Evaluation of Oregon's Relief Nursery Program: 2005-2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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T he Oregon Commission on Children and Families (OCCF) contracted with NPC Research to conduct the fiscal year (FY) 2005-2006 evaluation of Relief Nursery Programs. Relief Nurseries serve families in Albany, Bend, Cottage Grove, Eugene, Medford, Portland, Roseburg, and Salem. According to data provided to NPC Research by the Nurseries, over 600 families participated in the Nursery programs during fiscal year 2005-2006.

Relief Nurseries provide core services to high-risk families, and outreach services based on community needs. Core services include therapeutic early childhood services (and related services such as food and transportation), home visits, parent education classes, respite care, and alcohol and drug recovery support. Relief Nurseries demonstrate positive outcomes for families, including improving daily family functioning and the quality of parent-child interactions, and reducing overall risk.

Relief Nurseries Improve Daily Family Functioning and Parent-Child Interactions

The evaluation of Relief Nurseries included measures of two key areas of parenting quality. The first, family functioning, includes topics such as the presence of consistent daily routines, the family's ability to handle these routines, and the availability of positive social support. The second measures the quality of parent-child interactions, specifically, whether or not the parent expresses warmth and love, shows sensitivity and responsiveness to the child, uses firm, effective guidance, and creates a developmentally supportive learning environment.

Results found that after only 6 months of involvement in Relief Nursery services, participants significantly improved both their overall family functioning and the quality of their parent-child interactions. Overall, after 6 months in the program:

- The number of families demonstrating positive family functioning increased from 36% to 78%

- The number of families demonstrating positive parent-child interactions increased from 46% to 78%

Relief Nurseries Decrease Overall Family Risk

At program entry, families are screened using a detailed 65-item risk assessment tool that includes such issues as child welfare and foster care involvement, mental and physical health, poverty, and criminality. This evaluation found that Relief Nursery families are at very high risk at program entry:

- 100% of the families served by Relief Nurseries had at least 8 risk factors

- 75% of the families had 19 or more risk factors.

The average number of risk factors per family at program entry was 17. This indicates a very high level of risk. However, when assessed again at program exit, families showed a significant reduction in their number of risk factors, lowering risk by an average of two mutable risk factors per family[1]. Further, results found that the greater the level of risk reduction for families, the less likely it was that children would be involved in child welfare or placed in foster care homes subsequent to Relief Nursery participation. Specifically:

- For every two risk factors reduced over time, the risk of maltreatment was cut in half.

Both of these findings imply potential benefits for families as well as potential cost savings for taxpayers.

Summary and Recommendations

The findings from this evaluation highlight the success of the Relief Nurseries in improving the quality of parenting among these high-risk parents. Moreover, Relief Nurseries are successfully accomplishing the challenging task of reducing family risk factors. These findings are especially important in light of the documented relationship between risk reduction and reduced likelihood of subsequent child welfare involvement. These results suggest the importance of continued support for the core services provided by the Relief Nurseries.

While these results are encouraging, it should be noted that problems with the available data hindered the ability of the evaluation to document a broader array of outcomes, or to track outcomes for a longer period of time. While Relief Nurseries have worked over the past year to develop more consistency in defining shared outcomes and collecting complete and accurate data, without infrastructure support for data quality control and data management, it is difficult for multi-site, individualized programs like the Relief Nurseries to implement adequate data collection systems. Thus, a primary recommendation from this evaluation effort is to improve the quality of cross-site data collection and management. Ideally, an evaluation system would be developed that would capture the important cross-site process and outcome information, would allow Nurseries easy access to information, and which would include adequate staff time for data processing and data management. Improvements in data systems would benefit programs by allowing future evaluations to better document the important work that is being done by the Relief Nurseries.

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[1] The risk factor checklist includes 24 non-mutable risk factors and 38 mutable risk factors.