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Susan Carpenter

Minnesota State University - Mankato

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Susan Carpenter

Department of Social Work

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Special thank you to Academic Advisor Robin R. Wingo, MSW, LISW,
Field Liaison Michelle Alvarez, MSW, Edd & Field Supervisor Jo Ellen O'Rourke, LICSW



Abstract

In 2002, Greater Minnesota Family Services (GMFS) began providing Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) services funded by a grant and Three Counties for Kids and is still provided today in five counties. These counties are Blue Earth, Brown, Nicollet, Sibley, and Watonwan all located in Southern Minnesota.

A survey was conducted to determine why the FGDM program is or is not utilized by county employees in the service area. Of county employee's surveyed (N=25), 92% have used FGDM and 82% of those who identified their level of satisfaction (N=22) were satisfied to very satisfied with the services.

Research Questions

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) program by :

- 1) identifying the number of families served between January 1, 2010 and May 1, 2010,
- 2) the reason referrals were made,
- 3) the recorded outcomes of these family groups, and
- 4) to identify why FGDM is or is not utilized.

Literature Review

The idea for Family Group Conferencing, similar to Family Group Decision Making, originated in New Zealand in the 1980's as a response to a disproportionate amount of minority youth on caseloads and in foster care (Lupton, 1998, & Berzin, Thomas, & Dawson, 2008). Family Group Decision Making gained popularity in the United States in "1997 when President Clinton signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA)" (Vesneski, 2009, p. 2). Today in the United States, FGDM meetings are often utilized "by child welfare social workers and involve an abused or neglected child's immediate and extended family with the goal of planning for and ensuring the safety of the child" (Vesneski, 2009, p. 1).

Family Group Decision Making brings all parties together to develop a plan that is in the best interest of the child (Berzin et al, 2008). Solutions identified and developed by families are seen as more desirable than solutions imposed by professionals like child welfare case managers (Lupton, 1998).

There are basic tenets of FGDM and according to Berzin et al., and they include:

- Collaboration between family, community, and agency supports in child welfare decision making and service provisions
- Respect for culture
- Children's voice of desired decisions
- Empowers families to develop their own plan
- Increases extended family support

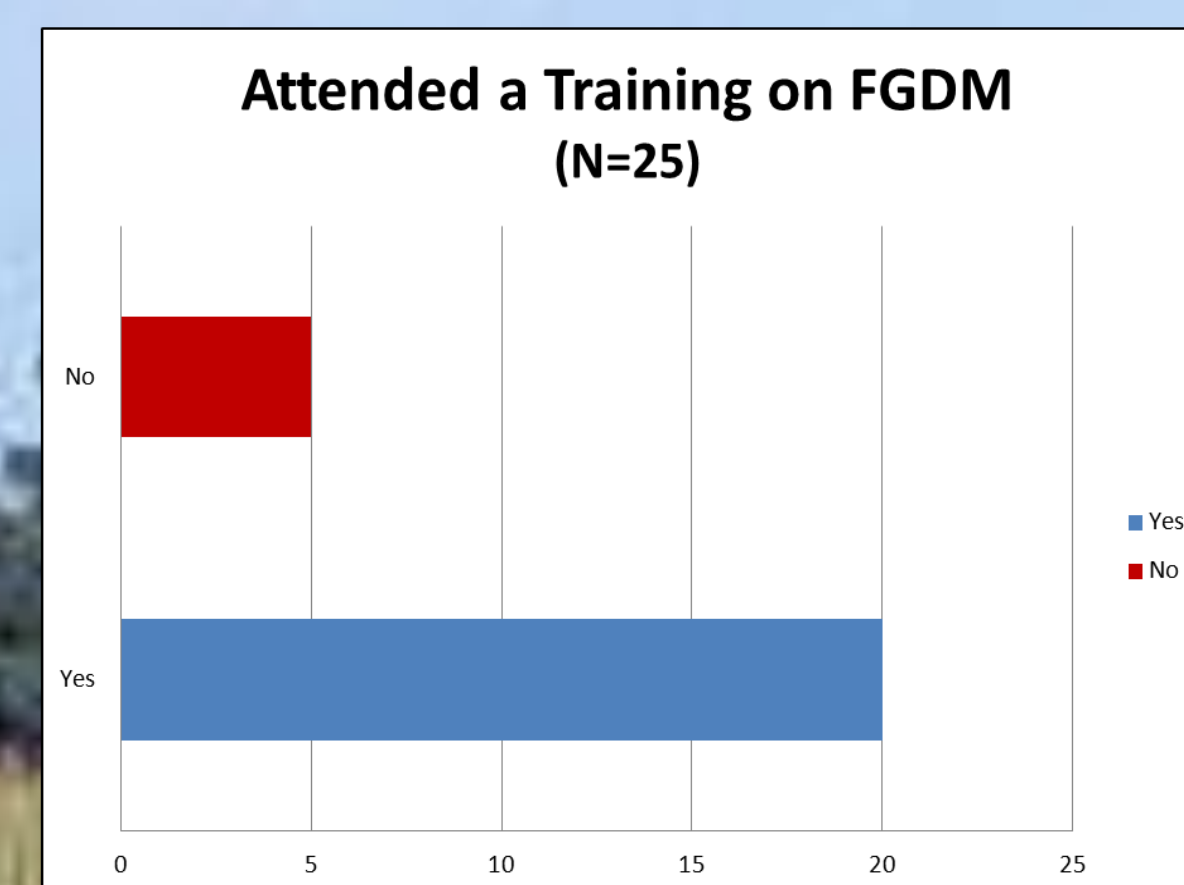
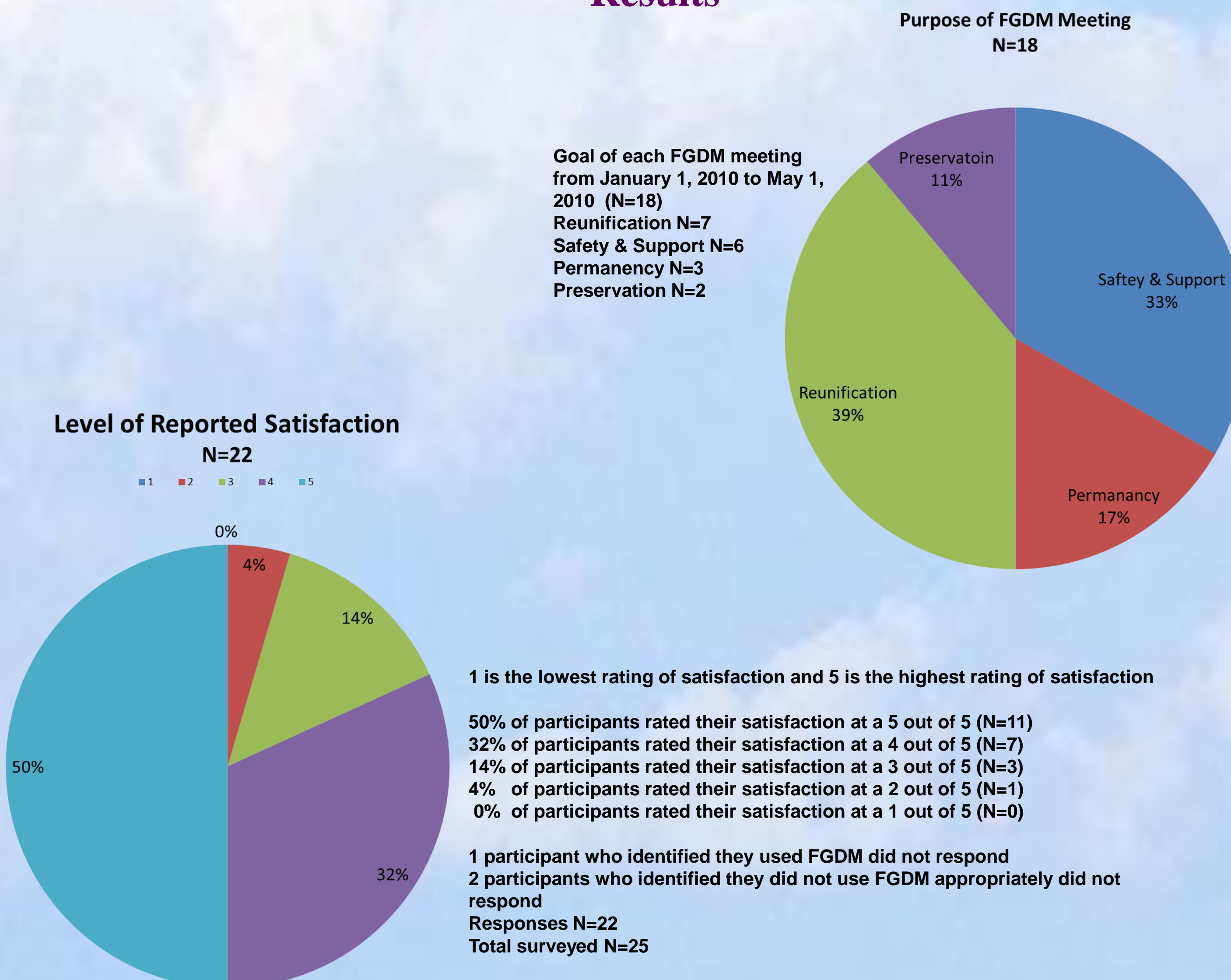
Methodology

For questions 1,2, & 3, Greater Minnesota Family Services (GMFS) collects data on each FGDM meeting. This secondary data was utilized to identify how many groups occurred, the reason for the meeting, and to identify the known outcome of each meeting.

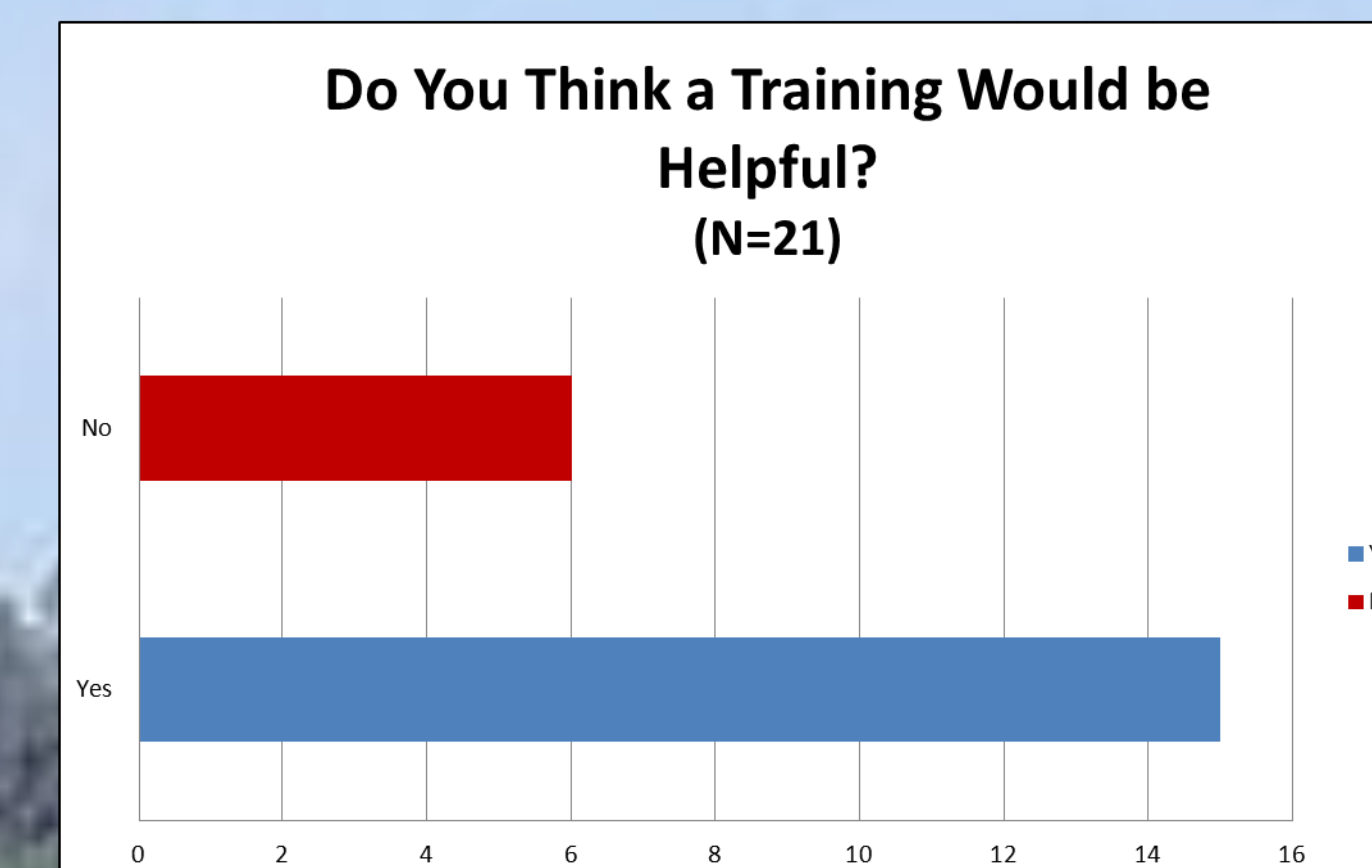
For question 4, county employee's working with families in Blue Earth, Brown, Sibley, and Watonwan county were surveyed. First consent was obtained from each county supervisor to conduct the survey of their employees, and then individual consent was obtained from each participant. Surveys were hand delivered to explain the reason for the survey and to answer questions. Participants were provided with a postage paid envelop to return their survey. From the four counties, 25 employee's were provided with surveys.

Grounded theory was used to analyze collected data. Grounded theory builds from completed data to avoid constricting data into pre-determined categories (Seaman, 2008). Themes emerge from the data and "what really exist in the data" (Seaman, 2008, p.4) instead of beginning with pre-determined categories that could cause the researcher to miss or ignore useful information. After all data were collected and completed using grounded theory, "Similar data are grouped and conceptually labeled during a process called open coding" (Scott & Howell, 2008, p. 2).

Results



5 participants identified they have not been to a training
20 participants identified they have been to a training



6 participants do not think a training would be helpful
15 participants think a training would be helpful
4 participants did not respond to this question

Data/Results

There were 18 families who participated in FGDM from January 1st, 2010 to May 1st, 2010. As described in the first pie graph, these meetings were for reunification of children with their family, safety and support, permanency with a non parent, and to preserve the family unit. Of these 18 FGDM meetings, 14 of the 18 had outcomes that matched the goal of the meeting. The two meetings for preservation of the family unit resulted in permanency planning and a termination of parental rights. One of the 3 permanency meetings eventually resulted in the children returning home. One of the 7 reunification meetings resulted in a placement in foster care. Of the 18 meetings, 10 children or sibling groups remained or returned home and 8 children or sibling groups entered LTFC or were not reunified with their parents.

There were 25 survey's returned with a 100% response rate. Of those surveyed, 23 stated they use FGDM and 2 stated they do not use FGDM. Half of the participants who utilize FGDM identified they were very satisfied with FGDM as provided by GMFS with a mean of 4.27, median of 4.5, and mode of 5. Those who do not utilize FGDM (N=2) identified they do not think they have appropriate clients/families to refer. Those who do utilize FGDM (N=23), 18 responded that they use FGDM because they have seen positive results with participating families, 17 responded that they use FGDM to help fulfill concurrent planning requirements.

Alternative responses for the use of FGDM included: Participants and families get to create their own plan (N=4), FGDM brings families together and builds on family supports (N=4), use FGDM to aid in child protection investigations (N=1), and use FGDM to make decisions about where a child should go (N=1).

One participant identified not being satisfied with FGDM because it takes too long to schedule a meeting and they feel the facilitator is too overwhelmed with job responsibilities to do a thorough job on the FGDM meeting.

Participants were also asked to make any additional comments on FGDM. These responses included: FGDM is helpful and gets families involved (N=5), gives families input into case plans (N=3), concerned about the meeting getting organized or planned thoroughly (N=3), and questions about the format of FGDM changing and how it can be utilized (N=2)

When asked if participants attended a training on FGDM, 80% (N=20) identified they have been to a training and 20% (N=5) identified they have not been to a training. Of the 25 participants, 15 identified a new training would be helpful for them, 6 identified they did not feel it would be helpful, and 4 did not respond. The 2 participants identifying they do not use FGDM felt a training would be helpful.

Strengths and Limitations

Of 25 survey's administered, there was a 100% response rate.

The surveys were only conducted in four of the five identified counties of the service area due to time and access to county workers. The majority of survey's were focused in the service area of one group facilitator. The surveys were only provided to individuals physically present at the time of administration. This caused some employees to be excluded from the opportunity to provide their input. Completed surveys were mailed back to insure anonymity of participants and the data can not be individualized by county.

The program evaluation of FGDM only reflects services as provided by Greater Minnesota Family Services.

Conclusions & Recommendations

FGDM is used for many purposes to aid case managers in working with families. Of the 18 planned FGDM meetings in the timeframe of this study, 14 had outcomes that matched their plan. One that did not match the plan ended with a family remaining intact suggesting that the county continued to work with the family even when permanency with a non parent was seriously considered.

Overall 82% of participants were satisfied with the services as provided by GMFS. The biggest concern of the services identified by participants was that they felt one of the facilitators was overwhelmed with too many job responsibilities. One participant felt the facilitator could do the facilitation well if they were given an appropriate workload.

Recommendations based on the data collected include offering a training for individuals working with families and children in the counties served by GMFS.

One recommendation comes from three survey's identifying concerns with meetings taking too long to plan and this includes GMFS and their part time facilitator identifying job responsibilities to determine if the current work load is appropriate for the assigned tasks.

The final recommendation would be to conduct the survey in the missing county to determine if there are other needs in the service area.

Implications for Practice

FGDM is a strengths based approach that gives families a chance to be involved in the decision making process and deciding what is best for the child or children involved. Data collected should be used to help increase provider knowledge of the FGDM program to help increase referrals and include more families in the decision making process.

References

References are available from the author upon request.