

**Evaluation of Oregon's  
Relief Nursery Program  
July 1, 2007 - June 30, 2008  
*Executive Summary***



*Submitted to:*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**F**ounded in 1976, there are currently 11 Relief Nurseries in the state of Oregon, and another 4 in development. This report includes data provided by 9 Relief Nurseries for 779 families and 954 children served during fiscal year 2008.

### Introduction

Relief Nurseries provide services to families at high risk of involvement with the child welfare system, including some who have current or previous child welfare involvement. Families receive a combination of center-based and home-based services depending on their level of need and the availability of services. While services vary among the Relief Nurseries, all Relief Nurseries provide therapeutic early childhood education in classroom settings, home visits, parent education classes and support groups, respite care, case management, and assistance accessing basic resources and other community services.

The Oregon Commission on Children and Families (OCCF) contracted with NPC Research to conduct the fiscal year 2008 evaluation of Relief Nursery Programs. This evaluation included four main objectives: (1) identifying key cross-program outcomes; (2) developing consistent cross-program data collection tools and systems; (3) supporting and improving cross program data collection; and (4) reporting on fiscal year 2008 program outcomes.

Key outcomes that were identified as most important to the Relief Nurseries, and which were included in the statewide data system are: (1) Improvement in family functioning; (2) Increased frequency of positive parent-child interactions; and (3) Reduction in the number of family risk factors. Key findings from each of these outcomes, as well as a small number of ancillary outcomes, are described below.



### Families Served by the Relief Nurseries

In fiscal year 2008, at least 779 families and 954 children were served by Oregon's Relief Nurseries. Of these families, primary caregivers were 46% Caucasian/White, 16% Hispanic, and 38% other race/ethnicities. In the current sample, 33% of the families were single parent families, and 71% of primary caregivers were unemployed at intake. On average, those families who left Relief Nursery services during fiscal year 2008 received about 13 months of services. For this report, outcomes were calculated based on changes in families over time, from intake to their next assessment (approximately 6 months following intake) and from intake to the second follow-up assessment (typically 12 months following intake). For parent and family-level outcomes, 392 families had an intake and an initial follow-up; 186 families had both an intake and a 12-month follow-up assessment. For child-level outcomes, 439 children had an intake and a second follow-up, and 187 children had an intake and a 12-month follow-up.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Note that to be included in these analyses, an intake assessment had to be present in the statewide data system; thus, approximately 300 families who enrolled prior to the implementation of this system could not be included.

## Relief Nurseries Improve Family Functioning, Parent-Child Interactions, and Engagement in Early Literacy Activities

Two of the primary goals of the Relief Nursery are to stabilize families and to improve the nature and quality of parent-child interactions. Families that are experiencing multiple challenges related to poverty and other circumstances have difficulty providing the safe, stable environments that children need for positive development. Research on early brain development has clearly documented that engaged, nurturing parenting supports the early attachment relationships that are critical to children's physical, social, and cognitive development, while harsh, disengaged, and unpredictable parenting is associated with child maltreatment and other negative outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Zeana, Boris, & Larrieu, 1997). Thus, improvements in these areas represent key outcomes for parents and children served by the Relief Nurseries.

The Relief Nursery evaluation includes two indicators designed to assess the quality of general family functioning and the frequency of positive parent-child interactions. These scales are completed by Relief Nursery staff at intake and every 6 months thereafter. The evaluation also includes a third measure that asks about the frequency of reading to children. Early reading to children has been found to be a key predictor of children's language and literacy development (Snow, 1993). Results found that there was statistically significant improvement on all three of these outcomes for parents participating in the Relief Nursery for at least 6 months. Specifically:

- The percentage of parents who were rated as having positive family functioning "most of the time" or "always" increased from 27% at intake to 34% at the 6-month follow-up. For parents participating at least 12 months, 23%

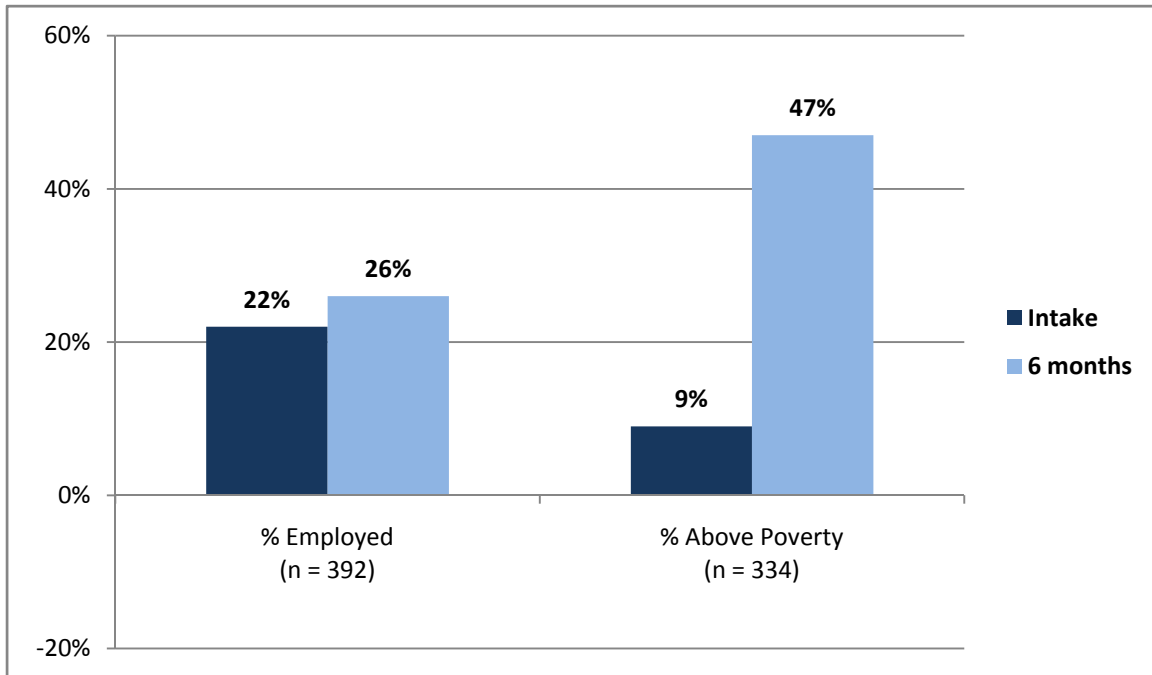
had positive family functioning at intake, compared to 40% at the 12 month follow-up.

- The frequency of positive parent-child interactions increased over time, with 52% of parents showing regular, positive interactions with their children at intake, compared to 61% at the first follow-up assessment. For families participating at least 12 months, 56% demonstrated consistent positive interactions at baseline, compared to 80% after one year of Relief Nursery services.
- At program intake, only 24% of parents read to their young children several times per week or more per week; however, after participating in the Relief Nurseries for at least 6 months this increased to 52%. For families participating at least 12 months, 19% read to their children several times per week or more at intake, compared to 64% at the 12-month assessment.

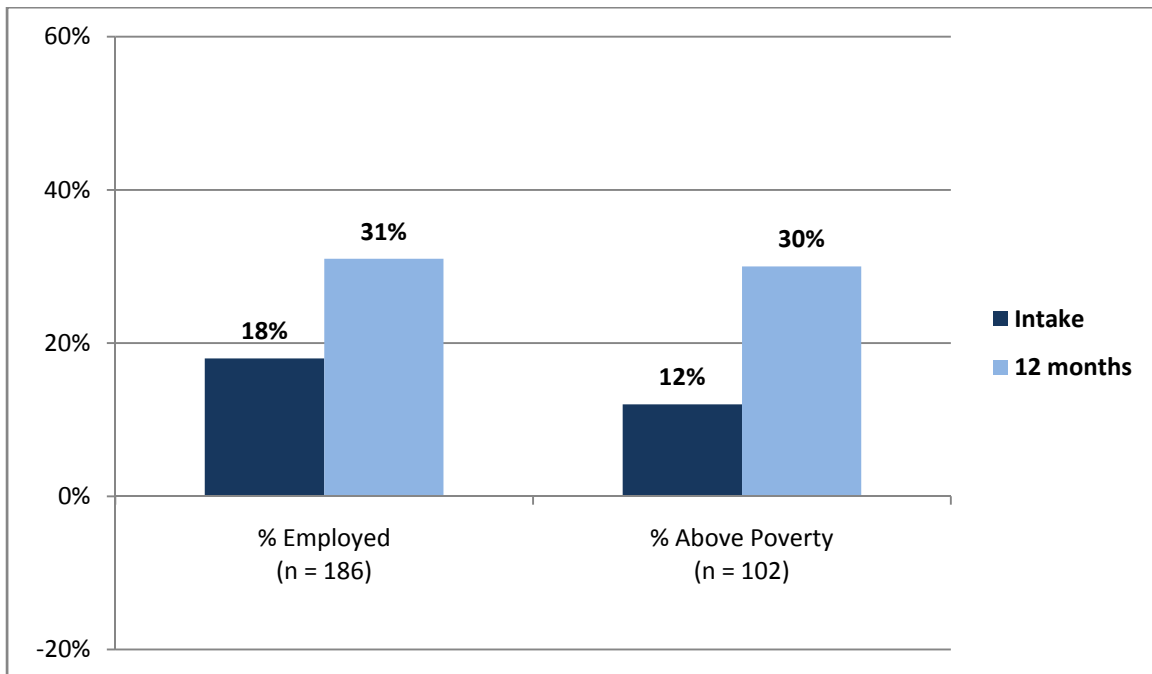
## Relief Nurseries Improve Family Economic Conditions and Health Outcomes

Relief Nurseries strive to help families become stable economically, by providing assistance connecting with job training, education, employment assistance, as well as with community resources such as WIC, TANF, child care subsidies, etc. A lack of resources to meet basic family needs has been consistently linked to increased risk for child abuse and neglect (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Relief Nurseries also work to ensure that all families are connected with a health care provider, have health insurance, and that children are receiving regular preventive health care. Results from this year's evaluation (see Figures 1a and 1b) found that the Relief Nurseries are having considerable success in these areas, nearly doubling the number of families that are employed, and helping to pull families out of poverty.

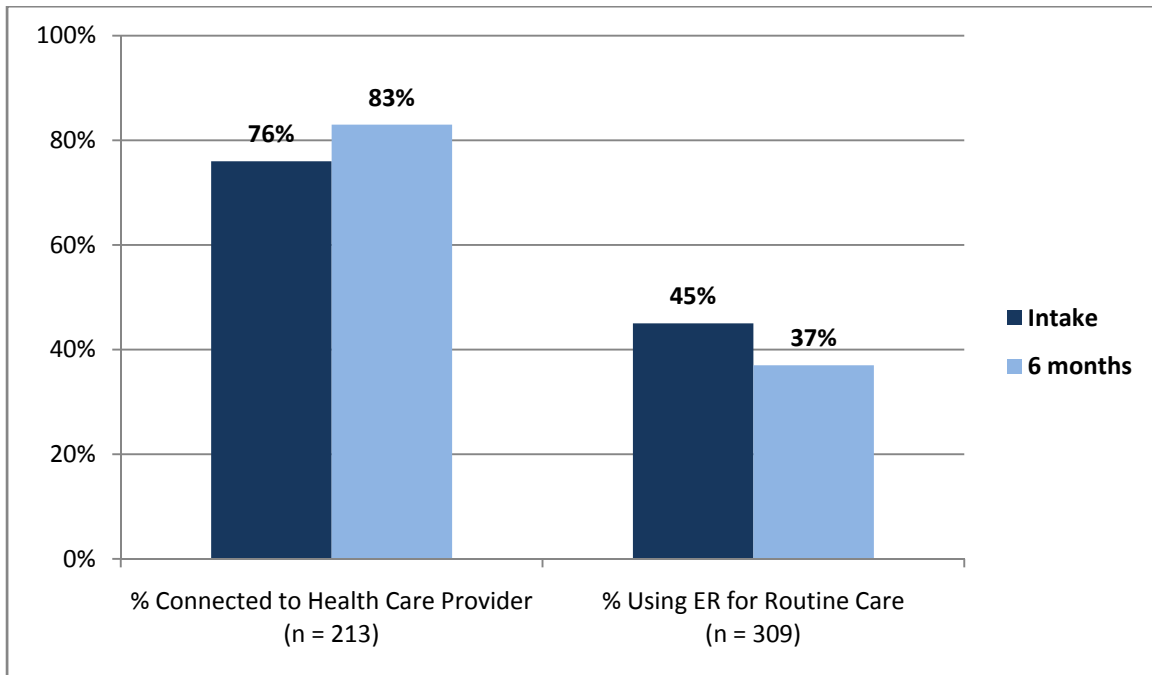
**Figure 1a. Self Sufficiency Outcomes: Intake to 6 Months**



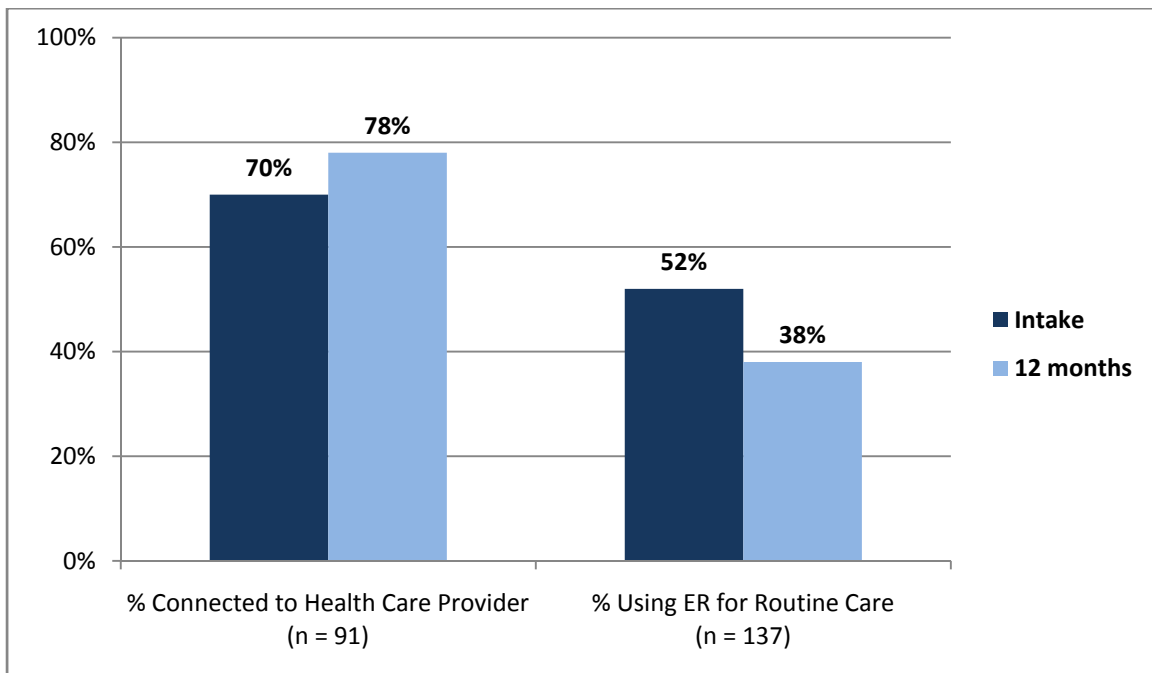
**Figure 1b. Self Sufficiency Outcomes: Intake to 12 Months**



**Figure 2a. Health Care Outcomes: Intake to 6 Months**



**Figure 2b. Health Care Outcomes: Intake to 12 Months**



## Relief Nurseries Decrease Overall Family Risk

Research on risk factors for child abuse and neglect suggests that while particular events and characteristics (e.g., poverty, childhood history of abuse) are clearly related to the increased likelihood that a parent will become abusive, that the *number* of risk factors experienced by parents and/or children may be even more important (Sameroff, 1993). For example, research on Oregon's Healthy Start program consistently finds that the more psychosocial risk factors that are present in a family, the more likely it is that abuse will occur—children from families with four or more risk factors are more than ten times as likely to be abused than those with no risk factors.

Relief Nurseries services appropriately focus on helping to reduce risk factors in families as a means for reducing risk for child maltreatment. At program entry, families are screened using a detailed 47-item risk assessment tool that includes issues such as child welfare and foster care involvement, mental and physical health, poverty, and family violence. The current data available for this year's evaluation includes 368 families assessed for risk at both intake and 6 months and 166 families assessed at both intake and approximately 12 months later. Results found that parents who participated in the Relief Nursery showed significant reduction in the number of risk factors in evidence:

- For families participating at least 6 months, the average number of risk factors reduced from **10.8** risk factors at intake to **8.5** risk factors.
- For families participating at least 12 months the average number of risk factors reduced from **11.4** risk factors at intake to **8** risk factors.

## CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

One of the key goals of the Relief Nurseries is to reduce families' level of involvement with the child welfare system, by working to reduce risk factors for child maltreatment, and helping to stabilize families so that children can live safely with their parents. To obtain data about child welfare involvement, NPC Research entered into a data sharing agreement with the Department of Human Services, office of Children, Adults and Families (CAFS). NPC Research provided information about each child served by the Relief Nurseries from July 1, 2007-December 31, 2007 (n=429 children) to CAFS staff, who then matched these children with existing child welfare records. Key findings from this analysis found:

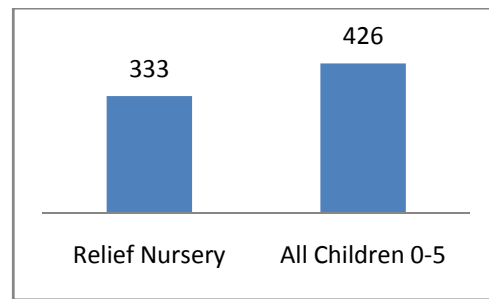
- ***Relief Nursery children are more likely than children in the general population to be involved with the child welfare system<sup>2</sup>:***
  - Out of 429 Relief Nursery children, 64 (14.9%) had ever had a founded abuse report, although the majority of these occurred prior to Relief Nursery enrollment. 36% of these children had one referral, 25% had two referrals, 22% had three referrals, and 17% had more than 4 referrals. A total of 147 founded reports were made on these 64 children. Statewide, only about 3% of children ages 0-3 have a founded abuse report.
- ***Relief Nursery children are likely to be involved with child welfare services because of parental neglect.*** In all, there were 147 lifetime founded reports on 64 children served by the Relief Nursery. Sixty percent (60%) of abuse incidents

<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that a significant number of maltreatment reports were missing the date of the report in the child welfare data system so it was impossible to tell when the report occurred relative to Relief Nursery enrollment.

were for parental neglect; 32% of abuse incidents were for threat of harm to the child; 4% of abuse incidents were for physical abuse; and 3.7% were for prenatal drug exposure). Statewide, in 2007 about 34% of abuse incidents were for neglect; 49% for threat of harm, 7% for physical abuse. Thus, it appears that the Relief Nursery population is more likely to be involved with child welfare because of issues related to parental neglect than is the case for the general population.

- Relief Nursery children spent less time in out-of-home placements, on average, than other similar-aged children.** Statewide statistics show that in FY 2006 and FY2007, children ages 0-5 who exited foster care spent a median of 411 and 441 days, respectively, in out of home care. For Relief Nursery children exiting care in 2007 or 2008, the average length of stay was 333 days. Thus, it appears that children enrolled in the Relief Nursery spent significantly less time in out-of-home care than children in the general child welfare population. The average cost saved per day that a child is not in foster care is at least \$13.30, thus this savings of 93 days represents at least \$1,237 saved per child in foster care reimbursements.
- Relief Nursery children are likely to be reunified with their parents.** Sixteen children had open child welfare cases at the time the child's family was enrolled in the Relief Nursery; of these, 9 were reunified (100% of those exiting care), and 7 were still in care at the end of the study window. Eleven children had placements occurring after enrollment; of these 5 (100%) were reunified, and 6 were still in care at the end of the study window. Statewide, about 64% of all children (ages 0-17) exiting foster care are reunified.

**Figure 3. Average Days in Foster Care**



- Twenty children were in foster care prior to being enrolled in the Relief Nursery; of these, 12 (60%) entered the Relief Nursery within 60 days of exiting foster care, suggesting that the Relief Nursery plays an important role in helping support families who have recently been reunified with their children.

## Summary and Recommendations

The findings from this evaluation highlight the success of Relief Nurseries in achieving important outcomes for children and families. Working with families at very high risk for poor outcomes, the Relief Nursery has had tremendous success in reducing family risk factors associated with child maltreatment, and supporting families to provide safe, stable environments for their children. Specifically, families who remained in the Relief Nursery for at least 6 months showed significant positive improvements in terms of their parenting quality, family functioning, economic situation, and health-care linkages. Moreover, Relief Nurseries are successfully accomplishing the challenging task of reducing family risk factors associated with abuse and neglect.

While data that directly examines the impact of the Relief Nurseries on families' child welfare involvement is not available, the information obtained from the child welfare system suggests several promising outcomes of the Relief Nurseries. First, it appears that the Relief Nurseries are working with a



number of families who either have recently been involved with child welfare, or who become involved with child welfare soon after enrolling in the Relief Nursery. These families appear to have a high likelihood of reunification, and it may be that the Relief Nursery is helping to reduce the time spent in foster care for these children. Certainly, the average length of stay for children in the Relief Nursery is considerably less than for the general statewide population. Data that would allow a better comparison between Relief Nursery children and children in the child welfare system who are similar to those served by the Relief Nursery are critical to supporting the notion that the Relief Nursery does help reduce the time spent in foster care by these children. Taken together, data collected by the Relief Nurseries, as well as the available child welfare data suggest the importance of continued support for the services provided by the Relief Nurseries.

## **DATA SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS**

The past year has seen considerable improvements in the statewide data collection system. However, quality control issues remain in terms of ensuring consistency in data collection across all Relief Nurseries, and improving the collection of complete and timely follow-up assessments. It may also be important to expand the statewide data system to begin to capture basic information about the frequency and type of services delivered, so that the amount of services provided to families can be accurately assessed and documented. This would help to better clarify and define the Relief Nursery program model, as well as helping new Relief Nurseries to be better able to develop and replicate the key services. Finally, the electronic interface between the statewide system and Relief Nursery-specific data systems needs further work to ensure that the data transfer process can be conducted smoothly. These steps will help to strengthen the ability of the statewide data system to accurately report on both implementation and outcomes for the Oregon Relief Nurseries.