Alternative Response (AR) Think Tank Overview & Highlights

AR Key Takeaways

Learnings from the AR Pilot & AR Think Tank

- **DCF learned a lot from the AR pilot and consider it successful**
  - AR practice is founded in the tenets of the Wisconsin Child Welfare Model for Practice
  - AR practice elevates the Wisconsin safety model
  - Fundamentally, AR practice strives to improve practice for all children, families, and CPS professionals in Wisconsin
  - Children on cases served on the AR pathway are no less safe (than if they are on a case that is served in the TR pathway)
  - Eliminating the maltreatment/maltreater determination at the conclusion of the Initial Assessment allows child welfare professionals to focus more on the assessment of child safety and family needs
  - Being a part of the AR pilot required counties to fundamentally shift how they think about serving children and families during the Initial Assessment

- **Implementation and operationalization of AR varied among counties**
  - Variation in how AR was implemented and operationalized exists at both the worker-, supervisor-, and county-level
  - Variation impacts which families are served using an AR approach, contributing to racial differences

- **The child welfare system needs to do the best for all families**
  - Since AR policy and AR practice are not mutually exclusive, we believe that we can use what we learned about how AR practice was operationalized in order to shift our statewide child welfare system and serve children and families differently and more equitably without needing the AR policy
  - DCF is unable to support and ensure all counties are practicing AR to fidelity

Next Steps

- **DCF is committed to implementing the lessons and key successes learned from the AR pilot into our statewide child welfare system and model for practice**
  - DCF will not be expanding the AR pilot to new counties
  - DCF will focus on a one-pathway system with flexibility and workforce support to engage and to serve families in a way that elevates the Wisconsin Safety Model and Wisconsin Model for Practice

- **DCF will be phasing out the current AR policy and AR pathway for all current AR counties**
  - DCF will continue to gather information and collect feedback from AR pilot counties regarding how to phase out the current AR policy
  - AR pilot counties can continue functioning as is for the time being
  - During the phase out period, DCF does not have capacity to support AR pilot counties in maintaining fidelity to the AR pathway

○ DCF is committed minimizing the impact of this transition for current AR pilot counties

- **Learnings from the AR pilot will be elevated and prioritized for the DSP Family First and Strategic Planning work**
  ○ DCF and DSP believe in the evolution of child welfare practice in order to best serve and meet the needs of children and families served in Wisconsin
  ○ Many of the learnings from the AR pilot, identified through the AR Think Tank and AR Evaluation, can be used to inform the DCF's goal of supporting Wisconsin families to raise their child
  ○ There are opportunities to incorporate and align many of the recommendations from the AR Think Tank into the DSP strategic planning process
  ○ DCF will continue to understand how key components of AR policy and practice impact how child welfare professionals serve children and families during Initial Assessment and Ongoing Services

AR Think Tank Overview

Introduction

The Alternative Response (AR) Think Tank was formed in 2018 and convened three times in 2018 and once in 2019 as a large group. The meetings used the critical thinking that AR pilot counties have already done and elevated it to the next level by expanding the perspectives to include research and evaluation, training and safety model expertise, CQI and consultants in the discussion. Members of the AR Think Tank met together to think deeply about the cultural, practice and policy changes that resulted from the AR Pilot in the 22 counties who implemented. The AR Think Tank was facilitated by Blue Spiral Consulting (BSC), who were uniquely positioned to support the process because of their years of experience in child welfare in jurisdictions across the county, their involvement in Wisconsin's AR pilot project, as well as, years of experience designing and facilitating group processes.

Goals

The goal of the Think Tank was to use lessons learned during implementation, data collected through the AR evaluation, and perspectives of lived experiences of families and the child welfare workforce in order to understand how the implementation of AR in Wisconsin has resulted in changes to child welfare policy and practice. Additionally, the Think Tank members were charged with the task of turning this knowledge into actionable insights and options for moving those lessons forward to enhance child welfare practice across the state. Specifically, the work of the Think Tank would conclude with identified recommendations about what elements of AR will improve and strengthen child welfare practice across the state. Furthermore, there was a desire to find elegant solutions for statewide implementation that built upon the current child welfare system and created the most change with the least amount of disruption.

AR Think Tank Collective Conclusions

The collective conclusions reached by the AR Think Tank offers a roadmap for reimagining a one-pathway system that is driven by the Safety Model and uses the Wisconsin Model for Practice as a guide. A one-pathway system can provide the structure for a unified approach to assessment and offers flexibility to child welfare professionals, guidance for families, and an authentic sincere, realistic response to statutory obligations that starts during the Initial Assessment and can be carried through to Ongoing Services. This is a vision for a one-pathway system that is innovative, based on experience, data and common sense.

1. **All families deserve the best the child welfare system has to offer.**
   - AR practice strives to improve child welfare services for all children, families and CPS professionals in Wisconsin.
   - We cannot organize the child welfare system on the worst-case scenarios, which is exactly what a one-pathway system or the traditional response of a two-pathway system aims to do. Rather, the child welfare system must provide the best service we can to every family to help that family system create safe supports for the child at the center, and when that is not possible, find another place were the child can be safe and ideally, remain in contact with the community to which that child belongs.
   - A two-pathway system can result or promote disparate and discriminatory service provision.
   - By eliminating or decreasing the adversarial position of the CPS professional, it allows the CPS professional to step in as a change agent and service as an advocate for the family. An incident-focused investigation can narrow the focus of the Initial Assessment because the CPS professional is primarily focused on making a maltreatment and maltreater determinations. When the focus on culpability is lessened, it allows for the emphasis to shift to assessment of protective factors in parents and working with families to create plans that can keep their children in home.
   - A family's experience in the child welfare system is improved when they are served by skilled CPS professionals who are supported by a congruous, values and mission-based organizational structure with a focus on supportive services, improved family networks and enhancing existing protective capacity in parents.

2. **Safety is achieved through collaboration.**
   - AR research demonstrates that when the substantiation decision is taken off the table, CPS professionals and families are more likely to work collaboratively together, families share more information with their CPS professionals, parents are more likely to follow the safety plans they collaboratively design with the CPS professional, and there are more options for building a natural social support network that can help the family long after the CPS agency is gone.
   - The safety of children served in the child welfare system can be enhanced when a collaborative approach is established from the start where the family is in the lead role in making decisions about the safety of their child including temporary placement decisions, recommendations for safety support network members and creating a robust safety plan that is monitored by the professionals and support network both. When allowed to be an active participant, parents and the child's support network can make changes in the everyday care of that child and maintain safety even when the issues that caused the worries continue.

3. **Effective CPS response requires respect for professional expertise.**
   - The skills required to deliver quality child welfare services are many and they vary throughout the child welfare system.
   - The work conducted by CPS professionals is difficult and requires expertise in specific skills. CPS professionals should be supported in the system they're working in through training, leadership and supervisory support to move from information-gathering into assessing and interpreting that information in order to make sound, defensible safety decisions throughout the life of a case.

- The child welfare system must be reasonable about what it expects the CPS professional to accomplish. A system with reasonable expectations, ongoing support and alignment with best practice child welfare principles, models and tools can alleviate not only a great deal of stress from the CPS professional, but can also provide the space and permission needed to partner with families, to focus on enhancing diminished protective capacity and building on existing protection and networks of support.

4. All case decisions must consider and enhance safety.

- Regardless of the assessment pathway, there is always a safety decision (whether the child is safe or unsafe) at the conclusion of the Initial Assessment. Additionally, there is also a determination as to whether or not services are needed to establish or maintain safety for the child.
- The maltreatment determination (substantiation) is focused on whether or not maltreatment occurred, and who did it. The maltreatment determination serves different purposes: (1) to communicate information to judicial authorities within the court system; (2) to protect children both in the family and the public who might be harmed by a perpetrator of abuse or neglect; and (3) to hold an individual who is guilty of criminal abuse or neglect of a child accountable. There is variance, however, between counties around the application of the substantiation finding.
- The change in focus from a maltreatment determination to child safety improves family engagement with CPS professionals and changes the tenor of the system from adversarial to collaborative. A collaborative approach leads to better information and safety decisions. This approach is often less court dependent but it does not eliminate the need for court authority.

5. The Wisconsin Safety Model is comprehensive and supports critical decision making.

- Wisconsin's safety model proved itself to be healthy and flexible enough to sustain rigorous CPS practice through both the traditional and alternative CPS responses. Safety decisions were equally valid in both pathways and safety decisions were in no way diminished by the differences in the two approaches.
- In a re-imagined single pathway system, the safety model would drive the Initial Assessment process.
- The AR Policy gave CPS professionals permission to work with families in a different way by removing the focus of the allegation and substantiation during the IA and shifted the focus towards assessment of the child and family needs by partnering with families.
- The assessment of child safety is always paramount but the change in focus from investigating an allegation to assessing family strengths and needs relative to safety does more than improve family engagement it strengthens safety planning.
- The introduction of the AR approach resulted in a more robust realization of the safety model by emphasizing comprehensive information gathering that improved the ability of the CPS professional to assess the family situation including strengths, needs and existing protective capacity.
- The AR Pilot gave counties an opportunity to pay attention to protective capacity differently throughout the system; beginning at Access with the types and scope of questions asked to guide pathway assignment and throughout Initial Assessment as CPS professionals approached families using more sophisticated engagement strategies. In a single pathway system that maintains these positive

changes, the initial assessment process would include a balanced assessment of the overall family functioning.

- The assessment of Parental Protective Capacities during the Initial Assessment will improve how children and families receive services in Ongoing.

6. **Alignment within the organizational system is the foundation of desired outcomes.**

- Wherever possible, operations, procedures, and structures should be aligned with and pointing in the direction of the stated values and goals of the organization. This alignment and guidance can provide explicit and implicit expectations for high-quality performance.

7. **Transformation requires a catalyst for change.**

- Reimagining the current child welfare system as a single-pathway that starts in Initial Assessment and continues through to Ongoing Services must include a significant change to the structure of the whole system.

AR Think Tank Recommendations

The following recommendations came from the cumulative results of the AR Think Tank process. The recommendations are intended to stimulate Wisconsin's child welfare system in a way that creates a transformative shift in the statewide approach to child protection and will result in improved effectiveness, efficiency and positive outcomes for families.

Overarching Themes

- Wisconsin Child Welfare Model for Practice
  - The tenets of the Wisconsin Child Welfare Model for Practice align with the information learned from the AR pilot regarding how the child welfare system is oriented towards and serves children and families

- All families deserve the best
  - All families who are served in the child welfare system deserve a coordinated, trauma-informed response, including the assessment of needs and referral to services
  - As a child welfare system, we should not be treating families assigned to the AR pathway or TR pathway fundamentally different
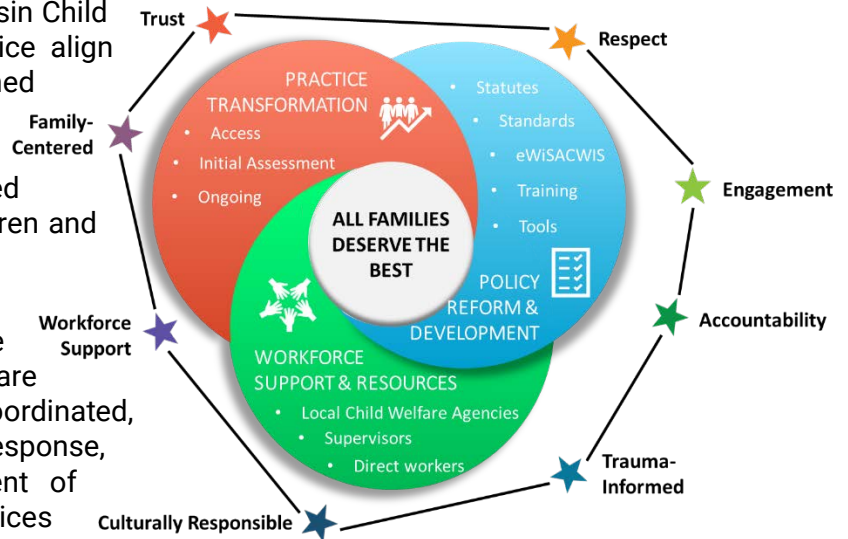
General Recommendations

- Identify the best practice learnings from the AR pilot and incorporate those learnings into the child welfare system as a whole
- Focus on a [statewide] one-pathway system with the flexibility and workforce support to engage and to serve families in a way that elevates the Wisconsin Safety Model and Wisconsin Model for Practice

Targeted Recommendations

Practice Transformation

Large-scale changes that will impact and improve child welfare practice as a whole, including Access, Initial Assessment, and Ongoing Services.

- Consider changing how maltreatment determinations (i.e. substantiation decisions) are made and used
- Prioritize information gathering, family engagement, and safety decisions-making
- Incorporate the assessment and use of Parental Protective Capacities (PPC) into case practice
- Elevate services over protection by prioritizing information gathering regarding the family condition over information about maltreatment allegations
- Use maltreater determinations to address public safety
- Strengthen the collaboration between local child welfare agencies and tribal child welfare agencies

Policy Reform & Development

Changes to current policy, Standards, or eWiSACWIS and/or development of new policy, Standards, or eWiSACWIS to support improved child welfare practice.

- Streamline requirements in the CPS case process in order to reduce redundancies and inefficiencies
- Improve and connect language between Statues and Standards
- Clarify how the child welfare system will attend to risk
- Review data regarding the number of cases that transition from IA to Ongoing
- Make changes to eWiSACWIS regarding how information is collected and used in the CPS Access Report, Services Report, and Initial Assessment
- Clarify/expand existing policy/standards regarding information gathering, danger threats, response times, and screening decisions
- Remove prescriptive language from standards
- Create new standards and/or policy regarding screening decisions, response times, information gather during initial face-to-face contact, and Present and Impending Danger Threats
- Update existing job aids/tools

Workforce Support & Resources

Changes to existing and/or development of new training and resources for local child welfare agencies, supervisors, and direct CPS professionals.

- Promote skill development and critical thinking for the child welfare workforce
- Provide reflective supervision, or a similar model, to all local CW agencies
- Use the Organizational Effectiveness (OE) process to support practice changes in local CW agencies
- Offer training and/or tools for using and applying the safety model in practice
- Offer implicit bias training and tools for the child welfare workforce
- Develop a webinar for external stakeholders that defines the role of CPS and local CW agencies
- Continue to work towards improving recruitment and retention efforts

AR Think Tank Membership

AR Pilot County Representatives

La Crosse County
- Deanna Hoffman, Initial Assessment Supervisor
- Michelle Johnston, Access Supervisor
- Erin Malak, Initial Assessment Supervisor

Brown County
- Lauren Krukowski, Lead Child Protection Supervisor
- Marc Seidl, Initial Assessment Supervisor

Jefferson County
- Laura Wagner, Access and Initial Assessment Supervisor

Department of Children & Families Representatives

Office of Legal Counsel
- Therese Durkin, Office of Legal Counsel

Division of Safety and Permanence
- Tania Cornelius, DSP Tribal Affairs Specialist
- Michelle Rawlings, Bureau of Safety and Well-Being (BSWB) Director
- Emily Erickson, former BSWB Child Welfare Policy Section Manager
- Alicia Breininger, BSWB Child Welfare Program and Policy Analyst-Advanced
- Lexi Mattia, BSWB Child Welfare Program and Policy Analyst- Advanced
- Rachel Nili, former BSWB Child Welfare Program and Policy Analyst-Advanced
- Emma Monahan, former BSWB Child Welfare Program and Policy Analyst-Advanced
- Katy Petershack, former BSWB Child Welfare Program and Policy Analyst-Advanced

Division of Management Services
- Tyler Oettinger, Bureau of Performance Management (BPM) Quality Review Unit Supervisor

University of Wisconsin-Madison Representatives

School of Social Work
- Ellen Smith, MSW, Clinical Associate Professor and Associate Director
- Kristi Shook Slack, PhD, Professor and PhD Program Chair

Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System (WCWPDS)
- Amy Smith, Safety Curriculum Manager
- Erin Nasgovitz, MSW, Safety Coaching Specialist & Trainer
- Kim Eithun, Special Initiatives Coordinator
- Serena Breining, MSSW, CAPSW, Applied Professional Development Coordinator

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Representatives

Helen Bader School of Social Welfare
- Colleen Janczewski, PhD, Assistant Professor; Policy and Practice Analyst, Institute of Child and Family Well Being

AR Pilot Milestone Timeline

DSP Communication:
AR Pilot Lessons Learned
Statewide Proposal

June 2010 - December 2016
AR Pilot Implementation

June 2010
Phase I
Implementation

January 2012
Phase II
Implementation

December 2012
Phase III
Implementation

June 2015
Phase IV
Implementation

June 2016
Phase V
Implementation

Oct 2016 - Aug 2018
AR Pilot Evaluation
ICFW-UWM

AR Process & Outcome
Evaluations Finalized

Today

2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2020

January 2010
WI Legislature
Approves AR Pilot

July 2012
AR Pilot Report
to Legislature

2016 - 2017
AR Policy Meetings
Facilitated by DCF & BSC

2018 - 2019
AR Think Tank Meetings
Facilitated by DCF & BSC

AR Think Tank
Small Group Work
Facilitated by DCF & BSC