



Project SOARS Partners with Local Agencies to Help Young Children Reach New Heights

If you are the parent of an infant and begin to be concerned about potential delays in your child's development, it can be a harsh realization of the challenges that may lie ahead.

The Sacramento County Office of Education (SCOE) has a long and successful history of serving children in Sacramento County, particularly children with disabilities, from birth through age five. In January 2014, SCOE received a grant from First 5 Sacramento for a pilot program focused on supporting children with potential developmental delays and/or disabilities. Project SOARS (Screening, Outreach, and Referral Services) targets families in transitional and permanent supportive housing—those at high risk due to generational poverty and lack of access to services—and uses a strategic approach to conduct developmental screenings for children under the age of five. Referrals, follow-up, and parent education are provided to families who need them.

Service integration and inter-agency coordination make Project SOARS work. The program offers education and outreach through a collaboration with social service agencies, permanent and transitional supportive housing programs, and social workers from the Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services. Lutheran Social Services of Northern California, a member agency of Lutheran Services in America is one of the partners benefiting from this collaboration.

“Due to our initial success, we'd love to see this scale and grow, benefiting more communities,” said Carol Roberts, Lutheran Social Services of Northern California CEO.

Project SOARS family advocates offer voluntary developmental screenings for children from infancy through age five. The screenings help identify children's strengths as well as any areas where they may need more support. Family advocates partner with housing program staff to engage parents who often have reasons to hesitate in reaching out for services. Because the services are offered in a nonjudgmental, easily accessible way, parents are more willing to participate.

“Early intervention can have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn new skills as well as reduce the need for costly interventions over time. Few services, however, are available to children with atypical diagnosis, yet have critical needs,” said Sacramento County Supervisor, Phil

Serna, chairman of First 5 Sacramento. “Thanks to Project SOARS, hard to reach families receive one-on-one services early on to detect developmental delays and mitigate challenges associated with these delays.”

Funding for Project SOARS is provided by the First 5 Sacramento Commission, which uses Proposition 10 (tobacco tax) funds to support the healthy development of children up to the age of five. Research shows that 90 percent of a child's brain develops in the first five years and what parents and caregivers do during these years to support their child's growth will have a meaningful impact throughout life. In the last year, First 5 Sacramento distributed approximately \$14 million in Prop 10 revenue to programs and services that meet local needs, including funding for Project SOARS. Every county in California has a First 5 Children and Families Commission providing unique local services for that county.

Project SOARS allows families access to services in the comfort of their own homes. Through home visits and agency office space visits, family advocates conduct developmental screenings. The project implements a targeted and strategic approach to conduct developmental screenings and facilitate referrals.

“The high percentage of children identified with a potential delay highlights the importance of conducting early screenings for children at risk and their families who are often isolated and lack access to resources. Providing access to early intervention services is critical and has a tremendous impact on changing a child's developmental trajectory,” said Nancy Herota, SCOE director of School Readiness.

The advocates help families develop a Family Action Plan to provide ongoing home visits and support. The advocates help ensure that families follow through with formal assessment appointments and access comprehensive services. In the initial six-month implementation phase in Sacramento County, family advocates conducted nearly 400 home visits, developed 73 family actions plans, and made 139 referrals.

Based on the results of the developmental screenings, the family advocates work closely with parents and guardians to ensure that they stick with the process to determine eligibility for early intervention services. In the first six months

See SOARS on page 37

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ATTORNEY BRUCE A. YOUNG OF NEW YORK

children’s advocacy center shall be audio-recorded or video-recorded.”

The National Children’s Advocacy Center published a report in 2011 entitled *Forensic Interviewing Practices in Children’s Advocacy Centers: 2009 Data*.⁴ It notes that 89.5 percent of child advocacy centers (CAC) responded that they record forensic interviews; 10.5 percent responded they did not. Of those that responded that they did record forensic interviews, 95 percent responded that all interviews were recorded; only 5 percent responded that they did not record all interviews.

When CACs were asked if they were mandated to record forensic interviews by state statute, of the 229 respondents, 42 (18.3%) responded “yes” while 187 (81.7%) responded “no.”

Attorney Bruce A. Young of New York asserts that “when judges, attorneys for children, defense lawyers and prosecutors are forced to rely on the subjective opinions of what happened in the interview, we are reduced to second guessing the reliability of the investigator’s subjective motives instead of examining the more objective recording of the verbatim questions, answers and body language of the subject and questioner. Note taking is plagued with inaccurate, revised, delayed, edited recording, and failures to preserve contemporaneous notes.”

There are numerous benefits of codifying current practice into statute, the most prominent being that, for legal purposes, the statute becomes a key indication of the standard of care. Such standards play a decisive role in determining whether appropriate service is delivered in a reasonable manner, and by minimizing unwarranted variations. The public, human service professionals, and the legal community thereby have a clear expectation regarding how sexual abuse

investigation interviews should be handled.

Child welfare practice is constantly evolving, ideally driven by developments in evidence-based practice. While there is no single definition of standard of care, codifying a practice into law is undisputed evidence of a society’s expectations. Perhaps it’s time for state legislators to mandate that, under appropriate circumstances, child sexual abuse investigation interviews should be videotaped. 

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Reference Notes

1. See *Crawford v. Washington*, 541 U.S. 36 (2004) (an out-of-court statement by a witness that is testimonial is barred under the Confrontation Clause of the Sixth Amendment unless the witness is unavailable and the defendant had a prior opportunity to cross-examine the witness regardless of whether such statement is deemed reliable by the court). Note that no comprehensive definition of “testimonial” was offered by the court. On October 2, 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court granted cert. in *Ohio v. Clark*, 13-1352. The case raises two major issues: (1) Whether an individual’s obligation to report suspected child abuse makes that individual an agent of law enforcement for purposes of the Confrontation Clause; and (2) whether a child’s out-of-court statements to a teacher in response to the teacher’s concerns about potential child abuse qualify as “testimonial” statements subject to the Confrontation Clause.
2. Lyon, T. & Dente, J. (2012). Child witnesses and the Confrontation Clause. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*.
3. Cent. Code § 50-25.1-05.
4. Available at <http://www.nationalcac.org/images/pdfs/CALiO/forensic-interview-practices-cacs-2009-2.pdf>

NEWS continued from page 32

committees, and APHSA on the board’s behalf. She also wrote articles, conducted surveys, and generally supported the NSDTA affiliate.

Joan Carrera Memorial Scholarships

Joan Carrera was a pioneer in staff development and training, a mentor, an inspiration, and founding member of NSDTA. Due to her generosity NSDTA is able to offer full scholarships in her name to encourage public agency employees to attend the affiliate’s yearly national conference. This year’s scholarship winners were:

Sara Alberti, Calif.; Lara Bruce, Colo.; Jamole Callahan, Ind.; Jennifer Caruso, Pa.; Scott Ciullo, Ore.; Marvin Ford, N.J.; Rebecca Gray, Calif.; Riley Haragan, Ore.; Steve Hastings, Ore.; Rhenda Hodnett, La.; Megan Jessup, Ind.; Yamairah Keller, Ind.; Gregory Mings, Okla.; Carol Anne Moses, Ga.; Jennifer Ortman, Calif.; Rachel Rolli, Wis.; Tanya Rollins, Texas; Jason Sage, Ill.; Jillian Schenck, N.H.; Denise Short, Va.; Greg Sommers, Idaho; Ramina Velez, Ill.; Cathy Wood, Okla. 

SOARS continued from page 33

of implementation, of the 155 children who were screened, 41 children were referred for further assessment.

The Social Return on Investment (SROI) for Project SOARS is substantial. Young children who might be developmentally delayed are getting the crucial help they need. Families are getting access to vital resources that they might otherwise not be able to access without assistance. Social service agencies are working in partnership to produce positive outcomes for children and their families. 

Amy Lawrence is the program manager at Lutheran Social Services of Northern California.

Tim Herrera is the communications director of the Sacramento County Office of Education.