

## Differential or Alternative Response

There are three core elements to a successful Differential Response: a broader response, family engagement and community partnership.

### I. Broader Response:

The focus for Child Welfare with Differential Response remains on safety, but the system also recognizes that not every family is well served in the traditional investigative path. While the current statutory definitions of abuse and neglect remain in place, with a differential response, the agency is able to help more families before their difficulties escalate to the point of needing court intervention or criminal investigation. There are three potential pathways, each of which relies on a collaboration between Child Welfare and community partners and organizations.

Path 1. Community Response: This is used when the family is experiencing problems, but they do not yet rise to the level of statutory abuse or neglect. These families are “screened out” in the current system. In this path, every family is also linked to services in the community through partnerships with local community organizations.

Path 2. Child Welfare and Community Response: This path is used when the report meets the statutory definition of abuse or neglect and an assessment by Child Welfare identifies either that the child is safe, or that there is low to moderate risk of future harm and the family is willing to work voluntarily to address the issues impacting child safety. The agency works with community organizations and partners to identify the family strengths and needs. If at any time, the situation deteriorates and the child is again unsafe, the family is re-referred and Child Welfare takes the lead.

Path 3. Child Welfare Response: In this path, the child is assessed as unsafe and at moderate to high risk of continued abuse. In this path, action can be taken with or without family consent or agreement and the court system is involved. Criminal charges may be filed as well. This path is the most common and traditional child welfare response.

Cases can move between Path 2 and 3, depending on how engaged the family is and how well the agency and community organizations work with the family.

## II. Family Engagement

Parents know what needs to happen to improve their capacity to care for their children. They generally know who they can rely on in their family system to assist them in identifying their needs and what interventions will be most effective. When family has a voice in the decision-making process, they generally have a greater investment in the process. In addition, families who have been involved in the system have a different perspective from those that work within the system. It is important to engage families in the process of designing the system.

## III. Community Partnership

Child Welfare can not protect children and help families without the involvement of the communities in which the families live. Differential response requires that the rules regarding information sharing, clarity of roles, use of authority, and development of mutual trust in decision making all be addressed in the effort to create strong and effective partnerships. Service gaps that exist in communities can be addressed when providers, consumers and the Child Welfare agency come together to do this work.

There must also be access to a broad array of culturally specific services and resources for families. Both formal services (e.g. domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse) and informal

services (e.g. neighborhood collaborations, faith community supports, volunteer groups) need to be developed to support families. Finally, especially for families that are experiencing neglect, basic needs services (housing assistance, child care, employment) are essential to their ability to address their issues and safely parent their children.

Based on information from “Implementing Differential Response in California, Breakthrough Series Collaborative, Casey Family Programs” 2007