
Statewide Children's Wraparound Initiative

April 27, 2011

"I don't want Michelle to leave," 9-year-old Quentin complains when asked how he feels about his Department of Human Services caseworker no longer being a part of his life. But he smiles at the suggestion of a pizza party to mark her departure.

No one likes to see someone they care about leave. But for Quentin – who's suffered neglect, witnessed violence and drug abuse, felt abandoned by parents and been shuffled through multiple foster homes – the loss of a protective adult could be horribly traumatic.

Six months ago, he likely would have erupted in an hours-long tantrum, behavior consistent with his diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder. But in his more stable life today, Quentin is asked about his feelings and quickly reassured. Soon he's back playing video games and only half-heartedly listening to the six adults focused on him.

Quentin is one of about 100 children in foster care who will receive services this year through the Washington County Wraparound Demonstration Project, one of three demonstration projects set in motion by the Statewide Children's Wraparound Initiative passed by the Legislature in 2009. The local project is coordinated by the Washington County Mental Health Program and reflects the state's efforts to safely and equitably reduce the number of children in foster care. With its emphasis on a coordinated, team-based approach that breaks down traditional silos, the Wraparound Initiative is also in sync with broader reforms to the state's health care delivery system. In Quentin's case, all involved agree, the project has helped him and his family become more stable and resulted in the closure of his DHS case. He now lives with his mother, Jessica Grant, her partner and two half siblings in a tidy home in Aloha.

One of the primary goals of this phase of the Statewide Children's Wraparound Initiative is to reduce the amount of time a child is in foster care and is dependent on high cost state services. This can only be accomplished by a multi system approach to meet the needs and capitalize on the strengths of the child and family. In the Wraparound process the family and child regain control of their lives so they can live as independently as possible.

"I'm so proud of your participation in this program," Judge Jim Fun tells Grant in February when he ends DHS involvement in the case. "The goal is to return decision-making to the family because no one knows the needs like the family," he says in recognizing the philosophy of the wraparound project to empower and support families. DHS is no longer needed, he says, because the Wraparound team will continue to be a presence in their lives.

Grant could not agree more. "They've helped me be strong so I can be strong for him," says the 32-year-old mother, who has been drug free for more than a year. "He's so much happier," she says of Quentin after the hearing.

Five months earlier, Quentin had been out of foster care and living with his mother for only one month when she realized she didn't have the skills to parent her older son. She agreed to be part of the local

project, which in its demonstration phase focuses on children who are in the custody of child welfare, have been in at least four foster homes and may have behavioral and emotional issues, such as depression or anxiety resulting from post traumatic stress disorder. Children with histories of trauma can have a variety of emotional and behavioral symptoms directly attributed to the impact of trauma on their growing and developing brains. For Quentin, this manifested as excessive anxiety at times when he was alone, such as bedtime, and also in a great fear of meeting new people. When exposed to these triggers, Quentin often lost control and acted out.

Jill Archer, Senior Program Coordinator of Child and Family Mental Health Services for the Washington County Mental Health Program, oversees the demonstration project. She says the project uses practices that have been clinically proven to help distressed children. Through a highly skilled care coordinator, the project brings together all of the systems working with the child and family, as well as their extended family, friends and support community. The approach, she says, helps maximize resources and address all of the complex and inter-related issues facing the children, including the child's psychological and emotional needs, behavioral issues and social skills, family stresses and parenting skills as well as medical treatment and even legal issues. Each of the county's four care coordinators, all with master's degrees in social work and years of experience, oversees about 15 cases.

Wraparound care coordinator Brian Whitmer entered Quentin's life in September – just as Grant says she was ready to give up on her son. The mother was living with her two sons at Oxford House, a non-profit that offers communal housing to people in recovery. She actively participated in an intensive outpatient drug and alcohol treatment program to further her own recovery, which helped her regain custody of her sons. She continues to participate in recovery activities.

As Grant tells it, Quentin responded to Whitmer's arrival as he would have to any stranger: He started screaming and hitting other children in the home, threw over the coffee table and ran out of the house and down the street.

The situation is much different five months later. At a monthly team meeting in the family's new home, Whitmer asks Quentin what's on his mind. "I've been good," the boy proudly announces from his perch on the couch. Whitmer is able to check off a number of goals that the family has met: Quentin is performing at grade level in school, the family has set up a routine for bedtime that's relieved his anxiety, the boy is involved in two after school activities each week to help develop his self-confidence and social skills and the family has engaged in collaborative problem-solving. Quentin's school has been a part of his Wraparound team and has helped make school a more successful experience for him.

Whitmer describes the approach as looking beyond the crisis to find out what the child needs and to build on the child's and family's strengths. "If kids knew how to communicate what they need, they would," he says.

One crisis, for example, is that Quentin’s anxiety reaches a peak at night and he acts out. But what does he need? He needs to feel safe, says Whitmer. To make him feel more secure, the team helped the family develop a structured routine of dinner, homework, TV and bedtime at 9 p.m. sharp. The boy wears a watch so he knows when bedtime is approaching and can modulate his anxiety. His mom gives him backrubs to calm him. As a result, there are fewer crises.

Still, there are challenges. Grant is starting job-training, for example, which means Quentin will need to spend time in daycare and that’s likely to trigger his anxiety. Quentin says he has no friends at school. Grant says it’s still difficult to take him into the community because he over-reacts to stimuli and acts out.

The group talks through options and comes up with a list of things for the family to do, including finding out if Grant can start job-training later in the day. Family partner Anna Guillen, caseworker Michelle Hilbert and mentor Seth Mankoski detail what’s happened over the last month and what they will do in the coming month. Family partners are an important part of a Wraparound team and link the family with much needed supports, such as short term assistance with rent or other assistance to help with overall expenses. Basic necessities for an adequate living environment were obtained through the assistance provided by the Grant’s family partner.

The group ticks through the meeting agenda, and Whitmer asks about the number one goal for February: Ask the court to dismiss DHS from the case. Team members agree that they support the move, and Whitmer discusses the statement he will make in court on behalf of the team.

Caseworker Hilbert nods in agreement, saying later that the wraparound team is able to focus on the larger picture and provide long-term services and supports for the child and his family. She applauds the approach of making children part of the monthly meeting, helping them learn to express their concerns and being part of the solution.

If it weren’t for the wraparound project, says Hilbert, she would not be ready to close Quentin’s case. “I feel confident that if Jessica (Grant) says she needs help, there will be services. ... All families have problems, but wraparound gives them an opportunity to work on those problems.”

In court, Hilbert makes the recommendation that DHS be dismissed from the case. The children’s lawyer, Whitmer and Grant make statements of support. The judge agrees: “Mom, congratulations. Everyone is so very proud of you, so very proud.”

For more information about the Statewide Children’s Wraparound Initiative go to <http://www.oregon.gov/OHA/mentalhealth/wraparound/main.shtml> or contact Benjamin Hazelton at 503-945-6661 or Bill Bouska at 503-945-9717.