

Using Comprehensive Family Assessments  
to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes  
Ramsey County Community Human Services &  
University of Minnesota School of Social Work  
St. Paul, Minnesota

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# Comprehensive Family Assessment Intake Baseline Addendum: Summary of Cultural Advisory Group Findings

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## **Background**

The Comprehensive Family Assessment (CFA) project represents a partnership between Ramsey County Community Human Service Department (hereby referred to as Ramsey County) and an evaluation team from the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW). The goal of the project is to develop, implement, and evaluate practices consistent with the *Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines for Child Welfare* (2005) developed by Patricia Schene in response to findings from the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) process.

The importance of culture for family experiences and outcomes throughout the human service systems had been recognized by Ramsey County prior to the formation of the Comprehensive Family Assessment Project. Responding to an increasingly diverse service population, as well as findings that racial disparities existed across several service delivery areas, Ramsey County established a goal of eliminating racial and culturally based disparities for its clients and employees. In 2005 Ramsey County developed an Anti-Racism Initiative aimed at addressing racial disparities prevalent throughout areas of the county's human services programs. This initiative led to the formation of an Anti-Racism Leadership Team, six workgroups to develop and implement strategies of change across the organization/institution level, and nine service team workgroups to develop and implement strategies for eliminating racial disparities in the areas of adult mental health, chemical dependency, CADI/TBI (Community Alternatives for Disabled Individuals/Traumatic Brain Injury) waiver programs, family support, child protection, children's mental health and delinquency, intellectual and developmental disabilities, adult

protection (elderly/vulnerable adults), homeless/low income and childcare. To build on the groundwork laid by the Anti-Racism initiative, cultural focus groups were formed to assist in the development and implementation of the CFA practice model in child protection units.

During Phase 1 of the CFA project, evaluators examined current child welfare practice behaviors to begin to identify changes in practice over time that were associated with CFA practice implementation. During the baseline study, the Comprehensive Family Assessment (CFA) team worked to understand the ways in which child welfare practice specifically addressed culture prior to the implementation of the CFA model. In order to develop an understanding of how culture is (and should be) incorporated into child welfare practice, Ramsey County enlisted Full Circle in reaching out to families. As cultural consultants, Full Circle assisted in creating a space for families to share their experiences and contribute to the development and refinement of a culturally appropriate CFA practice model. The use of cultural consultants also allowed researchers to gather culturally specific feedback from families in order to better understand their experiences with the child welfare system.

## **Methods**

Data for this summary was collected from participants in culturally-specific focus groups led by cultural consultants Judie Cutler and Sam Grant of Full Circle Community Institute, Inc. Participants in the focus groups were parents and caregivers who had experienced Ramsey County child protection services. In addition to providing summaries of focus group feedback by the cultural consultants, participant members wrote, developed and performed vignettes based on their collective experiences as families involved with

Ramsey County child protection. These vignettes were performed for the Ramsey County Comprehensive Family Assessment Advisory Group, local non-profit agency personnel, and University of Minnesota Title IV-E child welfare scholars, faculty and staff.

Written reports from the cultural advisory groups for the American Indian and African American groups were provided to the University of Minnesota evaluation team and these written summaries, along with evaluator observations of the vignette performances, were compared to interview questions developed by the evaluation team for a family interview portion of the Comprehensive Family Assessment evaluation to assess similarity of themes. Although the family interview portion of the CFA evaluation included some questions about culture, the interview data lacked substantive information about the level of cultural responsiveness provided to families involved with Ramsey County. (For example, the family interview instrument included only three questions specifically regarding race and culture. Families were asked to 1) define culture, 2) share a little bit about their own culture, and 3) self-identify their race. The family interview instrument also asked participants to rank the degree to which their worker respected their culture.) The written summaries and vignettes provided rich additional information from the families' perspective of being involved with Ramsey County child protection.

Themes from the cultural group feedback and the family interview instrument include the importance of the relationship with the child protection worker; the degree to which the worker understood how difficult it was to have children removed from their care; the loss of the parent's rights to make decisions about their children while in out-of-home placement; the degree to which the worker's expectations of the parent were reasonable; the timeliness of service provision, and the degree to which the family felt the

worker respected the family's culture, traditions and beliefs. The following sections summarize these themes from the African American and American Indian advisory group feedback and vignette performances. Each subheading in quotes represents a question from the family interview instrument that corresponded to feedback from the cultural group. The African American and the American Indian cultural advisory groups were facilitated by separate cultural consultants and each group process was unique; therefore the following summaries may not include feedback from both groups. It is also important to note that due to the desire of the CFA team to protect confidentiality and to allow for full expression of participants, only aggregate meeting notes were provided to evaluators. It is unknown whether sentiments presented in the following narrative are representative of the full group of participants, a majority of participants, or a few participants who were able to express their opinions freely.

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## Experiences with Ramsey County Child Protection Services

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### **The relationship with the child protection worker**

**One of the major findings that came out of the cultural group meetings was that there is an association between the quality of a worker's relationship with the family and the amount of cultural respect and sensitivity that is exhibited by the worker.** The cultural consultant for the African American parents expressed that "getting a good worker right away is perceived as the key to having a good experience versus a bad experience." The African American focus group termed it "a game of roulette when it comes to who their worker is" and that "getting a good worker makes a big difference in terms of outcomes."

The importance of the relationship between a worker and the family begins with respect. The African American group emphasized that “a good worker goes about building a relationship with families first, then lets them know the rules of the process, and partners with them to establish an efficient route through the process, and makes available resources to improve the process of family strengthening, where needed.” In the vignette created by the African American group, workers were portrayed as failing to return phone calls from families, and withholding information about the investigation or about the wellbeing of their children if the children were removed from their custody.

*“My worker understands how hard it is to get your kids taken away”*

The American Indian group participants felt that **workers were not sensitive to how difficult it is for a parent to have their children removed from their home**. The group members felt that **alternatives to taking their children were not presented**, echoing the African American participants who stated workers did not come with alternatives to taking children out of the home. American Indian participants also described being coerced into signing papers in order to have their children returned to them, although signatures were not necessary for the return of their children. In the vignette written and performed by the African American families, Ramsey County workers for these families did not show empathy with the family’s fears, worries or concerns about having their children removed. In the vignette, one family expressed concern that their child was being neglected and abused in the foster home only to have these concerns minimized and dismissed by the worker. The family felt that the worker was unsympathetic to their fears about their child’s safety and well-being. The African American group suggested that when Ramsey County child protection workers first

contacts families, workers should come to their first meeting with knowledge about culturally-grounded alternatives to removing children from the home.

*“My right to make decisions about my children has been respected”*

In addition to the lack of understanding and empathy over how difficult it was for parents to have their children removed, **families also expressed that their rights to make decisions about their children were not respected.** Parents involved in the cultural groups had many concerns about the care that their children received while in out-of-home placements. Parents and family members did not feel they were able to make decisions about the care their children received while in foster care, especially regarding issues such as diet and other cultural aspects. American Indian group members stated that the placement option chosen by the Ramsey County worker was seldom what the parent would have chosen if they had been involved in the placement decision. The American Indian group also stated that children’s diets changed while in foster care and some children gained weight that the child was not able to lose upon reunification. The African American group also mentioned their children’s diets changed while in out-of-home care as did discipline, rules and norms about accepted behavior. The African American group stated “care should be taken to support children by respecting the cultural assets they bring with them. For example, know their food preferences, how they go about spending time...the system must be about the well-being of the children and this requires honoring them culturally.”

In general, both the African American families and the American Indian families felt their rights were not honored. The African American group shared that many parents were not informed of their rights as parents at the beginning of the child protection process. The



American Indian group stated that they were not informed of their legal rights or given opportunities to learn about their rights. Many stated they had to find legal support on their own and most stated they found legal support in other counties. Parents were repeatedly asked to sign papers they did not understand and were falsely told by workers that not signing would jeopardize their ability to keep or regain custody of their children.

*“My worker’s expectations of me are reasonable”*

The African American group shared that **interactions with Ramsey County child protection started out “adversarial from the inception” and that county workers would threaten the parents or caregivers and used their power in manipulative ways.** The families also stated that workers had higher expectations for their behaviors than they did for foster families. For example, one mother reported being expected to lose weight in order to regain custody of her child, as the child protection worker felt the parent’s weight made her unable to effectively supervise her children. However, the parent discovered that the foster parent was also overweight and when the parent went to visit the child at the foster home, the foster parent’s weight prohibited her from answering the door. The child protection worker had higher caregiving standards for the African American parent than they had for the white foster parent.

*“My worker gets me necessary services in a timely manner”*

The African American **families shared in the focus groups that they did not always know about programs or resources that were available to them, especially those that were close to them geographically. The families also stated that they were aware there were not enough supports within their communities, especially culturally appropriate services and supports.** Both groups gave examples of services

that were either not available or provided to them through Ramsey County. The African American group members stated that the Cultural Wellness Center, an asset this group identified in the African American community, defines disease as “the loss of culture, loss of community, isolation and alienation.” According to the Cultural Wellness Center, a “return to culture” is “the keystone of empowerment and inner transformation of families and communities.” The African American group identified faith-based communities as their most helpful institutional source of support but reported that these are often not considered by the county.

*“My worker respects my culture”*

The focus group participants had a lot to say about how they felt their child protection worker handled their culture. Members of the American Indian group stated **they felt they were seen as “insignificant – as in zero” in the eyes of Ramsey County because of their race. They stated they felt disrespected and “put down” by their workers.** The American Indian families stated they believe that “whites and Asians get the best treatment and service from Ramsey.” American Indian families perceive that Latinos get the next best treatment, African Americans are “close to the bottom” and “Indians are always on the bottom.” They stated the ignorance and misunderstanding of their people go further than the child protection worker and that attorneys and judges also needed to learn about ICWA and the rights of American Indians. They also stated that “Natives need to learn about their own rights as Native people.”

Participants in the African American group expressed that African American culture is “a blend of enduring cultural attributes (both specific...and general) from Africa and long-term traditional family and community norms with strong regional variation.” The

African American focus group members emphasized that Ramsey County child protection workers need to have knowledge of culturally grounded alternatives, especially with regard to removing children from the home. The African American group also stated that because of the legacy of racism, many African American families have become removed from their culture and no longer have a sense of what their culture is. They suggested that because culture and race are both sensitive issues, and because of this loss of culture, workers should approach the issue with respect and “use appreciative questions to draw out families’ stories.”

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## Conclusions & Recommendations

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It is clear from the summary presented above that much work remains to be done in terms of developing and implementing a child protection practice model that fully meets the needs of the African American and American Indian population served by Ramsey County Child Protection. It is also clear that additional opportunities for personal and professional growth of child protection workers as it pertains to the inclusion of cultural factors in case planning is warranted. Although families shared many negative experiences of being involved in Ramsey County Child Protection, they were also quite interested in assisting the county develop a more culturally-based practice approach. For example, members of the African American focus group proposed several recommendations that they believe would expand the work of Ramsey County’s Anti-racism initiative in the area of child protection services. These recommendations include:

- Develop an asset-map of culturally grounded resources in the diverse communities impacted by out of home placements
- Include faith-based institutions as resources

- Develop a policy on parents' rights and implement a policy where this information is shared with the family at the first interaction
- Train staff and other stakeholders, such as the county attorney's office, police departments and the family courts about parents' rights
- Develop annual benchmarks for implementing anti-racism goals and involve parents on the advisory group as co-leaders in the agenda setting and implementation.
- Involve the parents on the advisory groups to facilitate workshops on racism and culture
- Honor the child's culture, especially when transferring them to out-of-home placements.

Involvement from parents in the culturally-specific advisory groups could be implemented in each of the recommendations developed by members of the African American focus group. Members of these groups have offered to perform their vignettes for Ramsey County child protection staff and management. These vignettes could be performed for other involved stake holders such as community providers, the county attorney's office, family court judges and the police departments. A "Parent's Bill of Rights" could be developed by the cultural advisory groups to be distributed to all families during their first interaction with a Ramsey County child protection worker.

Through its Anti-racism initiative and the input from the cultural advisory groups, Ramsey County has taken steps to address the issue of disparities in its child welfare services. Ramsey County is unique in its commitment of soliciting input and recommendations from the families most affected by these disparities. These findings and recommendations from the African American and American Indian focus group members can inform and improve Comprehensive Family Assessment practice as a culturally-

grounded practice model that is sensitive and respectful toward a diverse spectrum of families.

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