is slowly making its way into systems related to Child Protection without professionals noticing a direct cause and effect. The fact that Signs of Safety messages and language are trickling down to various systems, even if implementation is not covert, is a positive step for the model and its advocates.

However, because of outside factors, it is difficult to attribute the changes perceived by stakeholders as directly related to Signs of Safety. As shown in the timelines, a number of other events were happening concurrently, such as the Children's Justice Initiative (CJI), Alternative Response, and other local and statewide policy changes, which had a profound impact on child welfare practices and, potentially, Child Protection outcomes. In addition, some stakeholders do not have a clear understanding of the model, and are themselves unable to disentangle what changes might be due to Signs of Safety versus other practices.

Whether they are discussing Signs of Safety explicitly or changes to child welfare practices generally, stakeholders have observed a variety of positive system-level changes over the past several years.

#### **Systems-level changes**

Overall, stakeholders viewed their respective systems as having a positive relationship with Child Protection and, in most cases, said that their relationship has improved over the past 10 years. They also suggested that there is greater collaboration across other systems, and that relationships are less adversarial; stakeholders report that different agencies are now willing to work together and share non-confidential information to better serve families.

Some attribute these changes to Signs of Safety; however, others say that greater inter-system collaboration is the product of working together over an extended period of time

and learning how to listen and compromise. Several pointed to an evolution in their own thinking as they worked with systems related to Child Protection; many saw collaboration as a necessary step to becoming more efficient and effective in their work.

A couple of stakeholders said that new child welfare practices have helped them to more often think of cases in terms of “problem solving” and that working together across systems is regarded as a necessary part of effectively solving problems for families involved with Child Protection.

Now, there is more of a collaborative approach. Social Services has been pretty well able to provide services; they are pretty innovative and try new things. ...Everyone walks away with a clear idea of what they’re supposed to do. We do some collaboration, such as Family Group Decision Making and Signs of Safety; we get family and friends involved. (Carver)

There is that view out there that ‘This isn’t my problem; it’s Social Services’ problem.’ I used to think that way... Now, I work with Social Services, the county attorney’s office, mental health, and a lot of different resources. We try to say, ‘Is anybody from your office working with this client? Is there something you can do that we can work together?’ For me, it is problem solving. There are things that I have access to, information-wise, that Social Services sometimes does not, and they don’t know about it unless we collaborate. (Carver)

Yes [our relationship with Child Protection] has moved from authoritarian to more collaborative. (Olmsted)

In years past, there was not as much open collaboration between all of the different groups involved in a case, and parents felt left on the sidelines. I think the biggest change is the face-to-face meetings that are purpose driven, with neutral facilitators; and the group sets the agenda, so everyone can be heard. If there is an issue that the parent doesn’t feel is being resolved, everyone has a chance to lay their cards on the table, with a goal of resolving the issue. It’s a much more positive, less adversarial approach. (Olmsted)

## **Positive changes in child welfare practices**

Stakeholders observed a number of positive changes in child welfare practice over the years that they believe have improved the experience for families and workers alike.

### **Increased family involvement**

One of the biggest changes stakeholders have witnessed in their counties over the past several years is the increased inclusion of families, particularly parents, in the Child Protection process. According to several interviewees, parents are expected to actively participate in providing a safe environment for their children, by identifying and carrying out the necessary steps to reunify with their children, if they have been removed from the

home. These steps could include taking parenting classes or achieving and maintaining sobriety. While parents might have been expected to do these things prior to Signs of Safety, under the new child welfare practices, stakeholders observed that the new expectation is for parents themselves to identify their family’s safety goals; in essence, under Signs of Safety, the responsibility shifts to the parent to identify the solution. According to stakeholders, rather than working behind the scenes to find a solution *for* the family, Child Protection is working *with* families to help them find their own strengths and create their own safety nets.

There is more family involvement now with the [Child Protection] system...the communication with families is better and we get more support for families, which is an improvement. (Olmsted)

In the early years, there was great secrecy and confidentiality; Social Services was very careful about talking to family members because of confidentiality. Signs of Safety blows all of that away and certainly involves the family. On the one hand, that can be very painful for families – they are embarrassed about being in the Child Protection system, and Social Services is letting everyone know exactly what their concerns are and what behaviors led the client to be involved in the system...It’s a *huge* change from the past closed doors, but I am absolutely very supportive of it...In the long run, it’s better for my clients, and clearly better for their children. (Carver)

### **Greater transparency with and respect for families**

Along with increased family involvement, stakeholders, particularly in Olmsted County, noted that social workers have become more open with parents about the steps they need to take in order to reunify with a child in placement, or to keep their families together. Interviewees also said that there is a greater level of respect for, and less judgment of, parents going through the Child Protection system. Several described new child welfare practices as less “authoritarian” and “paternalistic” than in previous years.

Several stakeholders attributed this increase in transparency to the implementation of the Signs of Safety model, while others said these changes were a product of several events and policy changes over the past several years, such as Rapid Response and the Children’s Justice Initiative.<sup>8</sup>

One reason for these particular changes, according to interviewees, is a general shift in thinking among professionals. Several said that they have altered their own thinking – to be more transparent with and respectful of families – as a result of working with Child Protection for 10 or more years. Some said these types of changes are simply necessary to

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<sup>8</sup> Rapid Response is a method for engaging family and community members in safeguarding children at risk for maltreatment and/or at risk of placement.

achieve better and more efficient solutions for families, but most respondents could not necessarily peg the occurrence of the change to a specific time or programmatic influence. Rather, they saw it as a natural evolution caused by many different factors and experiences.

For me, the biggest differences – besides being respectful – is that families know what the concern is and they know what needs to be done. Maybe not how to do it right away, but... I can remember back to a case when the family had no idea how to get kids back. Nobody was ever clear about that. Now, if you talk to families and workers, here's what we expect, here's the level of safety, here are the indicators, and here's how we'll know we're there. (Olmsted)

I think [Signs of Safety] was revolutionary for us. I will say that I butted heads with people at first, because I came from the old paternalistic view, but...[Signs of Safety] changed the way I do my work... There is complete transparency and giving people credibility; being up front with families and letting families use their voice. (Olmsted)

### **Implementation of safety networks**

Another change noted by stakeholders is the development of safety networks, in which other family members, friends, and neighbors are asked to provide a support system for families involved with Child Protection. For the most part, stakeholders viewed safety networks as a positive change for families; they provide families with needed support during a difficult time, which, under a more adversarial system, they may not have gotten.

I've been encouraged, for the most part, by the adoption of Signs of Safety programming. I've seen a rather significant success rate in terms of [families] finding a support system that is not a government support system. Family support systems established through Signs of Safety are extremely helpful and contribute to them remaining out of the court system. (Carver)

### **More organization, efficiency, and standardization**

Several stakeholders also mentioned how adopting and implementing a standard practice model creates a level platform from which different systems can operate. These practices, according to interviewees, have ultimately made Child Protection work more organized and efficient. It is important to note that this standardization of practice occurred in both Carver and Olmsted Counties, but where practices in Olmsted were *influenced* by Signs of Safety, changes in Carver appear to be more directly a result of the implementation of the model.

When asked specifically about social workers and their level of consistency in implementing new child welfare practices, stakeholders had mixed opinions. A few said that social workers have become more uniform over the past 10 years, because practices like Signs

of Safety have created common language and standard operating procedures. On the other hand, a few stakeholders said the abilities and cooperation of social workers vary greatly from person to person, and they have not necessarily noticed a change over the past several years. It could be that this perceived unevenness in practice is due, in part, to the voluntary use of Signs of Safety in Carver County (as suggested by the last quotation below).

From the very start, workers are prepared differently [than they were over the past several years]. They are prepared very intentionally with practice principles in mind, and with the expectation that they organize and work around a framework – some of that is from Signs of Safety – and that they use a nomenclature so we're all on the same page... Today we have a rather organized practice... we can all get educated and get on the same page and use the same language, have similar expectations; it takes a lot of the confusion out of things. (Olmsted)

[Signs of Safety] has really been internalized by the case workers so you don't see a lot of variation in terms of how they handle cases or write reports. (Carver)

Overall, I think the administrative part of social services is extremely supportive of Signs of Safety. I think the line workers are a much more mixed bag in terms of how much they use it and how quickly they get family support systems involved; it varies a lot by worker... I see uneven follow-through from social workers. (Carver)

### **Use of evidence-based, research-driven practices**

Several stakeholders said that one of the benefits of Signs of Safety is that it is research-based, and that having evidence-based, research-driven practices helps give social workers a level playing field from which to operate. Again, this helps both workers and families by creating standardized, consistent practices, rather than relying on one party's feelings or impressions of a situation. It should be noted that while the Signs of Safety approach does not qualify as an evidence-based program by definition (as it has not been tested against a randomized control group), stakeholders often referred to it as evidence- or research-based.

Interviewees noted that, over the past 10 years, their counties have begun implementing more innovative and evidence-based child welfare practices; and many said that the use of research-based practices is what makes Carver and Olmsted Counties unique when compared to the rest of Minnesota.

Olmsted has always been interested in research-based practices in how we work with families. We were a pilot county with Family Assessment, as opposed to investigation, and now that is the law. We have been doing family-based practice as long as or longer than anybody. Decisions are based in sound, scientific, social science, and research...not people's individual feelings. That makes Olmsted County's Social Services very good. (Olmsted)

My impression is that the research just pointed to the [Signs of Safety] model... that it is a better model and works to protect the child; and the family works with you instead of against you. (Olmsted)

### **Perceived resultant positive outcomes**

For many of those interviewed, the positive changes seen in child welfare practices had corresponding positive outcomes.

### **Well-informed and respected families take on more responsibility**

Creating greater involvement and more respect for families is closely related to increased involvement from families. Several stakeholders felt that making a greater effort to involve families in reunification and being more transparent and respectful of their situation will, in turn, help them become more willing to engage with the system. Several stakeholders mentioned that the system has become "less adversarial" over the past 10 years. They argued that although sometimes the outcome of a case may not be different under this model (e.g., termination), the process is more amicable and it is the parents who make the decision about their children.

Most of the time, in Carver, cases result in either reunification, or transfer of legal custody – where the parent has made a choice. I think Signs of Safety has helped those parents realize that they have been given a fair shot and don't have the necessary skills to parent; and that is success. (Carver)

### **Standardized, research-based practices create clearer expectations for families**

Several stakeholders also mentioned that greater consistency in practice benefits families in Child Protection because they are not subject to the individual biases and judgments of their social workers.

I believe if we look at the scores in the reviews, we're doing a much better job of meeting timelines, meaning things are happening more quickly for kids, resulting in more stability. The workers are thinking more broadly and evaluative and thinking about other resources that might benefit families and uncovering needs that might not have been defined before. All of that provides a richer environment for kids to grow in. We have a much greater use of kinship care and fewer kids in placement. I really think it has benefited kids greatly and improved their odds. (Olmsted)

Any differences are usually across the whole system. We have the same goal in mind, which is creating a safe environment for the kid; everyone has a common goal. (Carver)

### **Lower recidivism, faster resolutions, fewer involuntary TPRs**

Many interviewees said that the increased emphasis on the immediate safety needs of the child, partly due to safety networks, has had a positive impact on families involved in Child Protection. A few, particularly in Olmsted County, noted that they have seen better outcomes for children and families, such as fewer out-of-home placements and increased permanency.

Very important [to Signs of Safety] are the principles – how we treat people, how we work together...It's a way of organizing practice, a way of talking about risk and harm and danger. We combined that with a number of other things, other measurement tools, in our practice...and we saw results – increased safety, less recidivism, happier campers. (Olmsted)

We are achieving permanency faster for children; kids are safer. The statistics for reoccurring maltreatment are showing that the practice is working. We've been amazed. (Olmsted)

The outcomes for children [in our county] are much better, partially because of the rules around permanency within 12 months; they push people to work in high gear and cases don't drag out for years...because of that, kids are not belabored in the system. (Olmsted)

### **Challenges with new child welfare practices**

Overall, the stakeholders viewed the changes that have taken place in Carver and Olmsted Counties over the past several years as positive. They are pleased to see a more open and respectful relationship between parents and Child Protection and welcome increased involvement from families in Child Protection cases. Most stakeholders are also appreciative of the collaboration across systems, increased organization and efficiency, and use of research-based practices.

Interviewees, however, also highlighted several challenges they have found as a result of the perceived changes in child welfare practices.

### **Keeping children with their families at the expense of safety**

Several stakeholders expressed concern that the emphasis on keeping families together, whether through Signs of Safety or other recent practice/policy changes, may sometimes compromise children's safety. These interviewees said that, while keeping families together is important, Child Protection has become so concerned with "wrapping families in safety" that sometimes children are left with parents who are mentally unstable or otherwise unable to parent.

Those who expressed the most concern about potentially leaving children in unsafe situations were those stakeholders who felt they advocate more directly for the child (versus the parents), such as guardians ad litem and those in law enforcement, health care, and education. While *all* stakeholders want what is best for the children in a case, these stakeholders may be more cautious about leaving children in the home in a potentially unsafe situation. One stakeholder said that it seems like Child Protection is not "dealing with the problem," but rather "planning around it," while another mentioned being uncomfortable with the idea that parents can continue to drink or use drugs with the children in the home, even if they have developed a safety plan around it. There is an assumption among a few of the stakeholders that once Child Protection is out of the picture, parents will no longer abide by the safety plan.

Some of the stakeholders who voiced these concerns referred to "instinct" or "a gut feeling" that children may not be safe. Even those who feel this way, however, said that instances of children being left with unfit parents are rare. This may reflect a need and opportunity for more education and training about Signs Safety for external partners.

I understand why [Child Protection] wants to integrate the child back with the family, but sometimes there is a need for [the child] to be with an independent person. Social Services listens and we have always been able to work something out so that the kids are not placed back into a home too quickly. I would say that is my biggest issue, but it doesn't happen that often. (Olmsted)

Sometimes [Child Protection's] focus is solely on the safety network, and they lose focus on what the concerns are. Sometimes a safety network is not applicable. For example, I have been working with this family since [month], and they have been trying to work with the mom to get her to follow a safety plan, and she just won't do it. There are mental health concerns that need to be addressed, and it is just clear she is not going to do it...I think they need to remove the kids from the home to keep them safe. (Carver)

## **Inability to adequately address chronic neglect cases**

Related to the issue outlined above, some stakeholders felt that Signs of Safety is not effective in dealing with chronic neglect cases. They reported that, in chronic cases, parents often show no signs of change and the circumstances do not seem to improve; again, they felt that children are left in an unsafe situation for too long and parents are given too many chances. They argue that either (a) Signs of Safety does not have the tools or techniques to address chronic neglect in particular, or (b) that workers do not know how to apply the model to these cases.

There are still barriers [in child welfare practices], such as chronic neglect, and how many chances we give parents; when to say enough is enough... We just have a few families where they have had too many opportunities... and we should have ended services sooner, but it is hard with those chronic neglect cases. (Olmsted)

The downside [of Signs of Safety] is with child neglect. I think children are sometimes left in bad situations for too long, where parents don't have the capacity for what they need... It doesn't rise to level of child maltreatment... but it's a potentially harmful situation... I do think that in the past, in a really severe chronic case, the child was removed sooner than what is happening now; they bend over backwards to keep the child in the home and give the parent every possible chance... I just feel like can go on a little too long. (Olmsted)

## **No “teeth” to deal with lack of follow-through on plans**

A few stakeholders described Signs of Safety as lacking “teeth” or “consequences” for children and families who do not follow through with their plans; of special concern was the lack of consequences for teens with behavioral issues. One person felt that while Signs of Safety may work for younger children, it lacked repercussions for teens (placed outside of the home) who misbehave. In one case in which Signs of Safety was used, a safety plan was put into place and a safety network was established for the child; however, after being placed with someone in the safety network, the youth acted out, the caregiver was overwhelmed, and the teen was sent back to foster care. In this case, what consequences for the youth and practice strategies could have been put in place to help address the youth's behavior and prevent placement disruption? How does Signs of Safety handle cases in which a youth is not cooperative?

If done correctly, Signs of Safety is excellent; however, it is not always clear exactly what the expectation is and, if it doesn't happen, what the consequence is. (Olmsted)

Signs of Safety has a lot of merit, but it has no teeth for anything the kids do. You can't give a kid consequences; there isn't anything to do as a foster parent... You can't send them to a detention facility; the kid has to almost burn down your house or threaten you with knives before the county will do anything with him. (Carver)

### **Maintaining rigor and discipline in implementing new child welfare practices**

Although many of the stakeholders said that new child welfare practices have done a good job of creating collaboration across systems and standardizing practices for Child Protection, a few expressed concerns about their county's ability to maintain these new practices. They said that social workers sometimes revert back to old habits and old ways of thinking.

Another challenge is maintaining rigor and discipline during changes in leadership, and without regular training and case consultation with Andrew Turnell. It will be important to consider if consultation with Andrew will always be necessary, and how to sustain the Signs of Safety practice without the ongoing guidance of its founders.

We haven't become stagnant, but we have become more comfortable with how we're doing things now; there's no move to shake things up... I would say the state level of CJI (Children's Justice Initiative) is occasionally coming up with initiatives to improve practice in Child Protection, but that isn't happening as much as it was to a substantial degree. (Carver)

The thing that takes my breath away is the tendency for Social Services to default to the way they were doing things, or the "easy way." It's takes a lot of rigor and discipline [not to default to old practices]. It's challenging to keep training and supporting staff so they're on top of their game. That's an area where we will improve; we need to improve. (Olmsted)

# Implications for other jurisdictions

## Key themes in observers' perceptions of Signs of Safety

Several key themes emerged from the implementation histories of Carver and Olmsted Counties and the findings from the stakeholder interviews and indicator data:

- **Implementing Signs of Safety is a culture change for agencies.** Signs of Safety is a culture change in child protective practice and as such, takes time to implement, works better by attracting rather than mandating workers to participate, changes the agreed upon ways of doing things, and 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 as well (courts, schools, public health, etc.) to ensure consistency across systems for families as well. 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 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.

### **Concerns about the model**

Although most of the stakeholders expressed at least some support for Signs of Safety practices, some identified aspects of the model that raised concerns for them:

- **Workers “give parents too much credit.”** Several stakeholders perceived that workers are too lenient with families, either by letting things slide without consequences, giving them too much credit, or making things too easy for them. Whether this is a real issue (i.e., workers getting so enmeshed with families that they cannot see problems when they arise), or one perceived only by stakeholders, is something other counties considering Signs of Safety or another family-centered approach may want to note.
- **Do safety networks remain after cases are closed?** There is concern among stakeholders about relying too heavily on safety networks, and potentially leaving children in dangerous situations. A review of the outcomes of these cases and the stability of safety networks after the case has closed, or at least educating stakeholders on this issue, may be helpful. This is an important area for future research.
- **Some stakeholders report that the model does not appear to address the issue of child/teen misbehavior and consequences.** This can be a frustrating and frightening experience for the families, especially in cases with older youth and serious behavioral incidents. What Signs of Safety principles or practice strategies can be used in cases where youth are acting out and/or non-compliant?

## **Potential for monitoring intended outcomes**

- **Select child welfare indicators that are be sensitive enough to show progress.**  
In particular, out of home placements, re-entry into placement, and case re-openings may be useful metrics in assessing gains achieved through Signs of Safety (and potentially other child welfare) practices.
- **It is important to examine trends over time.** Ideally, consistently tracking indicator data several years prior to the implementation of Signs of Safety and continuing through implementation and ongoing application is critical to understanding the potential impact of the model.
- **Implement evaluation strategies that can use rigorous designs.** Where possible, look for opportunities to conduct studies where a more direct test of Signs of Safety could be done. One of the more critical areas might be to explore the nature, duration, and impact of specific family-developed safety plans.

## **Possible next steps**

- Consider the role of private agencies in working with families. Private agencies, who are contracted partners of county Child Protection departments, sometimes provide most of the direct service, or are a significant partner in providing direct service to families. In moving forward with Signs of Safety implementation, it is important for a jurisdiction to consider the role of these organizations, including what kinds of training and ongoing coaching may be needed.

In Carver County, Connected Families is seen as an advisor in Signs of Safety. No other county has a local resource like this; therefore, it is also important to determine if consultation from Connected Families contributes to Carver's outcomes. In other counties, like Olmsted, the public agency contracts with private partners to provide direct service to families for some cases. This leads to questions, like: Do these workers receive as much training in the model? What is the position of the leadership in these counties? What role can/should these private agencies have? This may be an area for future research/exploration.

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# Appendix

## *Stakeholder interview protocol*

### **Evaluation of Signs of Safety in Carver and Olmsted Counties**

#### **Interview protocol**

**July 16, 2012**

#### **Consent process**

##### **Step 1. Initial contact and first round of consent by Carver and Olmsted County child**

**welfare staff:** After staff have identified relevant stakeholders within systems in the County, staff should contact these individuals and convey the following information about the study to all identified individuals. At your discretion, you may contact individuals by either telephone or by email, but you will need to obtain the individual's consent before sharing any information with Wilder Research. This is either verbal consent by phone or written consent (e.g., agreement by email). Feel free to reframe the following information as needed so it will be understood by the identified individuals.

- Wilder Research, a research and evaluation firm in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is conducting a study of the implementation and impact of new child welfare practices (i.e., Signs of Safety) in two counties (Olmsted and Carver) that have been long-term implementers of the practice.
- As someone with a long tenure in a system that intersects with Child Protection (e.g., courts, Public Health, etc.), Wilder Research would like to interview you about your historical perspective of child welfare practice over the years and your observations of changes, if any, in that practice since Signs of Safety was implemented.
- The information will be used to further our understanding of the long-term implementation and perceived impact of Signs of Safety on families and other systems.
- If you are willing to participate in this study, we will share your contact information with Wilder Research, who will contact you and ask you to participate in a telephone interview in July-early August 2012. The interview will last about 45 minutes, although the length will depend on how much you share.
- The telephone interview is completely voluntary, so you decide whether you want to participate or not. You may also stop the interview at any time.
- To the extent disclosure of the information is not required by law (e.g., court order), your responses will be kept confidential by Wilder Research and your answers will not be seen by any anyone except the Wilder research staff working on the study.
- *Ask potential interviewee:* Are you willing to participate in this study? (Note his/her verbal consent or refusal).
- *If interviewee consents:* Provide name and contact information to Monica Idzelis at Wilder Research.
- If you want more information about the study, contact Monica Idzelis at Wilder Research at 651.280.2657 or [monica.idzelis@wilder.org](mailto:monica.idzelis@wilder.org).

**Step 2. Initial contact by researchers (by phone or email):**

Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm a researcher with Wilder Research in St. Paul. Jodi Wentland in Olmsted County/Dan Koziolk in Carver County recently contacted you about an evaluation we are conducting about child welfare practices in your county. We are interested in hearing about your experience with the Child Protection system in Olmsted/Carver County and any changes you have observed over the years. We are conducting interviews with some people in your county, as well as in Olmsted/Carver County, in order to understand how attempts to shift child welfare practice in both counties are perceived by individuals who have contact with Child Protection.

We would like to set up a time to conduct a telephone interview with you. The interview is completely voluntary and should last about 45 minutes. Any information you share will be kept confidential, to the extent not required by law (e.g., court order), and your responses will be summarized with the responses of other participants.

Would you be willing to participate in a telephone interview?

*If yes* → Is there a day and time you would be available for an interview?

- *Schedule date/time and interviewer*

**Step 3. Telephone introduction and second round of consent (at time of scheduled appointment)**

Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ from Wilder Research. Thank you for agreeing to share your perspective about the Child Protection system in Olmsted/Carver County. As a reminder, the interview should last about 45 minutes. Any information you share will be kept confidential to the extent not required by law (e.g., court order) and your responses will be summarized with the responses of other participants. However, given the small number of interviews that are occurring for this project, it is possible that someone may be able to identify you by your job title as the source of the quote and/or paraphrase. Please note that you may choose to skip any questions you would prefer not to answer, and if there is anything in particular you share that you do not want us to quote, we will not do so.

All interview notes will be stored on password-protected computers at Wilder Research and destroyed at the conclusion of the study. All interview notes will be the property of and held by Wilder Research. Wilder Research will not disclose the identities of the persons interviewed for this project – or identify the source of specific quotes, paraphrases or responses to questions – unless required by law.

Do you have any questions before we begin, or would you like the contact information for the researcher or Casey Family Programs, who is sponsoring this study?

- You can either contact Monica Idzelis at Wilder Research at 651.280.2657 or the Casey Family Programs Human Subject Co-Chair at 206.378.3396.

*[For interviewers who plan to record telephone interviews, please add:*

*With your permission, I would like to record this interview, just to make sure I don't miss anything you say. No one other than the staff at Wilder Research will have access to your recorded interview. The audio of your interview will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Would it be okay if I recorded our conversation?]*

## Interview questions

### **Stakeholder background**

- 1) First, please tell me about your current role in the county. How long have you been in this role?
- 2) What kind of interaction do you have with the Child Protection system, or with families involved in the Child Protection system?

### **Perception of Child Protection within county**

- 3) How would you say the Child Protection system is working in your county? Is there anything special or unique about it? *Probes, as needed:*
  - What are your thoughts about new child welfare practices (known as Signs of Safety – in Carver only) adopted in Carver/Olmsted County over the past 8-10 years?
- 4) Have you observed any changes in child welfare practices in the county over the years?
  - If yes → How have things changed?
    - What do workers do now that is different?
      - *Probe as needed:* Do they interact/partner with families in a different way? Do families respond to workers in a different way?
      - *Probe as needed:* When did they begin to observe these changes (awhile ago or more recently)? Has it been a gradual change? When did you notice it?
    - Are the expectations for families different than before?
    - Is there anything new in the way they try to ensure children's safety?
    - Have you observed differences across the entire county's Child Protection system, or does it seem particular to specific workers or certain cases?
- 5) From your perspective, what are outcomes like for families involved in Child Protection in your county?
  - Are outcomes for parents different now compared to before Signs of Safety/the shift in practice? Are they better/worse? How so? Do you have any examples you can share?
  - Are outcomes for children different now compared to before Signs of Safety/the shift in practice? Are they better/worse? How so? Do you have any examples you can share?
- 6) Has your own thinking about the role of Child Protection changed at all in recent years? (That is, your thinking about the goals of CP involvement and how CP works with families).
  - If yes → How so? What has led to that change?
- 7) Do you think it's possible for child welfare practices to change/improve?
  - Are there changes needed in the approach that Child Protection takes with families in the county? What kind of changes?
    - (*For foster parents*): What would make things work better for you and other foster parents in the county?

### **Perception of their system's relationship with Child Protection**

*(For professionals representing various systems (e.g., courts, Public Health, etc.):*

- 8) How does the [court/public health/etc.] system in the county work with Child Protection as an agency and also with families involved in Child Protection? What is this system's role as far as Child Protection families are concerned?
  - Does the system work effectively with Child Protection?
  - Have there been any changes in how [the courts/Public Health/etc.] think about and work with Child Protection? What is different now? Can you give me an example?
  - How often do you (or your system) work with Child Protection? Are you/your colleagues any more involved in CP cases than before (at the table more than before), or involved in a different way? Can you give me an example?
  
- 9) On a scale from 0 to 10, with 10 being "it's a perfect partnership/very effective" and 0 being "it's a dysfunctional relationship/very ineffective", how would you rate [the court's/Public Health's/etc.] working relationship with Child Protection today?
  - What makes it a \_\_\_\_ (*insert numeric rating they provided*)?
  - If you were giving this rating 10 years ago, what would your rating have been?
  
- 10) What could be done that would help [the courts/Public Health/etc.] be able to work better with Child Protection and with families involved with CP?
  
- 11) Any other comments you would like to make about this topic