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Minnesota's Activities

June, 2002 completed the pilot phase of Minnesota's Citizen Review Panels. The three original panels reached a milestone in their development. Goals and objectives were reviewed, committee work was evaluated. Some reorganization took place in each of the panels while, at the same time, Minnesota Department of Human Services was laying the foundation to develop a fourth Citizen Review Panel in Winona County.

Several activities occurred that allowed Citizen Review Panel Members to increase the visibility of the panels and emphasize the value the panels bring to the State of Minnesota as well as the counties they represent. Panel members and staff presented Citizen Involvement in the Child Protection System, on March 20, 2002, at the Minnesota Social Services Association Conference and in April at the Child Abuse Prevention Conference.

To add to the visibility of panels and increase the counties represented, in January, 2002, staff spoke at a community forum regarding Citizen Review Panels in Winona. It was the beginning of successful expansion of Citizen Review Panels to additional counties. By summer of 2002, recruitment of panel members for Winona County was well underway and in September orientation and training of the new panel began. Before the end of the year, panel chair and vice-chair were selected and a list of topics to explore had been drawn up.

Recruitment of new panel members, although a challenging process, continues to strengthen the diversity of panel. The recruitment process has been well established and documented for use by staff. Creativity in reaching target populations will always be needed and adds to the challenge of member recruitment. Goals for recruitment include attracting more men to the panels and always expanding the diversity of communities represented. During the 2002 recruitment campaigns, Chisago County gained four new members, Ramsey County five, and Washington County added six people to its roster, while Winona County began its work with eleven members.

A notable reorganization in Ramsey County Citizen Review Panel has strengthened the position of the panel within the county structure. The CRP has merged with the Children's Advisory Committee and renamed Children's Services Review Panel. This merger eliminates some duplication of efforts and gives the panel greater visibility and value in working with the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners.

Minnesota Activities (continued)

Washington County, with the assistance of Dr. Teresa Swartz, Coordinator, Centers of Excellence, College of St. Catherine, designed a Mandated Reporter Survey focused on their history of and needs for training, their experiences as mandated reporters and their experiences with Child Protective Services. The Minnesota Department of Human Services assisted in printing and distribution of five hundred surveys. Upon the return of two hundred eight completed surveys, Dr. Swartz helped committee members analyze the rich data that resulted. Data was shared with other counties.

To reinforce responsible parenting skills, Chisago County in cooperation with Chisago County Health and Human Services, designed and distributed more than 10,000 PLAY IT SAFE bookmarks outlining supervision, babysitting age and general safety guidelines answering questions regarding when it is safe to leave children home alone. Other panels requested bookmarks to distribute in public areas where they would be accessible for citizens.

Each panel establishes committees and works on activities designed to reach their annual goals; however, the intra-panel sharing of activities has increased resources for citizens in all three counties. This sharing takes place through the Steering Committee placing great importance on its quarterly meetings.

Steering Committee

Officers (chairs, co-chairs, and vice-chairs) from each county's panel comprise the Minnesota Citizen Review Steering Committee. Additionally, a volunteer facilitator coordinates the activities of the steering committee. The steering committee has been meeting quarterly since April 2000. Terms for steering committee members parallel their county panel leadership term. The steering committee's purpose is to:

- Act as a resource guide for the Citizen Review Panels.
- Act as an advisory group for the panels.
- Look for trends in child safety.
- Compile information and write annual reports.
- Examine policies and procedures of the local county agencies as they pertain to child protection. Evaluate the extent to which the agencies are discharging their services efficiently and effectively.

The steering committee's role is to facilitate awareness of other county panel members, to encourage all panel members to become more familiar with how their county's child protection system works, and to share information concerning new data, experiences, and best practices with each other.

Common knowledge is that initiatives take at least three years to begin to produce the desired results. The fourth year of Citizen Review Panel work has been completed and the results seem to conform to that adage.

Whether we're measuring the influence panel members have as ambassadors in the community, as advocates for resources or as voluntary citizens just adding another perspective, there is little doubt the work of the Citizen Review Panels has a positive impact on child protection services. Activities of the Chisago, Ramsey, Washington and Winona Counties' Citizen Review Panels during 2003-2004 include:

- - Review requests for reconsideration of determinations of maltreatment
- - Assist with foster care provider recruitment and retention
- - Participate in administrative reviews of children in long-term foster care
- - Work to standardize and increase access to mandated reporter training
- - Study and evaluate educational neglect and truancy
- - Design and implement a pilot program of Ongoing Quality Assurance and case reviews
- - Shadow child protection workers
- - Analyze trends and provide insight by identifying and studying issues unique to their community
- - Increase community understanding, ownership and investment in our children and the child protection system
 - - Distribute child protection and child abuse prevention information
 - - Play It Safe bookmarks
 - - It's Not Safe for Kids Under Eight fliers

As a charter member of the Ramsey County Children's Services Review Panel, I am proud of the work that has been accomplished over the past four years. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with citizens whose commitment to the safety of children and their communities produces action oriented results.