



Substance Abuse—Challenges and Strategic Solutions



Fargo, North Dakota • September 27–29, 2004

Short Report

BACKGROUND

Since welfare reform passed in 1996, welfare offices nationwide have focused specific efforts on working with families that are difficult to move to self-sufficient employment, such as those presenting the multiple barriers of substance abuse, mental health issues, and/or disabilities.¹ Identification, assessment, and screening for these barriers at the time of intake as well as service integration among systems have helped TANF offices foster effective service delivery for their hard-to-serve caseloads. However, many factors hinder both identification and screening processes as well as service integration and collaboration. For example, clients with substance abuse issues may actively hide or be unwilling to admit their drug use for fear of the implications on their families or becoming involved with the child welfare system. Further, systems change and service integration efforts are commonly stalled by differing mandates between agencies, conflicting philosophies, fixed habits, and attitudinal biases.

NORTH DAKOTA TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REQUESTS

In late 2003, TANF professionals from Cass County, North Dakota requested technical assistance from the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network regarding identification, screening, and assessment tools to assist local TANF caseworkers in devising strategies to assist substance abusing customers find and maintain employment. Although the original TA request broadly addressed substance abuse screening in general, it also included specific concerns about methamphetamine use and identification among TANF clients in Cass County, North Dakota as well as concerns about systems change. The expressed motivation for this original TA request resulted from numerous factors, such as the need for better screening tools in rural areas, clients' unwillingness to divulge substance abuse for a variety of reasons, and the impact on children when there is methamphetamine and other substance abuse in the home.

To fulfill the scope of this TA Request from North Dakota, the Welfare Peer TA Network sponsored a site visit to Cass County which included the performance of a needs assessment, analysis of current protocols, and offer recommendations. Ms. Mary Nakashian, a national expert in the intersection of welfare and substance abuse, provided this technical assistance during early October 2003 and conducted a site visit to

¹ Hercik, J. & Jenkins, S. (2001). "Issue Brief: Co-Occurring Disorders." Caliber Associates.

Cass County from October 13-15, 2003. Ms. Nakashian's extensive professional experience includes fourteen years with the Connecticut Department of Income Maintenance, four years as Executive Deputy Commissioner at New York City's Human Resources Administration, and five years as Vice President and Director of Program Demonstration at The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. The full report from Ms. Nakashian's visit was made available through Welfare Peer TA in December 2003 and can be accessed at: http://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/pdf/north_dakota_full.pdf

John Hougen, the State TANF Director for North Dakota, then made a follow-up TA request to the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network to maintain the momentum generated by Ms. Nakashian's initial visit to Cass County through a statewide technical assistance event. Topics for this event would include: service integration, substance abuse diagnosis and treatment, defining work activities for TANF clients with substance abuse issues, the effects of addiction (e.g., addiction to methamphetamines) on children, how to work with clients with co-occurring mental health and substance abuse concerns, and how to incorporate a whole-family focus into treatment.

In response to Mr. Hougen's request, contract staff of Rivera, Sierra, and Company, Inc. (RSC) and Caliber Associates from the Welfare Peer Technical Assistance Network designed and implemented a statewide Roundtable event that took place in Fargo, North Dakota from September 27-29, 2004. This event, attended by over 40 individuals, brought together regional teams from each of the 8 service regions in North Dakota. In addition to State staff, local regional representatives in attendance included TANF case managers, employment workers from the Jobs Services program, child welfare professionals, substance abuse staff, and mental health clinicians. Also in attendance were presenters Ms. Mary Nakashian, Dr. Sushma Taylor, Executive Director of CenterPoint, Inc., and Mr. John Horejsi, the Federal Project Officer of Welfare Peer TA and representative of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Regional Administrator Thomas Sullivan graciously provided opening remarks and Project Director José Rivera of RSC moderated the event.

During two intensive days filled with workshop sessions, interactive discussions, breakout groups, and presentations on addiction and treatment, participants in the roundtable addressed issues of substance abuse from multiple perspectives and delved into topics such as the impacts of methamphetamines on rural North Dakota, identification and screening, treatment and recovery, and service integration. Regional teams were given the opportunity to work together to devise region-specific action plans. Participants were asked to identify ways that the Roundtable would impact their approach to their work at the individual, agency, and community level. Presentations were offered on topics such as redefining treatment as a work experience, innovative ways to meet countable work requirements, the treatment/self-sufficiency continuum, and new approaches to client-focused services.

Overall, the Roundtable event was a great success, as evidenced by the positive evaluations from participants, the concrete action plans, and the enthusiastic response from John Hougen, heralding the event as "exceptional." The full report from this Welfare Peer TA Event will be available in late October 2004. Questions should be directed to Bradley Myles of Caliber Associates at 703-219-4312 or bmyles@caliber.com.

