



IMPROVING CHILD PROTECTION REPORTING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

Each year, thousands of families are reported to child protective services (CPS), but their situations do not reach the threshold for abuse and neglect. Nationally, in FY 2020, almost 49% of referrals alleging maltreatment were screened out, almost 1.8 million calls.¹

In New Hampshire in FY 2020, about 43% of the 18,825 calls made to the Department of Child and Youth Services (DCYF) were screened out.² When calls are screened in, only a small percentage (about 8%) of the reports are “founded,” a policy or statutory designation indicating that child maltreatment was substantiated.³

Whether to report a concern about a child is a decision point that can create inequity. Individual bias can influence a decision to report, and some professionals report because they feel required to—even without concerns of abuse or neglect. Some people report because they want to help a family with obvious needs and know of no other options.

¹ US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2022). *Child maltreatment 2020*. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>

² US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. (2021). *Child maltreatment 2019*. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

³ New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Division for Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) (n.d.) 2020 *DCYF data book*. <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt476/files/documents/2021-11/dcyf-data-book-2020.pdf>.

Ultimately, current data suggest that there are challenges in the identification and reporting of child maltreatment concerns. These challenges are important to address because child abuse and neglect referrals have a substantial impact on children, families, and child protection systems.

A NEW WAY TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

A **community response guide** is a way to support someone who is trying to decide if they should call child protection, whether or not they are mandated to do so. It also offers a new way for the community to connect families who do not need CPS intervention with the support that they need.

Evident Change's *Community Response Guide* helps communities come together to collaboratively develop an accurate tool that helps create more equitable reporting practices tailored to their needs. The public, online guide includes decision trees for neglect or abuse concerns, linked to a regularly updated roster of local prevention agencies. The result is a real-time decision aid that helps reporters and concerned community members understand and consider the range of local options to help families.

In New Hampshire, where all residents are considered mandated reporters, DCYF, local nonprofit leaders, and members of the local community are working to improve the outcomes of reporting in their state by putting this tool in the hands of all residents to help guide this very tough and complex decision.

PROJECT PARTNERS

With partnership from Casey Family Programs, Evident Change staff and a team from New Hampshire are creating a community response guide for the state. The New Hampshire team is a diverse group of stakeholders that includes educators, representatives from nonprofit organizations and community agencies, community advocates, parents who have experienced CPS interventions, parents who have used community resources, DCYF staff, representatives from mandatory reporter training and advocacy organizations, medical and mental health care providers, court representatives, prevention partners, law enforcement representatives, family resource center representatives, and more.

GOALS

This project will give New Hampshire residents an online tool that provides useful guidance to help them get families the kind of assistance they need, whether that is intervention from child protection or a connection with a community organization. Ultimately, DCYF hopes to achieve the following.⁴

- **For families:** Ensure that families are connected to needed resources and culturally relevant services in their community, experience CPS involvement only when it is needed, and feel more comfortable receiving support from professionals in their community.
- **For potential reporters:** Provide reporters with a tool that would support them in making accurate and equitable reporting decisions, and that offers clear guidance about when to report and when to use the available alternatives.
- **For DCYF:** Reserve more time and resources to engage with families who truly require a child protection response due to abuse and neglect concerns.

APPROACH

The project's innovative approach aims to include community members' experiences and guidance at every phase of the work. The first phase of the project focused on data and research initiatives to examine the climate and trends of reporting across the state. Using those data, the project team started the guide "from scratch," with people from the community involved at every point in the process.

The approach is already bridging important gaps. Evident Change program specialist Emerson Ives highlighted the unique quality of this collaboration. "We have had some great discussions and have been able to unpack some of the complexities around reporting like never before," said Ives. "We ask folks with the most experience, both lived and professional, to guide the discussions. We're committed to the process as much as the product."

Racial equity is also a priority. In addition to creating a diverse workgroup, the project team conducted racial equity "impact mapping" to examine disproportionalities in the impact reporting has on people by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other variables.

Finally, the project has created a new prevention service role called the "community navigator," designed to support people in using the community response guide. "The guide may advise you to make a report, provide a resource, or call the navigator to talk through your concern," Ives explained. If CPS intervention is not

⁴ For a full description of project goals, see the project's theory of change on page 5.

necessary, but the family needs support of some kind, the community navigator will help the reporter support the family in an appropriate way. The navigator will also provide direct outreach and support to families. The role will be housed within a community agency to enhance trust, particularly among community members who have already been impacted by child protection.

TIMELINE

The project began in the fall of 2021. Design and testing of the community response guide are expected to be completed in 2023, with training and rollout occurring in 2024.⁵

LEARN MORE

To learn more about this project, contact Phil Decter, Director of Child Welfare, at pdecter@evidentchange.org or Emerson Ives, eives@evidentchange.org. Both can also be reached by phone at (800) 306-6223.

ABOUT EVIDENT CHANGE

Evident Change is a national nonprofit organization that uses data and research to improve social systems. We believe systems should help people achieve their greatest potential, not create barriers to their success.

⁵ A full project summary with activities and timelines appears at the end of this document.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE GUIDE THEORY OF CHANGE



FAMILIES



REPORTERS



CPS

What Problems Are We Trying to Solve for Whom?

Some families:

- Cannot easily identify and access support to address their needs in their community;
- Are inappropriately reported to child protective services (CPS) when community-based services could better serve them;
- Experience trauma from unnecessary reports to child protection agencies; and
- Are impacted disproportionately by the child protection system based on oppression and bias related to factors such as poverty, race, geographic location, family structure, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression.

Some reporters:

- Do not fully understand reporting thresholds or requirements and agency response protocols;
- Report to CPS only because they are not aware of meaningful alternatives;
- Struggle to refer families to community supports because reporters lack knowledge of available community services and confidence in offering supports;
- Are uncertain, hesitant, or lack confidence about when to report concerns to CPS; and
- Make reporting decisions based on biases, which means those decisions can be inaccurate and inconsistent.

Child protection systems:

- Have limited options to respond to families called in for issues that are not appropriate for a CPS response, which may result in inaccurate, inconsistent, or inequitable screening decisions;
- Divert limited resources to processing and responding to referrals that do not warrant a CPS response;
- Investigate and interact with families who would have benefitted from prevention services earlier; and
- Cannot devote the time they wish to reported families who require a CPS response due to abuse and neglect concerns.

What Will Be Different? What Is the Vision?

- Are connected to needed resources and culturally relevant services in their community;
- Experience CPS involvement only when it is needed; and
- Experience support and feel more at ease with seeking support from professionals in their community.

- Understand that alternative services exist for the families they are concerned about;
- Have clarity and confidence about when to report and when to use the available alternatives;
- More easily connect families to prevention services; and
- Make accurate, equitable, and consistent reporting decisions.

- Will receive fewer calls that do not require a CPS response or are not about child abuse/neglect;
- Will have more time for CPS staff to engage with families who truly require a response related to abuse and neglect concerns; and
- Will have more time for screeners to engage with reporters.

TOWARD THE VISION: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY RESPONSE GUIDE TO ENSURE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ARE SAFER AND ABLE TO GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEED

The challenges that reporters face may result in reporting that:

- Is not aligned with state legal thresholds for a child protection response;
- Is biased by factors such as poverty, race, geographic location, family structure, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression;
- Is inconsistent; and
- Leads to child protection investigations for families who could or should be served outside of the system.

Evident Change’s community response guide aims to address these challenges by helping communities collaboratively develop accurate, equitable, and consistent CPS reporting practices tailored to their needs. The public, online guide includes questions for professionals and concerned citizens about the children and families they are seeing to help them find the best help for the child. Sometimes this might be to call CPS; sometimes this might be to connect to a community response navigator or a local community provider. The result is a real-time decision aid that helps professionals and concerned community members understand and consider the range of local options to help families.

The guide’s development process is critical. Community response guides are created collaboratively by a community team of CPS staff and leadership and community stakeholders, including educators; medical and mental health practitioners; law enforcement; children’s advocates; and parents, caregivers, and others with lived experience of the child welfare system. The participatory nature of guide development becomes an intervention in itself, helping this diverse array of stakeholders to imagine new ways of improving child and family safety and well-being.

Communities that develop a community response guide will . . .

- Bring critical community stakeholders together across CPS, community-based service providers, people with lived experience, and other professionals in the community to build trust and develop partnerships.
- Achieve better understanding of:
 - » The existing community-based services network and improvement strategies;
 - » Reporters, their decision-making process, and their understanding of available community-based services;
 - » Who gets reported to CPS (including by race and socioeconomic status) by whom; and whether they are best served by CPS, their community, or not at all; and
 - » Statutes, policies, and practices that shape reporting behaviors.
- Work toward developing a shared vision for a meaningful continuum of responses for their local community that includes the roles of both CPS and community-based services to support children and families.
- Make recommended changes to reporting policy, practice, and statute where needed.
- Design and implement a web-based guide that professionals and community members can use when concerns about family safety or well-being arise.
- Help ensure children and families are safer and are able to get the support they need.

PROJECT SUMMARY

DISCOVERY (2021)

- **Convened team:** The project partners created a team that included New Hampshire community members and professionals who have experience with making a report or being reported.
- **Policy and practice review:** Evident Change reviewed reporting data and other materials provided by key parties to become familiar with local practices, reporter training, and statewide expectations.
- **Data review:** Evident Change reviewed existing data related to reporting to identify trends and patterns.
- **Prevention services inventory and needs analysis:** Evident Change facilitated the cataloging of existing prevention and universal services and compared them with projected needs.
- **Community stakeholder inventory and readiness:** Evident Change identified essential constituencies and conducted a statewide survey, which received more than 700 responses, to better understand constituents' views on making reports and the experience of being reported on.
- **Racial equity impact analysis and mapping:** Evident Change used information from the activities above, supplemented as needed with additional activities, to analyze the project's racial equity impact on child protection reporting behavior.
- **Discovery presentation:** Evident Change presented findings from the above activities to all key project parties. This information was then used to create the project's theory of change.

WORKGROUP ACTIVITIES (2021–2023)

- The advisory team, the workgroup, and Evident Change worked together to study New Hampshire reporting statutes and thresholds and to begin the creation of the guide. Using statutes and DCYF policy as a guide, the groups discussed a number of questions, including, *What concerns should always go to DCYF? What concerns should never go to child protection? What will be screened out if it is called in? Could we route that to a different organization?*
- The workgroup worked virtually during the first half of 2022 to create the manual, logic design, item definitions, and examples for the guide.
- During an onsite visit in September 2022, Evident Change provided the workgroup and advisory team with draft documents that outlined the overall logic design and showed how the tool would function once automated.
- Evident Change has been using the logic structures to create drafts of the remaining concern categories. The workgroup will review the draft version and provide final feedback in early 2023.
- The draft *Community Response Guide* is expected in early 2023.

INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGN AND CREATION OF COMMUNITY RESPONSE NAVIGATOR (2021–2023)

- Post and hire the community navigator position.
- Create data-collection ownership-sharing agreements.
- Plan for implementation.

EVALUATION PLANNING (2022)

- Created a theory of change that serves as the bedrock for all evaluation efforts going forward.
- Created a menu of evaluation options based on the theory of change.
- Explored potential data sources that can be used to evaluate implementation.
- Finalized a long-term evaluation and continuous quality improvement (CQI) plan.

IRR TEST AND FIELD TEST DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS (2023)

WEB-BASED DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM (2024)

TRAINING AND OUTREACH (2024)

SUSTAINABILITY CQI (2024)