Michigan Child Placing Network

Executive Summary

Michigan's Children's Placing Network (CPN) helps child placement specialists in county offices identify the best possible foster home placement for a child at imminent risk, due to abuse or neglect.   Placement workers are able to quickly find available placements that will satisfy the needs of the child, by using data from public and private partners that CPN can access.

As part of child welfare reform in Michigan a child-centered, neighborhood-based foster care placement system needed to be developed to replace the rotational "Family Assignment System" used in Wayne County since the 1980s.   The Child Placing Network looks at all homes with open beds, regardless of supervising agency, to find a placement.

Priorities were established for safe, stable out-of-home placements when children could not be maintained safely with birth families. These priorities align fully with the Department of Human Services (DHS)'s child welfare reform in Michigan, emphasizing:

- Placing children with suitable relatives, or if no suitable relatives are available or able, with others familiar to the children (i.e., fictive kin).

- Keeping siblings together.

- Maintaining children in their own neighborhoods and schools.

- Making the first placement the best, most stable placement possible.

Previously 10 percent of children were maintained in their own neighborhoods and 34 percent of sibling groups were maintained during the placements, Now 35 percent of children are maintained in their own neighborhoods and 70 percent of all sibling groups are kept together reaching 99 percent with groups of 2.

CPN was created using information not previously available in one place. It took extensive collaboration across departments and agencies to bring this project to fruition. CPN gathers information from private agencies, the States licensing system, and the States Geographic Information System (GIS). The protective services and foster care workers gather information about the child's needs. Using a web application, the worker enters this information and it is compared to the information about the homes to return a list of best possible matches for the child. Workers then work with the agencies to place the child. This has led to the remarkable improvement in placements.

Description

Michigan's Children's Placing Network (CPN) helps child placement specialists within the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) identify the best possible foster home placement for a child at imminent risk, due to abuse or neglect.   This replaced a rotational assignment system that was based on next agency to get placements to a system that places a child based on their specific needs.

The State and private agencies recruit and license foster homes for the placement of children. The State and each agency maintain their own homes. When the decision is made to remove a child from their birth home, DHS first looks for suitable relatives, and if none are found, then look to place the child in a licensed foster home.

Prior to CPN, placements were completed using a rotational "Family Assignment System" (FAS). With FAS, agencies were on a rotational schedule, and when their turn came up, it was their responsibility to find a home for the child. Very little was known about the child, as the referral form was a one page form, generally describing the need for a foster home placement. Since this was a "must take" system, agencies were often forced to look only where there were vacancies, resulting in siblings being split and children being placed far from their communities.

In contrast, CPN is a child-centered, neighborhood based placement system. CPN combines extensive information that the worker has gathered about the child during their investigation, information from DHS's licensing system, information from the State and private placing agency homes; and data from the States GIS to show workers the best available matches.

For licensing information about a foster home, CPN draws from the Bureau Information Tracking System, which is the database used by the State's Office of Child and Adult Licensing.   This information includes the home address, number of children they can have, ages of children they will take, type of home – family or group, status of the license, sex of children it serves, and types of services it provides. This data is then loaded into the State's Data Warehouse. The address is sent through software to determine the coordinates that are used in the final match process.

In addition to the licensing information, a website was created to allow all agencies to enter more detailed information about the home that is not available elsewhere. This information includes any pets in the home, smokers or not, local school information, current number of available beds, and detailed comments about characteristics of children they will or will not accept. The agencies have the ability to put their homes on hold if they do not want a placement there even if beds are available. The website is then used by the agencies to update the information on the home. This information is sent to our data warehouse nightly.

When removal of a child is being considered, a team decision-making meeting is required and may be attended by birth parents, relatives, caseworkers, the foster family, community representatives, and if appropriate, the child. If the decision is made to remove the child, and a foster home placement is needed, a Child Profile Database (CPD) interview is conducted. This extensive interview compiles not only identifying information about the child, but includes medical, behavioral, mental health, educational and any other special needs the child may have. It also identifies whether there are siblings that need to be placed together, and where children ideally should be placed.

The DHS placement specialist begins the matching process by entering into CPN the address that the child should be placed close to. This could be their home address, school address, a relative's address or any other address that the worker determines. Next, the number of siblings needing to be placed together is entered, including the ages of the youngest and oldest. All of the special needs of the child are also entered, as identified in the CPD interview. When the search is entered, all homes, both public and private, are filtered to match the criteria for the specific child. By combining all public and private agency homes, the small "pool" of homes of an individual agency is significantly increased, dramatically increasing the chances of a positive placement outcome for the child.

The application queries the data warehouse looking for matches between the child's needs, the licensing information, and the agency information. The results are displayed along with the distance (to the .01 of a mile) from the address entered. The specialist has the ability to enter as much or as little of the Child Information criteria to find the match needed. If a search is too restrictive then no matches may be found. If the search is too wide then hundreds of matches could be displayed.

The workers contact the agency responsible for the home that they would like to place the child in and the agency verifies the home is still available. If it is not the workers then select the next match, the agency does not get to substitute a home if the one selected is not available. The agencies now have an incentive to keep the listings updated.

This system has been in place in our largest county, Wayne, since April of 2006 and DHS is in the process of moving it statewide.

Government Benefits

This system aligns with the States child welfare reform emphasizing: keeping siblings together; maintaining children in their own neighborhoods and schools; and making the first placement the best, most stable placement possible. By placing a child within their existing community, children are ensured continuity of school, social contacts and a familiar environment. This approach helps the department meet its goal of minimizing disruption for children during the emotional adjustment of separation from a parent or caregiver.

The implementation of CPN in Wayne County was influential in the decision by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to make Wayne County an "Anchor Site" for Family to Family. This designation will provide Michigan with positive exposure throughout the country as contingents from other states visit to see how the system works.

There is now a strong incentive for the private agencies to recruit, develop, and train foster families that can meet the specific needs of our children, in the communities our children are being removed from. If agencies fail to do so, placements will not be made into their homes. There is no longer a guarantee for a certain percentage of placements.

The State now has the ability to look at details of the individual foster homes across agencies. This information can be used to determine if we have homes to serve the types of children we see coming into the child welfare system. The State can then work with agencies on recruiting the types of homes that are needed.

Establishing the first placement for a child as the best, most stable placement, the trauma of being replaced from one home to another will be reduced, in turn reducing the services needed by the child to address the trauma. If the need does arise to change the child's current placement then CPN is used to find another placement that will meet the needs of the child.

Having the capability of identifying foster homes able to provide specified services, the reliance on congregate care should be reduced, thereby reducing the overall cost of care for the child. The children are placed in a home that can meet their needs eliminating the need, in instances, to provide additional outside services to meet their needs.

The agencies have the ability to enter additional information about the homes that the workers can review prior to contacting them about a placement. This reduces calls to the agencies about possible placements if a comment reveals the placement would not be a good fit.

Using the States established GIS for the address lookup functionality avoided independent coding and data development efforts. The addresses can be matched real time saving the workers time and effort looking up information.

Public Value

Matching a child to a home, results in a smoother transition for the child into foster care. More often than in the past, the child will continue to attend the same school and stay in the same neighborhood.

Sibling groups can be matched to homes that have multiple beds available and meet the group needs. This lessens the disruption to the children, since they are still with siblings.

Foster parents receive better information about the child's needs and are better prepared to care for them. The interview done to determine the needs of the child can be shared with the foster parents so they have current detailed information about the child and their

needs. Foster parents are getting the children they can provide services to and the children are going to foster homes that provide the types of services/support they need to thrive.

The Child placing agencies have more case information to assist them in developing service plans and identifying the resource needs of the family. The agencies are also more aware of the types of homes DHS is matching on and can recruit to better meet these needs. Agencies that recruit homes in the neighborhoods that children are being removed from will have a greater chance of being selected when a placement is needed.

The wait time for placing a child that has been removed has been reduced. Previously the workers would contact an agency and the agency would find a bed for the child. With CPN the workers find the available beds immediately and then contact the agency about a specific placement.

Data on placement stability and reunification will take some time to compile, but the expectation is shorter stays, more stable placements, and higher reunification rates.

Prior to CPN only 10 percent of children were maintained in their own neighborhoods; after CPN this number has nearly quadrupled to 35 percent. The children do not have the additional disruption of moving to a new neighborhood and school.

Sibling groups are being kept together 70 percent of the time, up from 34 percent before CPN. When a sibling group must be split 96 percent of children who are part of a sibling group have been placed with at least 1 other sibling.

Since the implementation of CPN, 99% of sibling groups of 2 have been placed together. Approximately 92% of all sibling groups of 2 or 3 have been placed together.