

Washington County Citizen Review Panel 2009 Annual Report

Mission Statement

As volunteer citizens, we will assist the child protection system with ongoing evaluation to strive for the protection of children.

Panel Members

Jolene Abelson	Melissa Charley	Margaret Hart**
Ann Bebeau	Sue Lewis	Martha Gerkey**
Robert Benson	Mary Nelson***	Guy Sederski**
Danielle Horan***	Gail Peavey*	Janet Snell**

* Resigned from the Panel July 1, 2009

** Joined the Panel in the fall 2009

*** Retired from Panel July 1, 2009

Meetings

In 2009, the Washington County Citizen Review Panel met on January 20, February 17, March 17, May 13, June 16, August 18, September 15, October 20, November 17 and December 15 at the Washington County Service Center in Woodbury from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m. All panel members attended the Minnesota Department of Human Services 2009 Minnesota Citizen Review Panels' recognition and training event which was held at the Washington County Community Services' building in Cottage Grove.

Activities

- On September 12, 2009, Washington County Citizen Review Panel members manned an information booth at the annual walk sponsored by Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota. The booth and information represented the Child Protection Citizen Review Panels statewide. Washington County CRP facilitated raising donations on behalf of the Citizen Review Panels statewide and raised more money than any other team at \$705. They were subsequently awarded Saint's ball caps and tickets to a May 2010 Saints game.



Back row: Rick Backman, Melissa Charlie, Bob Benson, Don Pelton, Guy Sederski
Front row: Jolene Abelson, Janet Snell, Ann Bebeau, Sue Lewis, Margaret Hart

Activities (continued)

Panel Member Formal Recognition Events:

- The Washington County Board recognized the efforts of the volunteer Citizen Review Panel members with a reception on April 17, 2009.
- On April 21, 2009, a volunteer recognition and training event, sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, was held for CRP members at the Washington County Service Center in Cottage Grove.
- Washington County Community Social Services showed their appreciation for the work of the Citizen Review Panel members with a holiday dinner in December.

Other Activities

- Washington County Citizen Review Panel members participated in 7 of the 10 requests for reconsideration of determinations of maltreatment in 2009. These seven determinations were upheld after being reviewed by the Citizen Review Panel and county staff. Of the 10 requests for reconsideration, three are delayed due to legal actions.
- 2009 National Citizen Review Panel Conference in Jackson Hole, Wyoming
Bob Benson and Mary Nelson attended the above conference.
- The Citizen Review Panel co-chair Ann Bebeau presented the panel's 2008 annual report to the Washington County Commissioners on February 17, 2009.
- At the February meeting, panel members were organized into work teams to begin the Involving Father's Project.
 - Team one: Melissa Charley and Ann Bebeau-"Assess agency's capacity to include non-custodial fathers in child protection cases".
 - Team two: Bob Benson and Dani Horan- "Assess worker's capacity to involve non-custodial fathers in child protection cases".
 - Team three: Sue Lewis and Bob Benson-" Assess service provider capacity to provide service to non-custodial fathers in child protection cases".
- Panel member Melissa Charley attended a local Town Hall meeting on the impacts of budget cuts of social services.
- At the March meeting, Dawn Blanchard, Ombudsman from American Indian Families, educated the panel on how she handles complaints with social service agencies.
- Panel members Jolene Abelson and Melissa Charley distributed the Not Safe Under Eight flyers (alerting people to the dangers of leaving children unattended in cars) to various community entities during the month of March/ April as a means of reminding the community that April is child abuse prevention month.
- Panel member Sue Lewis discussed with Stillwater Schools their process for distributing the Not Safe under Eight flyers. We chose not to participate in the process because the cost of reproducing the number of flyers needed was too high.
- Panel Member Sue Lewis called CUB Foods in Stillwater to see if they would post the flyer.
- The Washington County Citizen Review Panel collaborated with the Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel, Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota, and the St. Paul Police Department to host a Child Abuse Awareness month event April 1. There was a balloon release in memory of all Minnesota children killed as the result of child abuse in 2008. Chief Harrington and Connie Skillingstad from Prevent Child Abuse Minnesota tied a blue ribbon on the police department's flag pole as a symbolic gesture of collaboration on efforts to end child abuse.

Activities (continued)

- In May panel member Ann Bebeau submitted a letter to local papers regarding the importance of getting involved in child abuse prevention efforts at the citizen level. Information on how to become a Citizen Review Panel member in various counties was included. This letter was published in several local papers.
- At the June meeting, panel members honored Dani Horan and Mary Nelson for six years of hard work and dedication to the Washington County Citizen Review Panel. Their six year terms had expired.
- Recruitment efforts were completed during the third quarter of 2009. New members were interviewed and approved, pending appointment by the Washington County Commissioners: Guy Sederski, Marty Gerkey, Jan Snell, and Margaret Hart.
- Melissa Charley was elected to the position of co-chair in September.
- The Involving Father's report was finalized in September.
- Orientation for new members was held October 15, 2009.

The results of the Panel's ongoing quality assurance study regarding the involvement of non-custodial fathers in child protection cases are in the following report which begins on the next page. This version of the report does not include the appendices.



**Washington County Citizen Review Panel
Ongoing Quality Assurance Review
Involving Non-custodial Fathers in Child Protection Cases, 2009**

Introduction

Why is it important for those in the child protection system to do everything they can to identify, contact and involve non-custodial fathers in child protection cases? Materials reviewed state that involving non-custodial fathers in child protection cases has a positive impact on reunification and permanency. “Nonresident fathers’ involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome. Children with highly involved nonresident fathers are also discharged from foster care more quickly than those with less or no involvement.” These are findings in the study, *More about the Dads: Exploring Associations between Nonresident Father Involvement and Child Welfare Case Outcomes*, conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Human Services Policy and the Administration for Children and Families in 2008. This study also found father involvement does not necessarily lead to subsequent maltreatment; in fact it is less likely. Other findings include:

- Children whose nonresident fathers were contacted by the child welfare agency have slightly shorter case lengths than children whose nonresident fathers were unknown or who were identified but not contacted.
- Children with highly involved nonresident fathers have shorter case lengths than children whose nonresident fathers were less involved or not involved.
- Children with involved nonresident fathers are discharged to adoption more slowly, yet are discharged to reunification more quickly, than children whose nonresident fathers are not involved.
- Children whose nonresident fathers provide nonfinancial support appear most likely to experience a reunification.

Other reasons stated in the materials to involve non-custodial fathers include:

- Benefits of a father-child relationship, as long as there is no risk for the child’s safety or well-being.
- Links or expanded links with paternal kin.
- Access to medical information.
- Possible health insurance, survivor benefits, child support.

Finally, the overall well-being of children is positively impacted when fathers are involved. According to Dr. Wade Horn, clinical child psychologist and president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, when it comes to children’s well-being, research has shown that children who grow up with their fathers are less likely to have psychological problems, abuse drugs and alcohol, live in poverty and fail in school. Seventy percent of kids in state reform institutions grew up without their fathers.

Panel member, Sue Lewis, prepared a summary of the articles and reports reviewed by all of the panel members for this project. Her complete summary and the sources are attached to this report in Appendix A.

A discussion was held among the panel members and all agreed it is crucial for children that both parents be involved in their lives, when it is safe. Making every effort to identify and contact fathers (and all non-custodial parents) is in children’s best interests. Identifying and contacting absent fathers early on is important and will more likely lead to their long-term involvement. However the panel members cautioned against unrealistic expectations being placed on workers to involve those fathers who are unable or unwilling to take an active role in their children’s lives.

Purpose of Reviews

The lack of involvement of non-custodial fathers in child protection cases has been documented in the federal and state Child and Family Service Reviews. Outcomes in this area need improvement.

Panel members:

- Assessed and evaluated how the county child protection agency identifies, contacts and involves non-custodial fathers.
- Determined what is working well and what can be improved when it comes to identifying, contacting and involving non-custodial fathers in child protection cases.
- Made recommendations to improve capacities to identify, contact, involve and engage non-custodial fathers in child protection cases.

Policies, social work practice and services to include non-custodial fathers that are working well will be shared with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and included in a guide that will be disseminated to the county child protection agencies. Recommendations to ensure non-custodial fathers are contacted, included and engaged in child protection cases will be made to the county child protection agency and the DHS. The recommendations will be used to improve and strengthen the involvement of non-custodial fathers in policies, procedures and practice throughout Minnesota. Pertinent information will be included in the counties' and the state's Program Improvement Plans.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services plans to follow up by comparing future outcomes with the findings of the most recent Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSR) to see if there is improvement in achieving the specific outcomes related to involving non-custodial fathers in child protection cases. Counties with similar demographics but no Citizen Review Panel will also be included in the comparison of recent and future results in an attempt to determine what impact, if any, the recommendations of the Citizen Review Panels had on their county child protection agency's CFSR outcomes related to involving fathers.

Methods Used to Gather Information

Panel members reviewed the expectations from the federal and state Child and Family Service Reviews regarding involving non-custodial or absent parents. They read research studies and other reports related to the topic. As mentioned before, a summary of these materials is included in Appendix A.

In April 2009 the panel members attended a training in which staff from Scott County Human Services shared their policies and practices to identify, contact and involve non-custodial fathers. They also heard from Chisago County Health and Human Services staff about their innovative program that works to involve non-custodial fathers through the child support system.

The panel members looked at what current father-involvement policies and practices in place. They broke into teams and interviewed child protection agency managers, supervisors and workers who had been involved with child protection.

Exploratory Issues

Panel members reviewed these questions and considered them as they gathered information about identifying, contacting and involving non-custodial or absent (usually fathers) parents:

- What does your county agency do to contact the absent or non-custodial father?
- What does your county agency do to involve non-custodial parents in child protection cases?
- What is best practice when it comes to getting non-custodial fathers actively involved?
- What can be considered reasonable efforts to engage and involve them?

Exploratory Issues (continued)

- How much is too much when it comes to the expectations of workers to involve fathers?
- What documentation should be required to show what efforts have been taken to involve them?
- How does your agency involve parents in case planning? If this differs from custodial to non-custodial parents, what are the differences?
- What are the visitation policies and practices in your county agency for non-custodial fathers?
- What services are offered to non-custodial fathers involved in cases in your county?
- Are there clear expectations for workers with respect to father involvement regarding:
 - Type of case
 - Effort for contact
 - Assessment of needs and services
 - Visitation expectations
 - Case planning
 - Provision of services
 - Relative searches?
- What means are used to identify non-custodial fathers?
- What means are used to contact them?
- When is the first attempt made to contact them?
- What follow-up is expected if initial contacts are unsuccessful?
- What means are used to involve and engage non-custodial fathers?
- How are non-custodial fathers involved in case plans?
- How are non-custodial fathers involved in visitation?
- What services are available for them?
- What general attitudes about involving non-custodial fathers have you observed:
 - by supervisors and workers,
 - by receptionists and other agency personnel,
 - in the environment and décor?

Definitions

For the purposes of these reviews, non-custodial fathers will be defined as those under the Juvenile Court Rules that have a right to participate in Child in Need of Protection or Services (CHIPS), Termination of Parental Rights (TPR) and permanency court proceedings.

- A known father
- An alleged father
- A man who has executed a Declaration of Parentage (DOP) before August 1, 1995
- A man who has executed a Recognition of Parentage (ROP)
- A man who has been adjudicated as father.

Review Teams

Panel members broke into two teams. The teams and their tasks were:

Team One: Assess the agency's capacity to include non-custodial fathers in child protection cases when it comes to:

- Identification, contact and involvement of non-custodial parents
- Training the workers to identify, contact and involve non-custodial fathers
- Physical environment, messages and attitudes expressed by the agency.

Review Teams (continued)

Team Two: Assess the workers' capacity to involve non-custodial fathers by asking them about:

- Formal and informal training in identifying, contacting and involving fathers
- Caseloads, numbers and intensity
- Policies about identifying, contacting and involving non-custodial fathers
- Barriers to identify, contact and engage fathers and what might help overcome them
- The involvement of non-custodial fathers in case plans
- Visitation with non-custodial fathers
- Services available in the agency or communities to help fathers
- Documentation of efforts to identify, contact and engage non-custodial fathers
- How the agency can improve the identification, contact and involvement of non-custodial fathers
- What the agency is doing well.

Number of Interviews Conducted

In person	Manager... 1	Supervisors... 2	*Workers... 4	Fathers... 0
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*One senior worker in intake and assessment, one family assessment worker and one concurrent planning worker.

Total interviewed... 7

Observations and Comments

Overall, the workers and the panel members agreed that Washington County Community Social Services does a good job of identifying, contacting and involving non-custodial parents, especially in cases that are involved in the court process. Questions about non-resident parents are asked up front and throughout the case. The workers said there is good communication about resources and good connections among the staff. The expectation is clear that non-custodial fathers be identified, contacted and involved. There is no formal policy and procedures vary among workers and with child welfare, family assessment and Child in Need of Protective Services (CHIPS) cases. All agreed the workers could benefit from written policies and procedures for involving non-custodial fathers. Required training would also benefit the workers.

Those interviewed mentioned it is important to engage not only fathers, but to involve the father, mother and children. Workers must also contact and involve extended family and concerned friends to participate in keeping the children safe and finding permanent homes.

Panel members were asked to observe the reception areas and report if the décor was inviting, inclusive and comfortable. Here are the observations of reception area:

“We liked the name “Child Services” as opposed to “Child Protection.” It is less threatening.

The waiting room appears to be gender neutral at first glance. There were two posters with fathers on them but they were hidden in corners. One was harsh and negative regarding parenting techniques. Things were worded as “don’t” instead of “do.” It was outdated and we think men would quit reading it because of the tone. The other poster showed an African American father with a black child lying on

Observations and Comments (continued)

his chest. It was awesome! We liked that it showed diversity. The poster should be moved to a central part of the room where everyone can see it right away. We found out the reason the “father” posters were not in the main waiting room is because they were attached to the wall with push pins which could be dangerous for children. That is easy to remedy.

There were not many toys. Some were broken. There was a big pink castle available for younger girls. We saw no toys that might appeal more to boys, like cars or trucks.”

A panel member called Washington County Community Social Services’ Children’s Services and asked for resources for single fathers. The person who answered the telephone did not know and referred her to a worker. The panel member left a message on the worker’s message machine and was called back. At first the worker was not able to provide much parenting information specifically for fathers. But upon further discussion she went out of her way to look for resources and related them to the caller. In conclusion, the panel member wrote: “The worker seemed generally very helpful and very gender neutral in her approach to referring services. She pointed out that all services were open to both men and women. We discussed how some men feel like people are judging their parenting just because they are men. They ask where the mom is and suggest he is babysitting and not parenting. She was sympathetic and reassured there are other men out there in this situation.”

Legal resources for fathers needing help with child custody, visitation, child support and paternity issues are not available to many of those involved with the child protection system. The Washington County community is in need of the following:

- A data base with resources for fathers in different languages that would be available through the county social services, courts, the county and city libraries, hospitals and other organizations.
- A law clinic that would offer pro bono services for fathers unable to afford an attorney and who are involved in custody, paternity and child support cases.
- Funds available to indigent fathers for court filing fees and other court costs.
- Affordable, efficient public transportation throughout the county.

At the onset of this project, it was designed for each Citizen Review Panel to contact three non-custodial fathers and interview them about their experiences with the child protection system in their county. This proved difficult in all counties and was not accomplished in any of them.

Washington County Community Social Services was not able to recommend or refer fathers who could be contacted or were willing to be interviewed. There were concerns about data privacy and confidentiality. From all four counties only two fathers were interviewed.

Ramsey County Children’s Services Review Panel member, RD Brown, made the following observations: “There seems to be reluctance amongst the fathers to stay engaged with what they perceive as the judicial and social service system and become involved with these interview sessions. What is this reluctance based on? Is it a distrust of the system, level of service provided or interaction with service providers? All of these are unknown, but certainly could be factors in their reluctance to come forward.”

The comments, observations and recommendations of non-custodial fathers are still needed. In 2010 the Citizen Review Panels may want to continue to pursue the input of fathers by working with the counties and the Minnesota Department of Human Services to develop and implement exit interviews, surveys or follow-up interviews after a case closes.

What Works Well

- Supervisors go over cases with the workers on a monthly basis and the identification, contact and involvement of fathers is reviewed at that time.
- Quarterly, random case reviews are conducted and include the review of non-custodial parent contact and involvement.
- Key staff have access to data for non-custodial fathers.
- The attitudes of the staff members towards father involvement are positive.
- Communication among the workers is good and resources are often shared.
- There is a clear expectation that non-custodial fathers should be involved.
 - A supervisor stated that non-custodial fathers should be included from the beginning.
 - A supervisor said they cannot do enough to involve fathers. They have even placed calls to fathers outside of the country.
- Washington County Community Social Services has had “super good outcomes with fathers.”
 - Has allowed access to the father’s family for placements.

Concerns

- There are currently no formally written policies or procedures about identifying, contacting and involving non-custodial fathers in child protection cases. (It is easier for concurrent permanency planning workers with CHIPS cases to find written legal guidelines for involving fathers.)
- Identification and contact with non-custodial parents is minimal at intake and in Family Assessment cases partly due to the lack of authority to obtain information when a case is not involved in court.
- There is an inconsistency among workers regarding the priority given to involving fathers.
- Although training to identify, contact and involve fathers is available, not all workers take advantage of it.
- It is more difficult to engage fathers of older children who may have behavior issues.
- Social Services Information System (SSIS) does not address non-custodial parents in the case plan.
- Child protection case files are filed under the mother’s name. It should include the father’s name.
- Legal resources for fathers regarding paternity, child custody, visitation and child support are not available to many of the fathers involved in child protection cases.
- The main waiting room could use more father-friendly posters and more male and female gender specific toys and reading materials for children of all ages.
- There is no standardized packet of resources for fathers to hand out and no organized electronic fathers’ resource file available for workers.
- Although individual workers have resources they use for fathers, there is no centralized location for information that is specific to resources for fathers than can be shared by all workers.

Recommendations

To improve the agency's and the workers' capacities to identify, contact and involve non-custodial fathers

- Continue the case review and consultation practices listed under the section "What Works Well."
- Develop and implement formally written policies and procedures to identify, contact and involve non-custodial fathers in child protection cases by December 31, 2010.
 - Continue to keep the safety of children paramount.
 - Promote consistency among workers regarding social work practice.
 - Use to evaluate employee performance.
 - Seek input from fathers who have been involved in the child protection system.
- Research additional data bases to identify and contact non-custodial fathers such as Lexus-Nexus and Accurint.
- Encourage involvement of fathers with older children and identify resources specifically for them.
- Add the names of the fathers to those of the mother's on the case files.
- Update the waiting room with posters of fathers, reading materials that appeal to men and gender specific toys and reading materials for children of all ages.
- Provide parenting information (brochures, magazines, pamphlets, folders with resources) in the main waiting room that includes information for services specifically for fathers.
- Develop an internal intranet resource page with father's resource information.
- Washington County Community Social Services, the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Citizen Review Panel develop a survey or exit interview for non-custodial fathers to evaluate the services provided, assess the services available and those needed to increase the number of fathers involved in child protection cases.

Acknowledgements

The Washington County Community Social Services staff members interviewed were: Rick Backman, manager, Don Pelton, supervisor, Lisa Hanson, supervisor, Lynn Hansen, senior intake and investigation worker, Carrie Krautkremer, Family Assessment worker and Becky Conroy, concurrent planning worker.

The panel members express their gratitude to all of those interviewed. They were generous with their time, extremely nice and provided straight-forward, helpful information.

The following Citizen Review Panel members conducted interviews for this report: Ann Bebeau, Bob Benson, Melissa Charley and Dani Horan. Sue Lewis prepared a summary of the materials reviewed. Other panel members who contributed their ideas were Jolene Abelson and Mary Nelson. All of the members of the Citizen Review Panel made recommendations to improve the involvement of fathers.

Looking Ahead

The recent CRP report regarding involving non-custodial fathers in child protection cases provided critical information to the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) and valuable recommendations for county agencies to implement in active caseloads. There is a strong desire both state and county- wide to seek further information involving non-custodial fathers in child protection

Looking Ahead (continued)

cases. Washington County has expressed concern with legal barriers that prevent non-custodial parents from obtaining confidential information through shared county systems.

Recommendations proposed by the report include:

- Additional research and surveys that include interviews and contact with non-custodial fathers
 - Panel members may reach out to other community groups to help them gather this information. Suggested groups include Human Services Inc. (HSI), the University of Minnesota Extension Program, other area colleges or universities and the Displaced Workers Program.
- Updated training for staff on how to identify, contact and engage non-custodial fathers.

Washington County is proficient with providing ongoing updates at every monthly Panel meeting. The updates include statistics, staff changes, policy changes, funding, and trends in types of reports and calls made in assessments. It is hoped and anticipated these updates will continue.

In the upcoming year 2010, Washington County will be involved in the State's Child Family Service Review in March. The Citizen Review Panel will participate in the review as part of the stakeholder's group. DHS will be leading this event.

Other projects the Panel has discussed include:

- The Washington County CRP will create a Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Prevention brochure to provide to the community at large to educate families, neighbors, families, and friends on the grave issue of SIDS.
- In September 2010, the panel will participate in the Minnesota Prevent Child Abuse Walk and will continue to be an active voice in the community throughout the summer raising donations and spreading the word about preventing child abuse.
- The panel will discuss more on the topic of mental health and environmental concerns, specifically houses commonly referred to as garbage houses that have children living in them. This is a topic that is increasingly becoming more of a concern each year. More frequently, counties are faced with the expense of making the house livable because the family has no support network to count on. Counties are faced with determining the right protocols for workers and families living in this situation. Updated training for staff is also necessary because mental illness is the root cause.