



DCFS Needs Portal

Assessing Service Requests and Gaps for Child Welfare Families

Background

Special points of interest:

- Caseworkers overwhelming request psychosocial services for families.
- 17% of Needs Portal requests require housing assistance
- Well-being services (e.g., job assistance) receive the fewest comments from service providers

Parents involved with the child welfare system are often mandated to participate in services. Non-compliance with these service plans may have dire consequences such as removal of children from the home into foster care or terminating parental rights. Recently, the role of access (or lack thereof)



to resources in neighborhoods has been scrutinized as a major factor in the development of health disparities. “Service poor” areas had higher rates of referrals for child welfare investigations and entries into foster care for maltreatment (Freisthler, 2013). Parents are more likely to participate in services when the service is geographically closer (Enano et al., 2014). However, this assumes that services for families involved in the child welfare system have availability to service these families.

Currently, most families learn about possible service providers through traditional paper guides

given to them by caseworkers, which are often quickly out of date as employees change or agencies modify the types of services they provide. Alternatively caseworkers rely on their own personal relationships with in order to help meet the service needs of families.

The types of services and the number of comments they receive provide information on what services are most needed by child welfare populations and identify those types of services where more providers may be necessary to meet the needs of families involved in the child welfare system.

Needs Portal

The DCFS Needs Portal is a web-based intervention for DCFS caseworkers, service providers, and community partners. The primary focus of the Needs Portal is to reduce the length of time families are involved in the child welfare system by providing services more *efficiently* and *effectively*. The Needs Portal allows us to accomplish this goal by connecting DCFS caseworkers to social service agencies and other community partners in real-time.

We achieve this by using a web-based tool where caseworkers can coordinate services through a messaging platform. The innovation in the Needs Portal is that it is not a “static” resource and referral guide that most families involved in the child welfare system are given. Traditional paper guides are often quickly out of date as employees change or agencies modify the services they provide. Oftentimes caseworkers rely on their own personal relationships in order

to help meet the service needs of the families.

Using a web-based system allows agencies to update their availability to assist with a given case in real-time. Thus, in theory, even new caseworkers will be able to serve their families efficiently even with the extensive agency contact network available to more senior caseworkers.

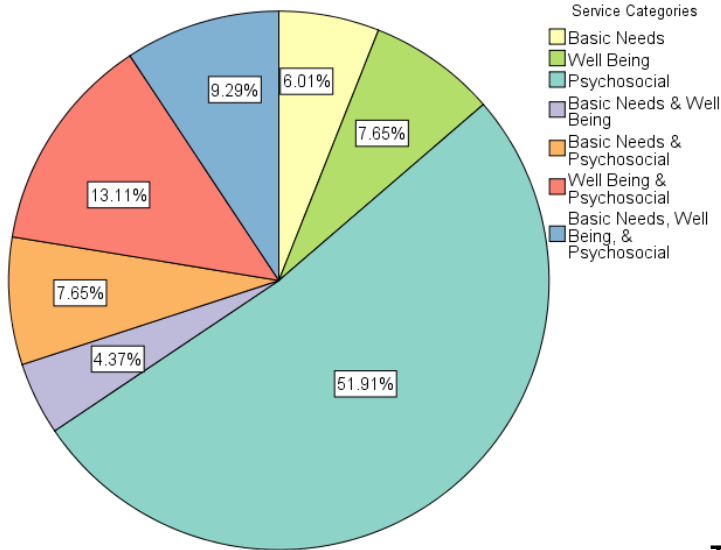
References:

- Enano, S., Freisthler, B., Perez-Johnson, D., & Lovato-Hermann, K. (2014). Evaluating parents in partnership: A preliminary study of a child welfare intervention designed to increase reunification.
- Freisthler, B. (2013). Need for and access to supportive services in the Child Welfare System. *GeoJournal*, 78(3), 429-441.

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Figure 1: Percentage of Requests by Service Categories



Methods

A census of tickets (n = 183) that were closed by February 28, 2015 were included in the current study. Across the closed tickets, there were a total number 610 service categories requests (mean = 3.33, standard deviation = 1.92) and 893 comments (mean = 4.88, sd = 3.22). Service categories were divided into three overall types to denote the relationship to child welfare. These types include basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, housing), family well-being needs (e.g.,

advocacy, immigration, legal aid), and psychosocial needs (e.g., parenting classes, anger management, counseling).

Data were analyzed using one-way ANOVA statistics to compare the three types of services (basic needs, family well-being, and psychosocial) by the number of times the service was requested and the number of comments received to identify unmet service needs.

Findings

Table 1 shows the number and frequency caseworkers requested each service category for the most often requested services in each category type. Table 2 shows the average number of comments per ticket when requesting different service categories. The number of comments significantly differed by overall category ($F(6, 176) = 4.37, p < .001$). Family well-being services, when requested by caseworkers without any other ser-

vice categories, received the fewest number of comments per ticket (mean = 2.43, sd = 0.59). When only basic needs were requested, they received, on average, 3.27 comments (sd = 21.8). Anytime psychosocial categories were request (alone or in combination with basic needs or well-being services) these tickets received about two times the number of comments than those requesting basic needs or well-being services.

Table 1: Percentage of Cases Requesting Service Needs

Service Category	Number of requests	%
Basic Needs		
Critical Household Items	13	7.1
Housing	32	17.5
Family Well-Being		
Child Care/Head Start	17	8.7
Job Assistance and Training	14	7.7
Psychosocial		
Counseling (Adult)	86	47.0
Counseling (Individual/Child)	73	39.9
Domestic Violence	47	25.7
Parenting Classes	75	40.1
Substance Abuse (any type)	35	19.1

Implications

Psychosocial services were the most requested and received the most comments from service providers. Since the social service needs of this population are traditionally psychosocial, it is logical that large numbers of agencies respond and these agencies are able to respond sufficiently to requests.

Basic needs received the second highest number of requests but fewer comments than psychosocial service needs. The exception

within this category is requests related to housing, which regularly received a low number of comments from agency service providers.

Well-being categories (e.g. job training) may promote long-term functioning ; however, the least number of service requests and service provider comments were in this category. Caseworkers may be focused on providing basic needs for families rather than linking to services that may increase self

sufficiency in the long term. The few requests submitted received the lowest number of comments from service providers and may represent an area of service need not being adequately addressed by current community agencies in the Portal.

Table 2: Average Number of Comments by Service Category

Service Category	Comments * mean/(se)
Family Well-Being	2.43(0.59)
Basic Needs & Family Well-Being	2.75 (0.77)
Basic Needs	3.27 (1.04)
Basic Needs, Well-Being, & Psychosocial	4.82 (0.40)
Psychosocial	5.07 (0.27)
Basic Needs & Psychosocial	5.07 (1.04)
Family Well-Being & Psychosocial	6.92 (0.98)
*F (6,176) = 4.37, p < .001	