



Innovator Interview: Jennifer Birden **Connecticut Department of Children & Families, Program Supervisor**

Jennifer Birden is a program supervisor with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) where she manages a workgroup of ~40 social workers providing services to children and families. She spoke with the GPL about the agency's implementation of Enhanced Service Coordination (ESC), a suite of interventions aimed at improving social workers' ability to match children and families involved with the agency with services.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Before Enhanced Service Coordination, what was the matching and referral process like from a social worker's point of view?

Jennifer Birden: Prior to enhanced service coordination, the social worker would really have to rely on their own knowledge of what services were available. On top of the time the social worker had to spend doing home visits and their other work, they spent a large amount of time just researching, trying to figure out what services were available. People used to have binders of notes about services—they'd save them from when providers had come to the office to do a presentation and keep notes on things they'd learned by word of mouth. In an office, you'd have some workers that have been there for 20 years and some workers that were brand new. The new workers would go to the workers that had been there for years and say, what service has worked? There's good and bad with that way of learning about services, but before ESC, there wasn't another way to learn about the services—social workers had to rely on word of mouth or reaching out to contact a provider.

Once they were ready to make a referral, they had to first research and figure out if the service had a gatekeeper, and if it did, who that gatekeeper was. It was a lot of phone calls, a lot of talking, a lot of back and forth. For six services, you could have six different gatekeepers. That added time for the social workers, too, because they would have to reach out to the particular gatekeeper to ask about the service they wanted—they'd wait to be told 'yes' or 'no,' 'this is a fit,' or 'there's a waitlist.' If there was a waitlist, they'd have to go back to the drawing board and start over. It was a lot of time spent and a lot of frustration, and led to the workers really going by word of mouth – 'hey, this service, I know they're easy, I know the referral's quick,' and they would put that service in, because it saved time and it got somebody in the home, but it wasn't actually meeting the family's specific needs.

What did Enhanced Service Coordination change for social workers?

Enhanced Service Coordination set up one person—a Enhanced Service Coordinator—with a bunch of services underneath them. When a worker has a question around which service is best, they don't have to figure out which of the six gatekeepers to go to. It streamlined the process.

We also were able to establish a service search database. Say you want a parenting service—you type in parenting and it pulls up all the parenting services. It's using our technology to make the

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worker's job easier, more efficient, and ultimately giving better outcomes and better services to our families.

And I think once the Enhanced Service Coordinator started to create a dashboard and have data around referrals, it also gave the worker some validation—this is working, our referral time is shorter, these families are getting services much faster than they had been.

What did Enhanced Service Coordination change for families?

When you look at the big picture, it really translates into the work around successfully closing a case. Court-involved cases—we were really seeing these families getting matched much quicker. I think that's where we got a lot of the buy-in from the workers was when they started to see that side of it.

Can you share an example?

OK. Many times when we deal with families, there's a multitude of issues. In this particular case, we had a family that lived in a rural area. So that was the first thing that we had to contend against – an area where there are not a lot of services available. This is a single parent family with a history of pretty significant mental health and trauma.

How do we address that family? There's not one service that we can just put in that's going to fix all of that, and there may not even be a service in that area to fix exactly what we need.

Before Enhanced Service Coordination, the matching and referral process would have looked much different. It would have really been the worker and/or the supervisor making lots of phone calls, reaching out to providers. Now, with Enhanced Service Coordination, we were able to talk to the Service Coordinator about the case and ask, 'what can we put together with your knowledge of these community supports?' In this case, the Service Coordinator had knowledge from her broader work on leadership teams and doing work around the state and connections to other providers. She was able to help us find a provider out in the other side of the state, and figure out that we can contract with them, and they can come to this home, and they're equipped to address the trauma in the family. She also helped us find another provider that specializes the mental health concerns the parent had and put them in place. So it was really taking a look at what we had available to us as a state and coordinating that to meet this family's needs, and it was all done under the Enhanced Service Coordination umbrella with the Service Coordinator coordinating that for us. In the end, the hope was to achieve a better outcome by – in this case, getting the children back home to their mom.