



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

2015 Local Government Excellence Awards Program Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

(All programs nominated must have been fully operational for a minimum of 12 months, prior to January 31, 2015)

Deadline for Nominations: March 3, 2015

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability**
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Children and Youth Investment Team (CAY-IT)

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: Catawba County, North Carolina

Jurisdiction population(s): 154,810

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented for at least 12 months prior to January 31, 2015, to be eligible. The start date [on or before January 31, 2014] should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: January Year: 2014

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, September 2015. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Mary Furtado

Title: Assistant County Manager Jurisdiction: Catawba County

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Amy Herman

Title: Program Manager Jurisdiction: Catawba County
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Program Abstract

The Children and Youth Investment Team (CAY-IT) of the Catawba County Department of Social Services seeks to streamline the process for finding permanent placements for children in foster care, resulting in less trauma for the child and faster decisions. CAY-IT brings together professionals from several different governmental units to work collaboratively in planning for permanent placements for foster children who have been in care longer than average. Planning for CAY-IT began in October 2013, and implementation began in January 2014. The State of North Carolina's goal is for children to remain in foster care no longer than one year. In March 2014, the department cared for 201 foster children. Twenty of them had been in care 36 months or more, and 45 more had been in care more than 24 but less than 36 months. Mental health and legal issues are often the reasons for longer-than-average placement times for these children. The CAY-IT team meets every other month and includes social workers, social work supervisors, guardians ad litem for the children, mental health professionals, and residential care professionals. The CAY-IT approach is already yielding cross-disciplinary discussions, which help the team move more quickly toward the best outcome for each child.

The Problem/Need for the Program

Professionals in the field of Child Protective Services, Foster Care and Adoption know that removing a child from his/her family is extremely disruptive. Therefore, they seek to reduce the time spent in foster care. The sooner the child can be moved to a permanent placement, the less trauma the child will experience. Some children experience multiple foster care placements, which can also be traumatic. The State's goal is to move these children into permanent placements within one year. Permanency can include return to the original family when safe, guardianship by a relative, adoption by a relative, or adoption by a non-relative. Although the department achieves this goal with most of the 200 to 250 foster child cases it handles each year, a troubling number were remaining in foster care longer than the goal. Some children "aged out" of care by turning 18 before finding a permanent home. In early 2014, out of 201 total children, 20 had been in foster care 36 months or more, and 45 more had been in care between 24 to 36 months.

Description of the Program

The CAY-IT team focuses on moving children in foster care into a permanent placement as soon as possible. Specifically, it is designed to meet the goal of achieving permanency in less than 36 months. A multi-disciplinary team meets every other month to discuss the children who are more difficult to place. This team includes social workers, administrators, employees of group homes for children, guardians ad litem (who represent the children's interests in court), and clinicians from Family NET, a youth and children's behavioral healthcare unit. By bringing together professional counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists with social workers and liaisons with the legal system, this team is able to review the cases from multiple perspectives. To keep the team focused on the purpose of the meetings, framed photos of the children being discussed are hung on the meeting room walls. The CAY-IT team meets every other month and typically discusses seven or eight children per meeting. Before the meeting, members are sent notes about the children's cases for their review.

The group discusses what barriers exist to prevent the child from moving to a permanent placement. In some cases, these children are in a state of legal limbo as a court ruling is needed to free them for adoption or other permanent placement. In other cases, the children are legally cleared for adoption but have mental health needs that are preventing placement. Many of these children are teenagers, who are historically more difficult to place. For example, in March of 2014, 20 of 201 children had been in foster care 36 months or more. Fifteen were between the ages of 12-18, 3 were between 6 and 11, and 2 were ages birth to 5. Forty-five more children had

been in care over 24 months, but not as long as 36 months. Of these, 30 were 12-18, 10 were 6-11, and 5 were age birth to 5.

In some cases, these children are placed with multiple foster families, which further disrupts their lives. Another goal of the team is to reduce the number of foster care placements for these children. By discussing these cases in team meetings, social workers may be able to head off a disrupted foster care placement by taking immediate action when a problem appears. Since beginning in January 2014, the cases reviewed have expanded to address other foster children's needs. In some cases, these children have been in foster care 24 months or more, but not as long as 36 months. "While this new team focuses on children in care 36 months or longer, it is often a pretty short trip for those in care 24 months or more to reach this point in time," commented a social work manager. "From a manager's perspective, the team conversations and suggestions that are generated in this meeting already are proving to give a lot of insight into the types of activities and work that can be done with the children in care over 24 months. This can result in some of them not ending up on our list to discuss at 36 months. That is good prevention work."

The CAY-IT team has also resulted in a united effort to reach the goals that are best for these children. Those participating have noted that there is no evidence of outside agendas or attempts to make unilateral decisions without team input. As a result, the professionals can move forward more quickly in making decisions that are in the best interests of the children and their families.

Responding to Economic Downturn

The CAY-IT approach uses existing resources to facilitate a faster transition to permanency for children in foster care. This approach is better for the child, since it results in less trauma compared to a lengthy process. It also saves staff time by focusing on the most difficult cases together in a face-to-face meeting, compared to many smaller meetings and email exchanges. By using the counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists of Family NET, which provides behavioral healthcare to youth and children, the department combines the professional competencies of this group with those of its social workers, who often see different parts of the situation. Since Family NET is already a part of the department, no extra expense is incurred by consulting with these professionals.

The team also includes guardians ad litem, who are volunteers representing the children's interest in legal cases. These specially trained volunteers bring their own unique perspectives to the table, allowing all sides of the case to be discussed at the same time.

When appropriate, staff from the county's group homes for children attend the meetings, bringing their observations to the process.

This approach saves time, paperwork and cost through shared decision making.

Use of Technology

This program uses email to distribute case summaries to team members. A database is used to track details of client cases.

Cost of the Program

This team relies on persons who are currently on staff (social workers and Family NET personnel) and volunteers (guardians ad litem), so there is no additional cost to the county. In our county, Family NET, the county's behavioral health care program for teens and children, is a part of the Department of Social Services. In other counties where this is not the case, staff would have to create an incentive for non-staff members to attend the meetings, although some might be willing to attend as part of their normal caseload.

Results/Success of Program

Although the CAY-IT approach is fairly new, it has already yielded results. It has:

1. Identified areas in which social workers may need additional training and support.
2. Identified specific issues the agency needs to explore and revise, including policies and procedures.
3. Enhanced the spirit of teamwork, collaboration and ownership.
4. In July 2014, 28 children had been in foster care for 36 months or more. As of February 2015, 21% of those children have achieved permanency.

Additional improvements in the placement process are expected as the program continues.

Worthiness of an Award

1. It improves the administration of an existing county government program (permanency planning for children in foster care) by bringing a wide range of expertise to the planning process. No longer are social workers making decisions without input from partners from the mental health and legal systems, which also impact these children. The result is a faster, better decision-making process.

2. It promotes intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared problems. By pulling together different units that work on different parts of a child's treatment program, the CAY-IT team helps develop a more holistic approach to improving the child's life. It is well-known by adoption and foster care workers that foster care should be used for as short a time as needed, and the child should not be subjected to numerous foster care placements. By analyzing as a group what stands in the way of moving toward permanence, children can be moved through the system more quickly, resulting in less trauma to the child.

The CAY-IT team has been in use since January 2014. During this time, it has improved communication between involved professionals and has allowed persons from different disciplines to become aware of different aspects of the child's needs.