Ramsey County Ending Racial Disparities Project

The issue:

Children of color, especially African American and American Indian children, are disproportionately represented in the child protection system and in out of home placements.

Ramsey County Community Human Service Department’s Family and Children’s Services Division’s Vision for Children: Strong Families with Healthy Children Within a Safe, Stable Environment

The Ramsey County Ending Racial Disparities Project is a multi-year, multi-phase project designed to reduce racial disparities in the child protection and out of home placement systems. The Project is led by the Ramsey County Community Human Service Department’s (RCCHSD) Family and Children’s Services Division.

The factors that drive the issue of racial disparities are not simple. It is not about what any one person has done or not done. Rather it is about years of multiple societal issues, policies and practices affecting certain families over time in a way that results in poor outcomes. The emphasis of this project is not to find fault or place blame but to work together as a system and community to find ways that yield better outcomes for children and their families.

The Project’s primary strategy is for players in the “systems” to partner with the four major racial/ethnic communities in Ramsey County (African American, American Indian, Hispanic/Latino and Hmong/Southeast Asia), especially the African American and American Indian communities where the disparities are the greatest, and to identify and address issues that are contributing to these existing disparities. This Project draws upon the wisdom of the different racial/ethnic communities and the professionals working in the systems to reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities. By creating working partnerships we can develop a common vision and understanding of what safe families are, and together work to keep children safe within their families and within their communities.

The first three phases of the Ending Racial Disparities are:
1. Planning – educating the Steering Committee about the extent of the disparities, how they developed over time and working with Cultural Consultants to develop a plan to connect and work with their respective racial/ethnic community to reduce the existing racial disparities.

2. Making Connections- utilizing the Cultural Consultants as liaisons to their respective communities and gathering information about each racial/ethnic community’s perspective and their ideas on how to reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities. Connecting with staff within the systems to increase their awareness and understanding of the disparities and how they developed and seek their ideas on how to reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities.

3. Implementation – with each racial/ethnic community, developing, piloting and implementing strategies they and staff in the systems believe will reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities.

The Project is currently in its second phase and has begun work in the third phase, implementing some strategies developed as a result of the work with community members and child protection system staff.

Project Activities

1. Developing partnering relationships with the recognized and emerging leaders from each of the four primary racial/ethnic communities (African American, Hmong, Hispanic/Latino and American Indian) in Ramsey County.
The Project’s Cultural Consultants have conducted Focus Groups or Talking Circles within their respective communities. The purpose of these Focus Groups/Talking Circles has been to educate each community about the existing racial disparities, find out from each communities perspective what works in the child protection system and what needs improvement and get their input on how or what Ramsey County should do differently or better to decrease the racial disparities and keep children safe.

In addition to Focus Groups/Talking Circles with recognized and emerging leaders from each racial/ethnic community, a Focus Group was held with African American parents who had received child protection services and a Talking Circle was held with American Indian families who had also been involved in the child protection system. The parent Focus Group/Talking Circle was limited to these two racial/ethnic communities because they are dramatically over represented in the child protection and out of home placement systems. The purpose of these two meetings was to find out from past clients what worked well, what needed improvement and what could have kept them out of the child protection system in the first place. These meetings were facilitated by the Cultural Consultants from the parents’ racial/ethnic community. The themes and experiences of these parents are attached. Both groups of parents expressed a desire to continue to meet and are working on ways they can contribute back to their communities and what they can do to increase the safety of children within their communities, both neighborhood and racial/ethnic.

2. Educating professionals involved in all aspects of the child protection and out of home placement systems about the existing racial disparities and institutional racism.

The Project has provided multiple sessions of the “Understanding and Dismantling Racism” workshops conducted by the Tri-Council Coordinating Commission staff of the Minnesota Coalition Anti-Racism Initiative. RCHHSD Family and Children’s Services Division staff were required to attend the full day training session. In addition, several staff members from the Saint Paul School District, Ramsey County Attorneys Office, Saint Paul Police Department, Ramsey County Sheriff’s Department and the Ramsey County Court’s Guardian ad Litem Program and Special Administrator’s Office attended the full day sessions as well.

In order to reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities, all professionals working with families involved in the child protection and out of home placement systems need to understand institutional racism and its impact on families of color.

Ramsey County utilizes community-based agencies in its work with families involved in these systems. In order to increase these agencies effectiveness with families of color, a full day Understanding and Dismantling Racism workshop was held for the management staff from these agencies, and a half day workshop, presented twice, was held for the front line staff who work with the families. These staff will continue to be included in training sessions designed to increase staff awareness of the issues and to increase their abilities to work cross culturally with families.

Other training sessions designed to increase the knowledge and skill levels of the professionals involved in the child protection and out of home placement systems were held. The focus of these training sessions was to discuss the importance of addressing the existing racial disparities, to provide an historical perspective on the issue and to increase staffs’ understanding of institutional racism.

Other training and staff development activities include:

- Dialogue Sessions with Cultural Consultants
- A Day with Dr. Jaiya John
- Understanding Racism and Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System – an Historical Perspective, presented by Dr. Carol Wilson Spigner
- Small Group/Unit Discussions, including viewing and discussing videotapes on racial identity (Knowing Who You Are) and institutional racism.
- Cultural Bias Awareness Training presented by Robert O’Connor

Further training sessions and a staff development plan will be developed based on the training needs identified by staff attending the past training sessions.
3. **Conducting Focus Groups or Talking Circles with the professionals involved in the child protection and out of home placement systems.**

   Race/ethnic specific Focus Groups and Talking Circles were held with all RCCHSD staff working in the child protection and out of home placement systems. Staff were required to participate in a Focus Group or Talking Circle. These Focus Groups/Talking Circles were conducted by the Project’s Cultural Consultants who compiled the results and shared their findings with the Project’s Steering Committee. A follow-up Focus Group/Talking Circle was held and staff attendance at those was voluntary. As a result there were fewer staff participating in them. The purpose of these Focus Groups/Talking Circles was to ask staff to identify what child protection does well, get their ideas on how the existing racial disparities could be reduced and eliminated, and to find out what kind of supports they need to do their job.

   Focus Groups were also held with the School Resource Officers and Family Violence and Sex Crimes Units of the Saint Paul Police Department, investigators from the Ramsey County Sheriff’s Department, staff and volunteers from the Guardian ad Litem’s Office, the “CHiPs” Judges from the Second Judicial District (Ramsey County) and school social workers and nurses from the Saint Paul Public Schools. The purpose of these Focus Groups/Talking Circles was to educate the participants on the existing racial disparities, ask them what they do well as part of their job function to protect children, get their ideas on how to reduce and eliminate the existing racial disparities and to find out what supports they need to do their job well.

4. **Researching proven, effective, or “best” practices that have either reduced racial disparities or kept children safely in their homes or within their communities.**

   Thus far, through this project, we have discovered that Ramsey County already uses some of the “best practices” for keeping children safely in their homes or within their communities. Family Group Decision Making (FGDM), which enlists the family’s extended family members and support systems to develop a plan to safely care for the family’s children and address the safety concerns and risks, was first implemented in Ramsey County in 1996. Training on the FGDM model was first presented in 1994. Over the years the use of FGDM has increased due to the availability state funding specifically for FGDM. RCCHSD has adapted the model and conducts Family Case Planning meetings using the concepts of FGDM, and holds 7-Day Meetings with Parents and Foster Parents within seven days of a child being placed in a foster home. The purpose of the 7-Day Meetings is to get the foster parents and child’s parents working together to address the safety concerns and risk to the child.

   In addition, RCCHSD’s Child Protection Intake and Program Managers and their Supervisors have worked together and developed a new Child Protection Practice Guide that focuses on working with families from a “strength-based” perspective. The goal of this work is to increase the family’s ability to safely parent their children. A national consultant was hired to assist in the development of this Practice Guide and the implementation of the practices.

5. **Collaboration with Bruce Vento Elementary School**

   One activity that became a part of the Ending Racial Disparities Project was the placement of an early intervention social worker from RCCHSD’s Family and Community Partnership Program (FCP) at the East Side Family Center’s Bruce Vento Elementary School site. The primary purpose of this placement was to intervene early with the “problem families” that school staff identified, assist them with any family crises that were affecting them and their child’s education, assist them in “navigating” the educational system (most of the parents have a child that was identified as EBD and in the school’s Level 5 EBD program) and to teach them how to interact effectively with school staff. At the same time the FCP social worker worked with school staff to help them change their behaviors with the families, not overwhelm them with many demands and interactions, and to help them understand what was happening in the family’s life. The FCP social worker began working part-time out of the East Side Family Center’s Bruce Vento Elementary School site Spring, 2006. This work has proven to be beneficial to families as well as the school and the FCP social worker’s hours at Vento Elementary were increased Fall, 2006. This strategy will be monitored and continued to be evaluated during the 2006-2007 school year to determine the impact it has on both student achievement and child maltreatment.
reports from the school. It is the Project’s belief that assisting families early to connect them to the support systems they need to care for their children safely will keep them out of the child protection system and improve their child(ren)’s educational achievement.

6. Increasing Community Capacity to Support Families
   The Ending Racial Disparities Project is working with community and agency leaders on Saint Paul’s East Side to enhance the existing network of community supports for families. Currently there are many community agencies that provide emergency/crisis and supportive services to families living on the East Side. These agencies include many culturally and linguistically specific agencies. However, many families are unaware of their existence as well as the existence of informal supports available through churches, Block Clubs, Parks and Rec, etc. RCCHSD has convened monthly meetings of these agencies to strengthen and build the capacity of the current community agency network so families can become connected to the formal and informal support systems they need to raise their children safely and ensure educational success for their children.

Funding
   Funding for the Ending Racial Disparities Project has been received from the following:
   - Otto Bremer Foundation
   - Bush Foundation
   - Saint Paul Foundation
   - Mardag Foundation
   - F. R. Bigelow Foundation
   - Ramsey County Community Human Services Department

Ending Racial Disparities Steering Committee
   The Ending Racial Disparities Project Steering Committee consists of representatives from the agencies and organizations involved in the child protection and out of home placement systems. These agencies and organizations are:
   - Ramsey County Community Human Services Department
   - Merrick Community Services
   - Ramsey County Attorney’s Office
   - Ramsey County Public Defender’s Office
   - Second Judicial District Court
   - Guardian ad Litem’s Office
   - Ramsey County Sheriff’s Department
   - Saint Paul Police Department
   - Saint Paul Public Schools
## Ramsey County Child Abuse and Neglect Reports

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## Ramsey County Children in Out of Home Placement
(excludes Shelter Placements)

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