

County Spotlight: Greene County

Alternative Response: Changing the Way We Help Families in Greene County

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In July 2008, Greene County, along with nine other Ohio counties, began participating in an Alternative Response pilot program. A year has passed, and the results of the pilot program are now being evaluated. Greene County Children Services (GCCS) has seen many positives as a result of the program and plans to continue using AR to respond to low- and moderate-risk families in the county.

"The most significant change we've seen is the way families respond to caseworkers when using AR," says Executive Director Dr. Rhonda Reagh. "Rather than the anxious feeling a visit from Children Services can cause, families felt relieved and hopeful when caseworkers used the Alternative Response approach. It is more difficult to establish a positive relationship with families if they are angry or stressed when a caseworker comes to their home."

During the first year of the pilot, 376 referrals were eligible for the AR approach. Of those, 174 were randomly selected as AR cases, while 202 were used as a control group and approached in the traditional way. Five percent of the AR cases were transferred as ongoing cases, while 10 percent of the control group cases were transferred as ongoing cases. "Because of the one-worker model utilized in Alternative Response, we feel we are able to build relationships and obtain services for families much faster than we can in the traditional model. Families are able to find solutions to the problems that initially brought them to us," says Reagh.

With the current state of Ohio's economy, neglect cases are on the rise at GCCS. Often these cases are most appropriately dealt with using the AR model. It allows families to get the help they need before the concerns escalate into something more serious.

"Alternative Response is a partnership that allows workers and families to be creative problem solvers in addressing the family's needs," says AR Caseworker Chad K. "I worked with a family for about five months. Mom and dad were both working and had five children. But money was tight, and mom and two of the children had some mental health issues. By working together, we were able to identify many of the problems the family was facing — the biggest being chronic poverty. Because of some of the ongoing problems facing the family, it was eventually turned over to ongoing."

However, because of the trust I had built up with this family, the dad called me six months later. He had lost his job, the plumbing in his house needed to be fixed, and he was feeling desperate. Because of the AR approach, the dad felt comfortable calling me before the situation escalated into something much worse. Working together, we were able to get his plumbing fixed and his unemployment benefits sorted out."

GCCS plans to continue using the AR approach. "We're still not in a position to go full force using AR," says Reagh. "We need to train more caseworkers on the AR approach, and cases will still have to be randomly selected for AR as training continues. But we found the whole pilot program to be a great success for our agency. We are already a family-centered agency and AR fits right into our mission."

