

Using active contract management to enable family resource centers to respond to family and community needs in Washington, DC

Place-based family resource centers can provide families in low-income neighborhoods with the supports they need to thrive. Washington, DC's Families' First program demonstrated how active contract management can be used to help family resource centers serve communities more effectively.

Seeking to improve family resilience with place-based family resource centers

Washington, DC is a city marked by deep inequality. In wealthy neighborhoods near the Capital, the median income exceeds \$100,000. Across the Anacostia River, in the predominantly African American Wards 7 and 8, it is closer to \$40,000. Families living in these wards face a number of challenges, including being more likely to experience an investigation by child protective services.

In October of 2020, the city announced the creation of the Families First DC program (FFDC), an initiative designed to use community-based organizations to support families and help prevent contact with the child welfare system. To achieve this goal, the city's Child and Family Services Agency made grants to 10 existing community organizations to establish Family Success Centers (FSCs). At the FSCs, families can access a wide range of services, from food to housing supports to parenting courses to youth programming. In some cases, services are provided by the FSCs themselves. In others, families are referred to trusted partners around the city. Combined, the City believed these voluntary, community-based family resource centers would make families more resilient and less likely to experience child welfare system involvement.

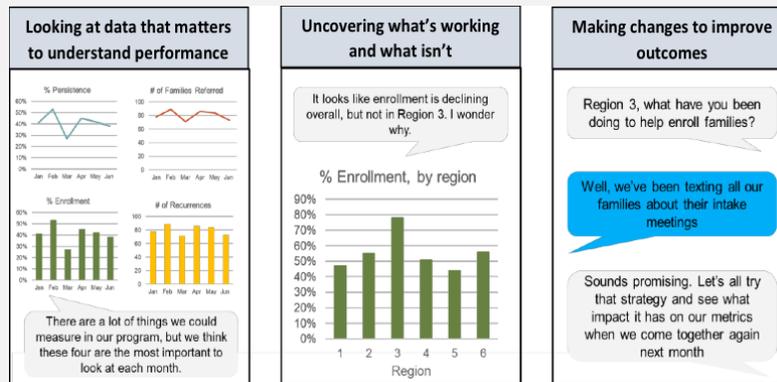
Implementation challenges facing DC's community-based prevention program

When the centers opened their doors later that fall, DCFS was excited to see higher than expected enrollment. Meeting the need effectively would require hard decisions about implementation. Despite careful planning, the City and the FSCs were still learning what families in each neighborhood needed or what could be done differently to serve them better. Figuring out how to adjust offerings to best serve families could not wait. The Covid-19 pandemic had introduced a host of new challenges for families living in Wards 7 and 8 and compounded many existing ones. At the same time, social distancing requirements made it much more difficult for FSCs to reach out to, engage, and serve their neighborhoods.

In February 2021, the City and community organizations began using active contract management (ACM) strategies to better support the FSCs in serving families in Wards 7 and 8. With support from the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, they sought to create better visibility into the program's data, uncover what was working and what was not, and spur each other towards making operational changes that could better meet family needs.

What is active contract management?

Developed by the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab, [active contract management \(ACM\)](#) is a set of strategies and tools for making social services work better for individuals, families, and communities. In ACM, staff from governments and contracted community organizations come together for regular, collaborative meetings. At each meeting, the team reviews key data and asks: What is this data telling us? Based on what we're seeing, what can we commit to doing together to improve the outcomes we care about?



Uncovering and spreading effective strategies for connecting with communities

Early on, the teams focused on developing outreach strategies to grow family attendance and on coming up with new ways to better respond to family needs:

- *Developing new outreach strategies to improve attendance* – If families were going to seek out FRCs, the city and providers knew they would need creative outreach strategies to build resident awareness and encourage referrals from neighborhood partners. To generate ideas about ways to engage more families, the team looked at data on FSC attendance and asked a pair questions: What can we continue or change to increase the number of families who visit a FSC for the first time? How can we stay connected with families after they visit a FSC for the first time? This data uncovered some providers who were more effective at initial outreach and others that were more successful with sustaining participation, creating an opportunity for the FSCs to learn from each other. For example, one FSC shared that they had been sending follow up text messages to families after their first visit to their local center. The messages included invitations to future events and concluded with the phrase, “Will we see you there?” Feedback from participants had shown them this was encouraging families to engage with staff and stay connected to the FSC. That provider has shared their procedures for prompting staff to send messages and the city has asked the other FSCs to test their own variation of it in their communications with families.
- *Better meeting family needs* – Each FSC collects information about what resources families ask for help accessing. At an early ACM meeting, the team reviewed this data across providers to uncover which needs were most pressing for families. Analysis revealed that access to food was the most frequently identified need. To address it, the department convened staff from all of the FSCs to discuss what strategies were working to identify families that were food insecure, share what each organization was doing to meet this need, and uncover any common barriers that the department could help solve. The discussion highlighted a lack of institutional connections between the FSCs and

other food security organizations as a barrier to getting families food when they needed it. This insight sparked a pair of reforms. The City has since worked with city-funded food banks and other food access organizations to get them registered in the referral system used by the FSCs to streamline families' connections to partner organizations. At the same time, the FSCs have each created a plan to find and develop partnerships with local food access organizations in their individual neighborhoods.

"Looking at the data, at what we see, what we don't see, and coming up with a plan of action, we've seen a huge difference in improvement over time. We're big on looking at strengths, what are [providers] doing well and how do they help others. And others who aren't doing so well in one area may be doing really well in another... And what [ACM] has done is helped to enhance and deepen the focus on action steps. It's like 'we can talk about this all day long, but what are we going to do about it?...' It was really built in and meaningful to the work that we were already doing... I think it's been really phenomenal to see the progress that we've made, that the providers have made..."

- Octavia Shaw, Program Manager Families First DC

A toolkit for responding to the evolving needs of families and communities

Life in Washington, DC is slowly returning to normal, and by the summer of 2021, FSC attendance had been steadily increasing. As the FSCs shift to serving more families in person, they will need to continue to adapt to best meet the needs and preferences of families living in Wards 7 and 8. The Covid-19 pandemic represented a unique crisis, but major shifts in the needs of families are sure to happen again.

Active contract management has provided a structure, forum, and set of tools for responding to those changes. It allows the city and the FSC providers to ask, "How can we collaboratively adjust service delivery to meet this moment?" When crises have passed, the team can use ACM to ask, "How can we continue to reengineer and improve how we are serving our community?"

"ACM has been really helpful in grounding the families in our work, and making sure we're not getting lost in the details of government and all those things but instead we're bringing it back to 'how do we better serve families?'. And that's been demonstrated through our deep-dive topics, in our dashboard metrics, in our road maps. And it's really a helpful framework for us to keep utilizing even after we're not working with the GPL directly."

- Taylor German, Management Analyst, DC Child and Family Services Agency

The family resource center model is gaining popularity, and there is a [growing body of evidence](#) suggesting that programs like these may prevent families from experiencing contact with child welfare systems. Active Contract Management can help governments and the community organizations they partner with to achieve that goal. Used well, it can be a catalyst for improving the lives of families across the country.

To learn more about the GPL's work with DC, see our [Innovator Interview with Families First DC staff](#).

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, Casey Family Programs, the Corporation for National and Community Service Social Innovation Fund, the Dunham Fund, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Pritzker Children's Initiative, and the Rockefeller Foundation. © Copyright 2021 Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab.