Working with Small Tribal Organizations to Develop an Effective Data System

LESSONS LEARNED

Julie Atkins, MA, NCIC Tribal/State Liaison

Penthea Burns, MSW, NCIC Tribal/State Liaison

Working with Small Tribal Organizations to Develop an Effective Data System

LESSONS LEARNED

INTRODUCTION

Many tribal child welfare agencies are small when defined by the number of their staff but enormous in scope and workload. Especially among the many smaller tribes across the country, there may be only two or three staff who make up the entire agency, conducting investigations, recruiting foster families, providing in-home services, working with state staff on tribal cases and so much more. Housed within a larger Department of Health and Human Services, staff often wear multiple hats and may assist with other services such as the Food Pantry or domestic violence programs.

Given this level of activity, a sleek and effective data management system would seem to be ideal, allowing for quick and easy access to case level data for both field staff and supervisors. It would ease the burden of reporting to funders and Federal agencies. Time formerly spent tallying by hand and searching through files would be put to better use working with children and families.

For a variety of reasons, however, many smaller tribes don't have data systems like these in place. A major barrier is the time it takes away from daily activity for staff to take on a large project like implementing a data system. Another is the cost; systems can be expensive. Resistance to change is also common. When time is limited, it may seem easier to continue with how the way things have always been done.

Despite these barriers, two small East Coast tribes chose to take on the challenge of moving from paper records to an electronic data system. In partnership with one another and the Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point and Penobscot Nation recognized the importance of accessible data, identified their data needs, modified an existing system, and began using it as a tool to ensure that their child welfare practice reflected their community values.

THE WABANAKI CHILD WELFARE PROJECT

In 2011, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point and Penobscot Nation applied to the Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center as a consortium, with the interwoven goals of improving the consistency of their practice and lessening the destabilizing impact of staff turnover on practice. In taking on a comprehensive system change effort such as this, the consortium model was effective in both obvious and less apparent ways. First and foremost, this strategy was cost-effective, allowing the two tribes to share a Project

Coordinator and a data system developer. Technical assistance was provided jointly to the two agencies, saving on consultant costs. Beyond financial concerns, however, was the impact of having a larger group of peers working together to design and implement the components of the work.

Both tribal child welfare agencies consisted of two to three staff members and neither had electronic data systems. It was determined that a data system could be an important tool to both improve practice and provide consistency during periods of staff turnover. Designing and implementing this data system in tandem with an articulated practice model was important. The articulated practice model served to codify the agencies' current values and beliefs, allowing policy and codes to be aligned with these principles and for the data system to then be reflective of these renewed and culturally-relevant policies and codes. To further focus the data being collected, based on these core practice model values, five or six priority child outcomes, such as a focus on kinship placements or cultural connection, were identified in each community. These indicators were then included within the data system design, ensuring that the staff would easily see whether and how their efforts were impacting practice. How many children in their care spoke their native language? How many were placed with kin? These questions would be answered with more than anecdotal information once the data system was in use.

THE WABANAKI CHILD WELFARE DATABASE

With a clear plan in place, the tribes set out to determine the functions and capacity they would need in a system. Several options were considered, from ACCESS databases to commercial packages specifically designed for tribal agencies. These ranged from too simple, not collecting enough data or case history to be meaningful, to far too complex, requiring implementation among several tribal departments.

Ultimately, the consortium was introduced to a data system that had been developed for another small tribe, using Federal funds, which seemed like the perfect fit. This user friendly child welfare case management database included various modules, such as administrative, case management, caregiver, finance, and reports. Because it was originally designed for tribal use, it addressed factors such as tribal membership and the Indian Child Welfare Act. Limited modifications were then required for the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes, making it a cost effective option. Due to its initial development with Federal dollars, the data system was free to the tribes save for modest installation costs.

While considering these existing systems helped the consortium to identify and refine their needs, such as editable case notes, cultural connectedness indicators, and intuitive reports, finding the existing systems was a challenge in and of itself. In the interest, therefore, not of endorsement, but of transparency, the system selected for modification by the consortium was developed by 12Bravo. Once selected, the vendor then modified and installed the database for each tribe and trained users and technical support staff in each community. As the modifications were made with Federal funds, this stronger system is then available to other tribes, benefiting those who may adopt it in the future.

Essential steps in the process of implementing an effective and responsive data system included:

- **The Project Teams identified their needs and requirements for a data system as they developed their practice model and revised policies.** Much of this was accomplished through completing a business process mapping of the child welfare case flow in each office. This information then informed an analysis of decision making points for the agencies and their internal and external reporting needs.

- **Securing a dedicated server that was compatible with the Tribal governments Information Technology (IT) system.** This meant gaining support from Tribal leadership in order to become one of the priorities of the Tribe's IT department.

- **Identifying the modifications to the data system that would serve the Tribes' programmatic, decision-making, and reporting needs was managed by the Project Coordinator.** The Coordinator then tracked the modifications and then tested the system as modifications were made. Having a single person overseeing this detailed work for both Tribes was critical.

- **When undertaking this type of project, we recommend engaging the T/TA Network for its expertise on the child welfare data needs for state and tribal jurisdictions.** The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Data and Technology provided expert technical support in reviewing the system and highlighting case management and reporting issues that the Tribes would need to have resolved.

- **Training for the small staff was essential.** In this case the training was hands on, with case entry being done by staff in close collaboration with the Project Coordinator.

- **A user manual was developed for staff.** The manual provides step by step instructions on how to use the system and how to troubleshoot when problems arise.

- **An essential component of the technical assistance was to aid teams to see the data system and data as tools for "living their values" by tracking the work and outcomes most important to their communities.** This work on identifying priority outcomes was deliberate and served as an important foundation to embracing the data work, establishing quality improvement activities, and providing tools for supervision of case practice.

LOOKING FORWARD

The data system is in the early stages of implementation in both communities. It is being utilized on a daily basis, uploading information from old files to condense into new ones and uploading the new cases which are being opened. New employees are being trained on using the system through the support of experienced staff, with the User Manual serving as a valuable reference. Staff generate and print reports and daily activity logs. Additional modifications are being undertaken to enable the extraction of AFCARs data. In the end, the implementation of a data system for these small tribes, while having some technical difficulties, was successful. The end users were involved throughout the process with the goal of identifying a user-friendly system that was cost effective, would serve their program needs, and offer training tools to promote staff capacity to effectively use the data system in alignment with their model of practice.