

ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY RESPONSE

Supporting Community-Based Agencies' Responsiveness to
COVID-19 and Future Events That Require Service Adaptation

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Capstone Product Description

I have developed an internal guidance piece for The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the DCF contract administrators who monitor and support contracted agencies who provide family support primary and secondary child abuse and neglect prevention services and programs. This internal guidance piece is a toolkit that outlines possible language additions to be used in the administrative contracting process and subrecipient monitoring processes DCF carries out as a funding pass-through agency.

The components of the toolkit provide a way for contract administrators to attend to new program policy needs that have arisen during COVID-19 for contracted agencies providing different types of in-person programs and services in homes and communities. These language additions and adaptations are intended to operationalize support and technical assistance from contract administrators to community-based agencies as they respond to the current COVID-19 pandemic, and any future similar events that may cause disruption to in-person and in-home family support programs and services.

In 2020 and during the current pandemic, many of these agencies have experienced service suspension, reduction, and need for adaptation. As the COVID-19 public health emergency continues, additional aspects of contracting such as those referenced in the toolkit may be needed to support agencies in being able to respond to this changing situation in timely, effective, and informed ways. These contracting additions will ensure that these emerging needs are planned for and attended to by the administrative side of policymaking in a direct state agency, in order for contracted community-based services and programs to be delivered as much as safely possible now and into the future.

Background and Rationale

The COVID-19 Pandemic has required community-based agencies providing primary and secondary prevention and family support programming to either suspend, reduce, or adapt their services and programs typically delivered in-person and sometimes in-home. This was due to an initial statewide Safe at Home order in the spring of 2020. After this order was lifted, some county public health officials continued a version of this order requiring that some community-based agencies continue to not provide in-person services while other counties did not, resulting in some agencies opening back up to in-person services in some capacity.

In a very short amount of time, agencies shifted services to virtual formats and other alternative delivery methods in order to get critical supplies and services to families during the time the statewide safe at home order was in place. At the same time, these agencies had to quickly respond to move their staff to a remote work environment. All of this required a level of technology infrastructure that may not have been in place for staff. And in many communities, this required a need for technology and broadband resources that not every family had adequate or equitable access to.

Agencies had to quickly learn not only how to deliver services and programs differently, but also what new critical infrastructure was necessary to carry out their programming virtually. This COVID-19 pandemic and experience has created a drastic shift in the context and landscape by which these agencies do their work, and how families experience accessing these services and programs.

This shift is likely to continue in some way even after the current pandemic has ended.

One reason is that this pandemic is not likely to be the last pandemic we experience. And a pandemic may not be the only event we experience that could disrupt these services: An increase in natural disasters and severity of weather events could increase the number of times communities face a situation where similar programs and services are not able to be accessed in person.

Another reason these adapted services may continue is that during this current pandemic, many programs are experiencing unexpected increases in enrollment and participation now that programs and services are offered virtually. Some families are reporting that it is easier to participate. Many agencies are beginning to plan for the possibility that some amount of their programs and services will be delivered virtually even after the pandemic has ended.

The COVID-19 situation has left already vulnerable and at-risk families even more at risk and experiencing even greater needs. This further shows how imperative it is for community-agencies to be able to continue outreach and service provisions during the current pandemic. It emphasizes the importance for these agencies to be able to respond to similar events in the future that disrupt their ability to provide in-person support and programming to families in need and at risk.

All of this points to a need to attend to providing quality, accessible, and effective virtual and remote service delivery moving forward, and to be able to adapt to this delivery in the event of an unexpected service disruption such as a pandemic or natural disaster. Numerous guidance pieces have been developed across the country and from many different stakeholders on how to adapt services to virtual delivery platforms. And many professionals in the field have

formed communities of practice to collaborate around what has and has not worked. In Wisconsin, two examples of this are taking place in the domestic violence prevention community, and in the child abuse and neglect prevention programming community that delivers the evidence-based parent education program called Triple P.

Understanding the lessons learned during COVID-19 can help maintain virtual delivery for the duration of the current pandemic as well as prepare agencies to do this work in the future. This is especially important for the family support and prevention field where little research has yet to be documented about effective virtual delivery of primary and secondary prevention and family support programming such as home visiting. These guidance pieces, the telehealth field, and shared learning opportunities are providing at least some evidence-informed guidance for best practices these agencies can follow.

How an Administrative Policy Response Can Help

One way to support this agency readiness to respond is by attending to response planning through the administrative side of policymaking. Supporting the need to budget for and plan for service adaptation and disruption can happen through administrative policy processes such as the contracting process. Requiring contracted agencies to have a plan in place will support better agency response in the future when the need to adapt services arises. Adding to contract scope of service language, program monitoring plans, and site visit checklists will operationalize these practices and the technical assistance needed to carry out these contractual obligations. Asking response-for-proposals (RFP) and competitive application (RFA) questions about how population's experience navigating services and programs during times when services are delivered virtually, helps assess applicants understanding of virtual service access challenges and barriers in their communities and will elevate this subset of barriers as an

important aspect for community-serving agencies to understand and respond to moving forward.

Why Engage Stakeholders

The need for collaborative shared learning between the agencies providing services, and contract administrators at direct state agencies like DCF (those who carry out the administrative side of policymaking), is the reason why I have developed a series of grantee meetings for the coming contract year as part of this capstone product. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an evolving situation for agencies requiring them to adapt and respond quickly and in short amounts of time. As the pandemic continues to unfold over the next contract year, there will likely be continued need for adaptation and learning. This could result in further need to adapt the toolkit I have created that is based on what has been learning so far. These meetings will be a way for me to gather that further learning and incorporate it into the toolkit.

These meetings will be used to facilitate further iterative shared learning as agencies navigate the next 12 months delivering services while continuing to navigate the current COVID-19 pandemic. These grantee meetings are structured so that I can gain a greater and on-going sense of what the needs are of agencies and how I can further refine the administrative policy language in the toolkit.

Creating actionable and responsive administrative policy will require understanding what infrastructure is needed for agencies like these to deliver these services remotely. It will be important to understand not only what has worked but also what barriers exist that impact virtual delivery of family support services. Equity in access is imperative for agencies to sustain adapted delivery of services and programs to all families even after the pandemic is over. All of August 16th, 2020

this will be able to be shared, learned, and documented throughout this series of grantee meetings, and then incorporated into the tool kit.

What will result from these grantee meetings will be administrative policy processes and language that are informed by and developed by these stakeholder voices who are on the ground doing the work and the collective cumulative experiences throughout the duration of this pandemic. Including gathered information from these grantee meetings will help ensure the policy response mechanisms in the toolkit are usable, supportive and effective. These collaboratively developed administrative policy mechanisms will then be ready for use during the next contracting cycles and subsequent contract cycles moving forward.

Capstone Objectives

One purpose or objective for choosing this capstone product was to take a deeper dive into the administrative side of policymaking to explore the opportunities or levers for impact that exist and that can support responsiveness to situations like a pandemic within community-based agencies. The current COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting impacts on dramatic shifts in how community-based agencies do business, afforded me this practical opportunity to understand how policy can work to support this shift and other program adaptations in different contexts. The resulting product will be able to be used within actual contract administration processes at the DCF when it is appropriate.

Planning, Process and Methods

The process for developing and planning this capstone followed a series of steps and pathways:

- I reviewed more than ten guidance pieces released by stakeholder entities across the family support services system. This began to develop a picture of what needs community-based agencies were experiencing through the first several months of the pandemic. It also showed that there was little need for yet another guidance piece.
- I interviewed: two stakeholders from national evidence-based model consultants working with professionals in Wisconsin and other states, the state Home Visiting policy team for Wisconsin, and three state level associations who support community-based agencies doing this work. These interviews broadened my understanding of what experiences professionals and families have had during the pandemic, including what barriers and challenges both have been facing.
- I reviewed research that currently exists on how to deliver in-person and in-home services virtually. This allowed me to begin to understand what infrastructure is needed to deliver virtual programming, and also what costs may coincide with this infrastructure.
- I reviewed more than five webinars generated by national model developers and associations for family support and prevention programming. These webinars were focused on response to the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting implementing agencies as they adapted service delivery.
- I reviewed existing resources about the equity issues accessing broadband in Wisconsin. This provided context for what challenges and barriers need to be attended to when adapting to virtual services.

- I attended three virtual home visiting grantee meetings as an observer to hear from providers doing the work now. This allowed me to begin to understand what challenges they had been experiencing and what support they are likely to need moving forward. It also influenced my decision to develop the series of grantee meetings to create an iterative process to adapt the administrative policy additions as the current pandemic unfolds, and in partnership with those actually doing the work.
- As I navigated a contract renewal 'season' in April, May, and June of 2020 as a contract administrator, I documented what questions I was getting from contractors as they adapted scopes and budgets for new contracts. I paid attention to what new or increased costs they were needing to budget for, and other changes associated with service delivery adaptation and remote work for staff. This brought to the surface at what points in the contracting process mechanisms existed to support response planning for service disruption.
- I sought out feedback and response from two fellow contract administrators on the toolkit components and grantee meeting series. This helped me understand what toolkit components or grantee meeting series topics I may have overlooked.

The outcomes and results of the steps in this process were used to structure the contract administration toolkit components, and the structure for the grantee meeting series to further inform the toolkit after a full year of response to COVID has been experienced. By creating a policy response tool kit that is based on what is known up to this point from the pandemic provides a resource for any contracting that will take place now. Holding the series

of grantee meetings over the next year of the pandemic will provide opportunities for continued learning and an iterative process that will better inform the policy response toolkit better ensuring its ability to support rather than overburden agencies now and in the future.

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