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## 6.0 SELF-EVALUATION

An explicit premise of FAMILY TO FAMILY was that its planning, implementation, and evaluation should be guided by clear and specific goals, and that grantees needed good performance data to guide them toward those goals. Given this premise, the Foundation sought to build capacity for self-evaluation among grantee states and communities. The thrust of this capacity-building effort was threefold: first, to build databases that tracked children through their experiences in out-of-home care by drawing on data already being collected in routine program operations; second, to compile information about children in out-of-home care from a variety of agencies other than child welfare that served families and children (mental health, special education, juvenile justice, etc.); and third, to build self-evaluation teams that would pull together information on an ongoing basis, and more importantly, use it to improve child welfare policy and practice.

To make better use of data in FAMILY TO FAMILY, it was necessary to create new structures and processes for handling information. This involved:

1. consolidating and expanding staff resources devoted to generating and disseminating information, and making better use of that information by creating "self-evaluation teams" that included program staff, analysts, and data managers;
2. building a performance baseline that showed each grantee state and community its history and current status with regard to key FAMILY TO FAMILY outcomes; and
3. using this baseline as a point of departure in each grantee's effort to assess its own progress and adjust policies and practices to bring them closer to their goals.

Putting this process in place required two sets of activities. One set focused on developing a structure for self-evaluation by creating a self-evaluation team. The other set of activities concerned the work of the team—compiling data, conducting analyses, presenting results, and linking data to planning, management, and evaluation. This chapter describes the progress each state and community made in developing or expanding its capacity for self-evaluation.

## 6.1 Alabama

Alabama's progress toward self-evaluation was substantial, even though participants in that state adopted a slightly different strategy than other sites. Alabama elected to integrate self-evaluation's use of data for program planning and evaluation with the Quality Assurance (QA) process mandated by the R.C. consent decree. The QA Director strongly believed that it was important to create one process for reviewing the work of the department. As a result, self-evaluation is now strongly entrenched in Alabama. The Foundation's emphasis on using data significantly supplemented the qualitative analysis that originally characterized the work of the QA committee. At the state-level, analysts use a variety of data to produce quarterly reports that are sent to the counties for discussion by their QA committees.

To encourage self-evaluation at the county-level, the state QA office provides resources and technical assistance to county staff. Using FAMILY TO FAMILY resources, the state purchased analysis software and paid for training of analysts in the six largest counties in Alabama. State QA staff provide additional training and ongoing technical assistance to county staff as they move toward conducting their own analyses of multiple data sources. The county QA committee, which includes community representatives from diverse backgrounds, works with agency staff to provide the final component required for moving forward with self-evaluation. The QA committee and county staff can provide context for the interpretation of analysis results. The challenge for self-evaluation in Alabama is to continue to move self-evaluation to the county-level, and, in particular, to integrate self-evaluation activities into the mainstream of county DHR administration. This has been an elusive goal in Jefferson County during the FAMILY TO FAMILY years.

## 6.2 New Mexico

New Mexico started its self-evaluation process early in the planning year, by investing substantial programming effort to extract entry cohort data files from their information system. The evaluation team was able to create analytic files and prepare analyses that New Mexico incorporated into the planning process and implementation grant application. These analyses highlighted the extensive use of emergency shelters in a way that had not been apparent

through cross-sectional data, as well as the extent to which court deadlines created under the consent decree influenced children's movement through the system.

The FAMILY TO FAMILY coordinator and staff from the Division's Research and Evaluation unit began meetings with the District Operations Managers to review the analyses and discuss their implications for efforts to be developed within FAMILY TO FAMILY. This group constituted the statewide self-evaluation team, and met with some regularity through the initial implementation period. At the same time, staff within the Research and Evaluation unit significantly enhanced its capabilities for data management and analysis. Two new analyst positions were created with the goal of producing longitudinal files in-house (a milestone achieved in January 1997) and developing skills to conduct the analyses of the type used in the FAMILY TO FAMILY evaluation. A related goal was to respond to other analytic needs within the Protective Service Division.

Although the formal self-evaluation group was never reconstituted after being lost to the reorganization and personnel changes that occurred in early 1995, analytic work from the Research and Evaluation unit continued to enjoy a wide audience (the analyst position originally funded through FAMILY TO FAMILY was converted to a permanent state position in 1996). In fact, state officials cite New Mexico's increased capability for producing and interpreting data as one of the most lasting impacts of FAMILY TO FAMILY. Longitudinal data are the basis for several of the quality improvement indicators reported on a quarterly basis to the Secretary, including patterns of initial placement, length of stay in care, re-entry to care, and rate of disruptions. The importance of early analyses of patterns of length of stay and exits from care in the development of the new Children's Code has already been cited. However, the potential impact of data on practice is limited by the lack of mechanisms for communicating about self-evaluation with county staff.

The agency's culture also has shifted to one in which management decisions are based on empirical data. Central office staff report that they now are expected to compile data and set goals when developing new programs, in contrast to relying on their own impressions of needs. Examples of the trend toward data-driven practice are the agency's investment in internally validated risk and safety assessment instruments used in case decision-making and the use of data on reported and substantiated abuse and neglect to support requests for new staff

positions to the legislature. The new SACWIS-compliant data system currently being brought online is expected to greatly expand the agency's self-evaluation capabilities.

### 6.3 Ohio

When planning for FAMILY TO FAMILY began in 1992, the Ohio Department of Human Services (ODHS) already had access to a sophisticated data system and staff expertise in both programming and analysis. Thus, it is disappointing that the ODHS self-evaluation efforts have been inconsistent. Self-evaluation activities at the state level began with a group, originally convened to discuss cross-agency data needs for FAMILY TO FAMILY, that eventually evolved into the state-level self-evaluation team. The group included representatives from each of the grantee counties, as well as staff from the other child-serving agencies in Ohio. The efforts of this group did produce an important accomplishment in a series of statewide population profiles that stand as a model for other states. More of the time of this group, however, was spent in planning to specify the data needs of the initiative and then to agree upon a division of responsibilities that would meet these needs. Unfortunately, this plan was never implemented.

Lack of progress on this plan was associated with several barriers that were not overcome. First, the leadership of the state-level self-evaluation effort has been inconsistent. The persons hired as FAMILY TO FAMILY analysts attempted to fulfill this role, but their status as temporary contract employees and their lack of permanency and status in the state hierarchy gave them no authority to accomplish what needed to be done. Moreover, the state FAMILY TO FAMILY coordinator (also a contract position) had little interest or involvement in this role.

Second, although Ohio was one of the first states to create longitudinal data files during the planning phase, they still have not developed a production process for creating and distributing these data to county FAMILY TO FAMILY sites, nor even to other state-level staff who are interested in these files. Without the data files it is impossible for other counties to begin developing the analytical capabilities necessary for an independent self-evaluation capability. Instead, the state periodically distributes a variety of performance indicators under its Child Protection and Outcome Evaluation Project (CPOE). These indicators include some of the measures emphasized in FTF, but some are based on exit cohorts and caseload snapshots.

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Finally, tension between the state child welfare agency and county agencies is inherent in the Ohio system. Since the counties are responsible for providing a substantial proportion of the resources needed to operate their local child welfare agencies, it is not surprising that they are independent and, at times, resist state involvement in their activities. The state, for its part, is not always responsive to the needs of the counties, as evidenced by the problems with sharing the data files. Under these circumstances it is probably understandable that state and county collaboration on self-evaluation has not progressed further.

**Hamilton County.** When FAMILY TO FAMILY began in 1992, Hamilton County already had a well-established planning unit with staff who were experienced in data management and analysis. Even with these resources in place, it was a challenge to assemble a self-evaluation team and begin meeting on a regular basis. The self-evaluation team in Hamilton County eventually included representatives from across the agency, including staff from the planning unit, supervisors, frontline caseworkers, and section chiefs. The composition of the team included individuals with program knowledge, data management, and data analysis skills. The participation of agency leaders in the self-evaluation efforts signaled the importance of self-evaluation to the agency and communicated that it was acceptable to spend precious staff time in this work by attending bi-weekly meetings and participating in follow-up discussions between meetings.

Within the bi-weekly meetings, data are used to highlight issues of critical importance to Children's Services, such as the status of children who are "stuck in care." Prior to the examination of this issue, first by the self-evaluation team, and subsequently agency-wide, HCDHS staff would say, when presented with these children, "that's just long term foster care," implying that it was an acceptable, and even an expected, way to serve children within the agency. As the self-evaluation team examined this issue using available data, it became clear that there were alternative ways to provide services to some of these children.

One goal of the self-evaluation efforts in Hamilton County was to make data easily available and understandable to more staff within the agency. This was accomplished through a series of monthly and quarterly reports that summarize the information available to the agency. As the county moved toward implementation of its welfare reform strategy, the use of data to plan and evaluate services and to ascertain the impact of programs on families and

children became an integral part of the process. Thus, the self-evaluation process is now well-established in Hamilton County. Multiple types of data are available and an analysis and reporting capacity is in place.

**Cuyahoga County.** Beginning in mid-1995 and continuing through 1996 and 1997 the self-evaluation team in Cleveland met on a biweekly basis while a small planning team met in the off-weeks. The team focused on several tasks that incorporated the use of data into planning and evaluation of agency activities. These tasks included an evaluation of the neighborhood work, an examination of the use of relative caregivers, and a review of reports that were currently produced by the agency. The results of the self-evaluation team's work were shared with the management team on a regular basis.

Initially, one of the agency deputy directors chaired the self-evaluation team. The commitment of the time and resources of agency administrative staff signaled to others in the agency that this was an important task and allowed them, in a limited way, to devote their time to this process. Some months after DCFS established its self-evaluation team, the leadership of the team changed. Two program managers assumed the responsibility for co-chairing this group. Since then, these managers have provided consistent leadership for the group. They have been able to bring a programmatic perspective to the use of the data and, perhaps, to help others realize the importance of using data in a field that historically has not done so.

As in all other sites, agency staff who committed their time and efforts to these self-evaluation tasks usually did so in addition to their other "real" responsibilities. The exception to this, in Cuyahoga County, was the full-time analyst position that the agency developed and funded with the use of FAMILY TO FAMILY resources. This position was placed within the MIS unit, reporting directly to the manager of the unit, but with the charge to support the evaluative needs of the FAMILY TO FAMILY team and the self-evaluation team. The position was somewhat unique in that there were no other analyst positions within the agency. In retrospect, perhaps, it would have been better to position the analyst within an administrative unit of the agency because eventually the analyst became involved with projects in the MIS department that sometimes interfered with her ability to support the FAMILY TO FAMILY team.

The Cuyahoga County self-evaluation team is currently in the process of evaluating their role within the agency and determining how the team needs to evolve to meet the changing needs of DCFS. The self-evaluation team here has demonstrated its capacity to obtain, analyze, and interpret data. The program staff on the self-evaluation team have been key to providing perspective to the meaning of the evaluation results and to identifying what practice and policy questions should define the next levels of analysis. However, there are still several outstanding issues that the team and the agency must address if the self-evaluation group is to expand its usefulness to the agency. Perhaps, the most important remaining step for the group needs is to determine ways in which data and analysis results can be shared more consistently throughout the agency, and, eventually, even with others outside of the agency. DCFS has access to information that should be useful in informing policy and decision-making throughout the agency but its use is limited to a small group of staff.

Finally, DCFS needs to make a commitment to the continuance of the resources to support the self-evaluation efforts, and to the expansion of these resources. To some extent this has already begun with the addition of staff to the MIS unit and the expansion of the computing resources within the agency. However, there still appears to be an expectation in the agency (with the exception of the analyst position) that participation in self-evaluation activities is an “add-on.” Thus, until the agency can commit staff time to these efforts by releasing staff from other activities, self-evaluation will continue to be a lower priority for already harried staff.

#### **6.4 Maryland**

Development of a self-evaluation process in Maryland was constrained by several factors identified in earlier chapters. Chief among them was a lack of consistent commitment to the process by state leadership, compounded by frequent turnover in the FAMILY TO FAMILY coordinator role. In addition, data system limitations, including inconsistent documentation of placement changes and termination reasons, and lack of linkages between data on custody status and living arrangements, created substantial definitional and data management challenges. After a delay of more than two years, these were eventually overcome through the efforts of local coordinators who recognized the need for data, creative programmers and skillful facilitation by two successive FAMILY TO FAMILY coordinators.

Maryland's first cohort files were produced in early 1997, allowing analyses of trends in entries and length of stay. These were presented to and discussed in a series of meetings that

included staff from the research and evaluation office, foster care program office, FAMILY TO FAMILY coordinators from Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties, and staff from Baltimore City. Concurrently, FAMILY TO FAMILY technical assistants assisted agency staff with the development of an analytical file representing current and recent caseloads, based on periodic downloads on from the central information system. This file allowed managers considerably improved access to information on open cases, in a format that facilitated analysis and presentation.

Although the longitudinal data generated considerable interest within this committed group, there was not a clear strategy for conveying it to any larger audience of program managers. Given its emergence so late in the initiative, neither was there any opportunity for the analyses to influence the development of FAMILY TO FAMILY implementation strategies. However, the data have been used as the basis for briefings within the Department and to the state legislature. They have also generated further interest in data resources, as evidenced by the incorporation of data-driven decision making into the statewide FAMILY TO FAMILY expansion plan.

## **6.5 Pennsylvania**

Although Pennsylvania lacked a statewide data system, Philadelphia converted to a new and relatively sophisticated data system during the FAMILY TO FAMILY planning year. The data resources available through this system, combined with a high level of skills in data management and analysis at the state level, made it possible for staff there to replicate the longitudinal files and analyses produced by the evaluation team for Philadelphia during the planning year.

Philadelphia has continued to produce longitudinal files in-house, and has used the resulting data extensively in briefings and presentations to agency management, city officials, private providers, and FAMILY TO FAMILY expansion counties elsewhere in the state. However, it does not appear that communications between those charged with producing the data and line supervisors and managers entail interaction that would encourage program staff to become more engaged in using data to monitor performance. This inhibits the use of data in identifying emerging trends (such as declining placements in caretaker homes or increasing length of stay in such placements) and developing programmatic responses to such trends.

## 6.6 Cross-State Assessment

The premise of self-evaluation is that good information is necessary to successfully plan and implement the changes in policy and practice needed to achieve clearly specified and widely endorsed outcomes. Also, it is necessary to have a performance baseline from which to assess improvements and to make mid-course corrections. Two aspects of the experience in FAMILY TO FAMILY reinforce the credibility of these premises. First, improvements in outcomes are indeed possible and some improvements are substantial. Second, in anticipation of such changes, it is essential to invest the time, energy, and financial resources to measure results and to make adjustments in response to them.

It is not begging the point to say that the full impact of FAMILY TO FAMILY is not yet known—it is clear that *some* of its objectives were accomplished in *some* sites and a *few* objectives were not accomplished in *any* site. More important, however, is recognition that a cut-and-dried, once-and-for-all assessment is not possible at this juncture, nor is it appropriate. In many ways, FAMILY TO FAMILY is but one aspect of the constantly changing environment of the child welfare system. The dynamic quality of that environment and of deliberate efforts to improve outcomes for families and children that demands continued commitment to a process for assessing whether those efforts, in fact, are making a difference in outcomes.

Finally, planners and evaluators now have a better understanding of the diverse constraints impinging on reform initiatives and are attempting to adapt models and methods to the complex reality of these initiatives. Similarly, as a result of their experience in FAMILY TO FAMILY, some program managers gained an appreciation of the value of information and the need to create a flow of data to help them develop and implement changes in policy and practice. A number of states and localities involved in the initiative appear to have made a commitment to maintaining a capacity for generating performance data and using it for self-evaluation.