

FAST Program Provides Connections for Youth and Families

*Pierce County Mental Health Report
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In October 2000, FAST (Family Access To Stabilization and Teaming) hit the ground running with its first referral. Since then, more than 600 children and families have participated in FAST services. Though the services are relatively new, FAST has achieved an outstanding success rate and was featured at recent state mental health and child welfare conferences. In October, FAST will present for the statewide child welfare conference in Minnesota, and in November will provide FAST training for northern California counties. Mental Health as well as Child Welfare administrators and providers have expressed interest in replicating this service in other regions within Washington State.

The purpose of FAST is to provide intensive support services to families when their children are at risk of being hospitalized due to mental health emergencies or placed in foster care because of a family crisis. At times, a youth will be referred after having lost a number of foster and group home placements due to behavioral issues. Support may be for one night or it may be for three months, depending on the needs of the family. The goal is to support the family and their children to build a plan that they believe will give them the best chance to live a safe and fulfilling life together. About half of the referrals to the program come from area hospitals, emergency rooms, and crisis triage; the other half come from throughout the foster care system, where placements are not working and the child is either homeless or without a family.

“Parents and their children can identify the things that they need to stay together. When we listen to them and help to find ways to meet those needs, remarkable things happen,” explained Kevin Campbell, Intensive Resources Director at Catholic Community Services. “We meet families and children in very difficult situations; without help their only choice may be to send their child to a psychiatric hospital or to foster care. With help from family members, school teachers, neighbors and community-based professionals, almost all of these children have stayed with their family or extended family,” Campbell said, adding, “What we have found in the past two years is an amazing 87 percent of children we have met have been able to stay home or live with extended family members.” He said many of the kids have challenges and are very difficult to care for, but regardless, with support, their parents and relatives want to keep their children home and work through the challenges.”

Campbell explained that when an outreach is being made, a parent often says that there is absolutely no one to help, that they are isolated from friends and family. The question is asked, “If your child was seriously hurt or sick, whom would you call from your family, friends or neighbors to help? Let’s call them now and get them involved.” Parents are so worried about their children during these times and can feel terribly alone as they encounter the crisis system. The FAST Team encourages them to know it’s imperative to involve their family and friends in helping. Parents and relatives are the experts with regard to the children in their family. For children in the foster care system, a family tree is researched with the support of state social workers. One important question is always asked: “Who loves this child and how can we find them and get them involved in making the best decisions for this child’s future?”

FAST was the brainstorm of a group of professionals from throughout the Pierce County mental health system and the Division of Child and Family Services, who met for more than a year with the one question: “What are the unmet needs of children and families in Pierce County?” The concept of FAST was developed. It has been up and running since October 2000, with two teams of six people, including one supervisor per team and one support person per team, as well as psychiatric services.

“FAST has evolved significantly over the past two years,” explained Mary Stone-Smith, Director, Integrated Family Preservation Service, Catholic Community Services. “Initially, we anticipated that at least 50 percent of the children and youth referred would need to be placed in a FAST home (foster

home) for the duration of services. Early on, we discovered that with extensive family and relative searches, and intensive efforts put toward engagement of the family member, very few of these children need extensive time in a foster home.” She added: “When long-lost grandparents are found, for example, their response to our phone call is often, ‘We searched for our grandbaby for seven years when he was taken away from our daughter.’ We couldn’t find out anything about him, and finally we just gave up. Absolutely, we want to help.”

Stone-Smith explained that during the first year, 64 children were united with extended family members (some in other states) whom they had not known before. Nearly one year later, 62 of those children are still living with those extended family members, and two have stabilized in a permanent foster home while remaining connected to their relatives. “What we have learned in the process of developing and providing FAST Services has truly revolutionized the way we work with families in all areas (including Wraparound),” she said.

Staff from Catholic Community Services recently completed a referral for Karen, 14 years old (not her real name). She had 10 previous foster placements that were unsuccessful due to severe issues related to behavior and mental health challenges. Her parents were unable to care for her. She had experienced a number of losses and rejections throughout her life. Through FAST, the team was able to work with the family to locate a relative in Kentucky, who had not previously been considered as an option for Karen. She began e-mailing and calling, and started to feel a real connection. Through conversations, she learned of other relatives in Texas. On Karen’s 14th birthday, she visited with her newly found relatives and the outlook is very positive for her future.

“Our real focus is looking for a connection,” Campbell explained. “The kids are lonely and this contributes to their challenging behaviors. It is amazing what a sense of connection can do.”

“What I admire about the FAST team is their ability to meet children and families when they are most vulnerable, convey a sense of hope and then consistently follow through and make it a reality.” Explained RSN Children’s Services Coordinator Doug Crandall: “As a program and agency, staff really do ‘walk the talk’ of family-focused, flexible, do- whatever-it-takes, unconditional care,” he said.

“Pierce County has long been effective in preventing hospitalization for our children and youth; however, it too often involved out-of-home placement. With FAST, children and families can be assisted and maintained in their own homes. The family can be supported and strengthened or connections made with extended family. It is an extremely beneficial service to our families,” explained RSN Administrator, Fran Lewis.

For more information on FAST, call Catholic Community Services at (253) 759-9544.