The Family Preservation and Support Services Program

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Abstract

Two recent issues of The Future of Children have examined programs that support families with young children: the Winter 1993 issue on home visiting and the Winter 1995 issue on the long-term outcomes of early childhood programs. In both issues, the legislation creating the Family Preservation and Support Services Program was discussed as a possible funding source for such programs. This Revisiting article summarizes the key elements of that federal program and discusses some of the challenges states have faced as they have tried to implement the new law. Thus far, the legislation has had only a modest impact on the availability of services, but it has triggered a comprehensive and broad-based planning process that is likely to have lasting benefits.¹

In 1993 the federal government established the Family Preservation and Support Services Program (FPSSP) as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (Public Law 103-66), providing states almost $1 billion over five years to establish preventive family support and family preservation services.² Family support services are typically community-based services designed to increase the strength and stability of families through such activities as parent support groups, home visits, drop-in family centers, and child care. Family preservation services are offered to families at risk for incidents involving child abuse or neglect, or in crisis. They include counseling, respite care, and intensive in-home assistance by parent aides to avert foster care placement or to help the family adjust when children are returned home. This important legislation attempts to make state child welfare systems more responsive to the needs of families and better equipped to intervene with families before they go into crisis.

Total funding under the program is scheduled to grow from $60 million in 1994 to $255 million in 1998. Funds were allotted to states based on the number of children receiving food stamps so estimated state grants for 1995

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varied from a low of $186,726 in sparsely populated states like Alaska and Wyoming to a high of $16,631,924 in California. Additional funds go to tribes, territories, and evaluation. In each state, dollars were awarded to the public child welfare agency responsible for the Child Welfare Services Program (Title IV-B of the Social Security Act). States were encouraged to use the first year for an intensive planning effort before submitting a five-year plan by June 30, 1995.

Provisions of the Legislation
This article examines the significance of this legislation for state child welfare systems and reviews program implementation. While the amount of money allocated toward the FPSSP is fairly small compared with total state spending on child welfare services, the legislation encourages states to use these new dollars to integrate preventive services into treatment-oriented child welfare systems, to improve service coordination within and across state service agencies, and to engage broad segments of the community in program planning at the state and local levels.

Prevention Programming
The legislative expectation is that states will utilize primary prevention services like parent education, family support centers, and child care to help families at risk before they enter the child welfare system. While this expands the traditional jurisdiction of child welfare services, it provides an opportunity to reach families earlier with less intensive and costly interventions. This investment in prevention is especially significant in light of the ballooning caseloads and skyrocketing costs that confront most states’ crisis-oriented child welfare systems.

Comprehensive Service Planning
The legislation requires that each state’s five-year plan describe a continuum of publicly funded child and family services, including family support and family preservation services; child abuse and neglect prevention, intervention, and treatment; foster care; and services to support permanent living arrangements for children. In addition, the plan was to discuss the coordination of these services with related social, health, education, and economic services. The intended effect of the coordination requirements was to streamline participants’ access to services and to ensure that existing services work together for families.

Broad Access to Service Planning
The legislation stipulated that the planning process should include parents and consumers of services, community-based agencies, representatives of local governments, representatives of professional and advocacy organizations, and child welfare agency line staff, administrators, and supervisors. The intent was to make child welfare systems more responsive to families and communities by involving a broad range of stakeholders. Many of these groups have traditionally had little opportunity either to contribute to planning efforts or to influence the design and operation of service programs.

Implementation Directions and Issues
Most states and the District of Columbia began delivering services funded through this program in Fiscal Year 1995. The state plans for 1995 showed that 10 states intended to split their federal dollars equally between family preservation and family support activities, 11 states invested more in family preservation, and 30 emphasized more preventive family support services. Averaging across the states, 44% of the 1995 funds were targeted to family preservation and 56% targeted family support.

Table 1 gives a more detailed look at the specific family support activities paid for with these new funds in the 31 states and the one federal district that could provide such specific information statewide. (In others, the service mix is determined at the local level.) Parent education or skill training is the most prevalent family support activity, followed by family centers and home visiting programs.

In practice, the implementation of the program has been shaped by the program
requirements described above in some unanticipated ways.

**Limited Funding**

The FPSSP legislation requires significant changes in the way child welfare departments plan and deliver services even though the funding it provides is a small fraction of states’ child welfare budgets. One positive consequence of that limited funding is that states have integrated FPSSP dollars with other funding sources, strengthening the coordination of FPSSP with preexisting services and, perhaps, enhancing program sustainability.

**Multilevel, Broad-Based Planning**

To involve community organizations and residents in the design and delivery of services, most states gave responsibility for service planning and implementation to county governments or local planning and governance boards. Typically, state-level planning...
bodies set the program goals, undertook a statewide needs assessment, determined the process for disbursing funds, and identified or created local planning bodies. The local groups conducted needs assessments and developed strategic service plans in their own communities. While the two-step process enhanced local capacity to plan for social service delivery, it delayed program implementation, and there has not yet been the proliferation of models and experience that might have been expected.

In many states, the voices of consumers of services, community residents, advocates, and local groups were heard in the planning process through their participation in statewide and community-specific needs assessments, advisory or steering committees, and focus groups. That diverse input often led to a broadening of the program’s focus beyond child welfare as traditionally defined. Communities, when asked, identified such concerns as jobs, housing, crime, and safety. Increased expenditures on broad family support services frequently resulted, as these services tend to be well-suited to address such communitywide problems.

The Success of FPSSP
If FPSSP is to be judged strictly by the degree to which it has made family preservation and support services more available, then results are disappointing. Implementation so far has been slow, and many of the programs that have been implemented are primarily expansions or replications of existing models. If, however, success is defined by the program’s broader effects on child welfare and social service systems, then results are encouraging. Under FPSSP, state and local partnerships have emerged that should enhance the responsiveness of services and systems to local needs, and an infrastructure has been developed at the state and local levels to promote family-centered systems.

Having gone through a needs assessment process and spent a year on planning for comprehensive, integrated services, the FPSSP planning bodies have skills and an agenda for change that can be applied far beyond the confines of the FPSSP. Participation in advisory bodies and needs assessments gave communities and consumers an avenue through which to shape policy. While the development of these planning structures takes more time than was envisioned in the legislation, it is this aspect of the program that is likely to have the most lasting impact and produce the most benefits for children and families.

1. The Family Resource Coalition in partnership with the University of Iowa School of Social Work and the National Indian Child Welfare Association operates the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. This article evolves from the Resource Center’s technical assistance to federal regional offices, state governments, and localities on the implementation of the Family Preservation and Support Services Program.


