

Collaborative Adventures



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Family Involvement Grants:

The Long and Winding Path to True Family Leadership within Systems of Care

By: Chris Cook

One of the values of Systems of Care that sets it apart from many other practice models is true family involvement at all levels. Families not only drive the planning process for their child and family teams, but they are strongly encouraged to participate in system level issues such as developing policies for their systems of care, determining which outcomes should be measured and reported to the governance board, and hiring of system of care staff. Families are also encouraged and empowered to lead their own support groups. For anyone who has attempted to develop a group of any kind from the ground up, you know how difficult this can be. To make matters even more challenging, family involvement is often an afterthought as far as funding is concerned. System of care advocates realized this in 2007. There was a groundswell of family involvement as a result of the numerous systems of care developing around the state. DMHA decided to invest in the family involvement movement, and allocated "seed funding" to family involvement efforts attached to systems of care around the state of Indiana.

Communities that obtained this seed funding, proposed utilizing the money in vastly different ways. Some communities focused on their monthly family led support groups. Others utilized the funding to further level the playing field in their communities by offering stipends to family leaders for taking part in system of care governance meetings, or leading family support group meetings.

In order to stay true to the family driven philosophy, DMHA contracted with the Family Action Network of Lake County to manage the funds and provide technical assistance for family leaders and groups in communities throughout Indiana. The structure of the family involvement grants now includes a two-year funding cycle. The first year includes a maximum of \$3,500 and the second year funding is for \$1,500. Nancy Cloonan of the Family Action Network states, "The grant allows each group to be very creative in how they will spend their money while following the guidelines that have been set by DMHA. There is money allotted for attending conferences, System of Care quarterly meetings, advisory meetings, and advertising for family support group meetings by way of flyers, brochures and newsletters. Groups will be able to help with transportation, child-care, snacks, and incentives to help families attend these meetings".

Kathy Nichols is the family leader for "Visions of Hope", the family support group in Harrison County. Kathy states "The grant has provided the means for us to put together folders for system of care families that introduce them to our support group. We also gave folders to system partners so they can give them to families who are potential candidates for the support group". Funds also can be utilized to enhance meetings once families are there. Kathy says, "We've used the grant to provide food and beverages at our meetings. Gas cards, gift cards, and various prizes have been given to families as incentives to attend meetings. The grant has also allowed us to start a group library. We believe that knowledge empowers us. The more knowledge we have the better we can advocate for our VERY SPECIAL kids and our families." In true system of care fashion, the idea that family involvement is crucial is not isolated to families, or those serving them directly. Kevin Moore, Bureau Chief of Children's Services with DMHA states, "In the same fashion as the state provided funding for system of care start up costs, these grants demonstrate DMHA's commitment to recognize the importance of family support and involvement in the care of their children at all SOC levels."

How many child and family service systems can you think of that put so much power, and money, in the hands of those being served? By allowing families to assist in the governance of their system of care overall, and manage their own support efforts, we are sticking with our most basic practice model that has proven so effective: the wraparound process. When the four phases of wraparound (Engagement, Plan Development, Plan Implementation and Transition) are applied

to family support efforts, it ensures that families have a voice, take part in decision making, drive the development of their groups, and are preparing to stand on their own. A lot of support and coaching is needed while ENGAGING families in the system of care. During the PLANNING phase of how to grow family involvement within the soc, families begin to assert themselves. During the IMPLEMENTATION of the plan, families are encouraged to succeed and overcome barriers as they see fit with the support of the entire community. And during TRANSITION, many family groups become completely self sufficient and independent. The family involvement grants are designed to help families down this path.