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Defining Exemplary Children's Mental Health Services in Minnesota's Rural Communities

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Practicum Agency: Blue Earth County Children's Mental Health



Research Question

Research shows that children's mental health services in rural areas are not likely to meet all the qualities to be determined 'exemplary' with regards to diverse groups and at-risk populations due to:

- limited community resources
- decreased funding and reimbursement rates
- geographic distance from consumers
- lack of collaborations from primary care physicians
- sparse number of adequately trained mental health (Fenell & Hovestadt, 2005; Gamm, Stone & Pittman, 2003; Moore et al., 2005; Powell & Dunlap, 2005)

The purpose of the research was to define exemplary services as it applies to rural county children's mental health services so as to assist county agencies in identifying exemplary services, which Minnesota's Comprehensive Children's Mental Health Act mandates case managers to evaluate service providers (Minnesota State Statute 245.487, 1989).

Methodology

A systematic review of the literature was conducted and data were collected from surveys to define and identify criteria of exemplary children's mental health services in rural Minnesota communities.

A comparison was then made between the literature review and the participants' responses to the survey describing qualities of exemplary services.

Nine out of 11 county children's mental health supervisors agreed to allow their employees to participate in the anonymous on-line survey. The county agencies willing to participate in the survey are: Brown, Le Sueur, Watonwan, Freeborn, Faribault/Martin, Sibley, Rice, and Blue Earth.

Participants were asked to define 'exemplary' services, describe qualities exemplary services exhibit, identify similarities or differences between the qualities of rural and suburban exemplary services, identify what they consider 'exemplary' services/programs, indicate whether if and how their agencies evaluate service providers, what they would find helpful in evaluating service providers, and describe any recommendations they have for rural children's mental health service providers.

Literature Review

A systematic literature review was conducted in the area of children's mental health services. Researchers have identified 8 consistent qualities for defining services considered to be exemplary – accessibility, coordination and collaboration, interagency services, least restrictive interventions, family focused interventions, individualized interventions, culturally competent services, and utilize strengths based approach. (See Figure 3)

Farmer et al., 2002; Holden et al., 2005; Powell & Dunlap, 2005; Smith – Boydston, 2005; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1998a; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1998b)

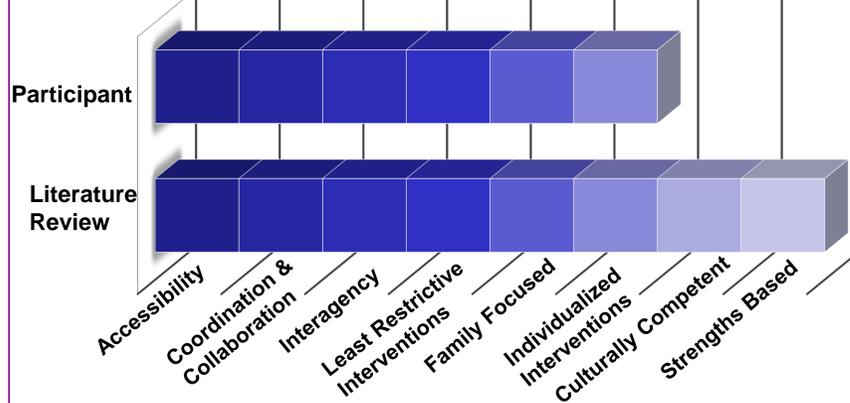
Fewer social services are provided in rural and small communities, which creates additional barriers to clients that must travel out of their community to access services. These barriers include:

- lack of transportation
- financial need based services
- eligibility for services
- long waiting lists
- less funding available to greater Minnesota
- lack of professional supports
- lack of interpreters and culturally sensitive services
- greater emphasis placed on service delivery costs and/or reimbursement rates (Center for Mental Health Services, 1997; Gamm, Stone & Pittman, 2003; Moore et al., 2005)

Data/Results

The data from the survey indicated the children's mental health case managers in rural Minnesota county agencies described 6 out of 8 qualities of 'exemplary' services consistent with the review of literature such as: (See Figure 1)

Figure 1
Identified Qualities of Exemplary Services by Participants in Comparison to Literature Review



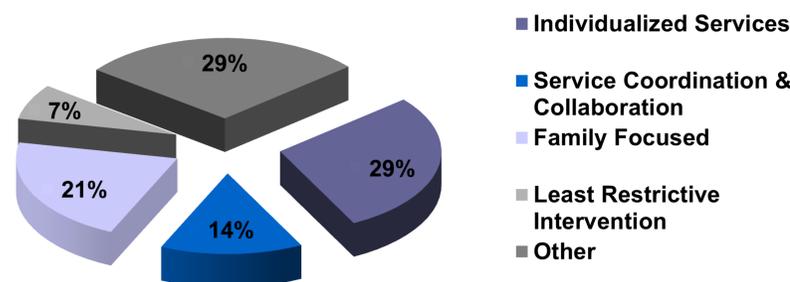
The most frequently qualities indicated in the survey are as listed in Figure 2. Other qualities of exemplary services participants identified were empathy, adequate clinical leadership and supervision, organized and thorough interventions, ability to work well with the family, and resourcefulness. In addition, a participant expressed that any program can be exemplary based on carrying out their mission.

Some examples of exemplary programs noted by survey respondents included the Washburn Child Guidance Center in Minneapolis, Family Group Decision Making with Edith Haenel, Gilbertson's foster home through PATH, St. Cloud Children's Home, and Children's Mental Health [case management] services.

Participants also identified barriers to identifying 'exemplary' services in rural communities, which is also consistent with the literature are:

- financial resources
- services centralized in suburban areas
- services available in larger populated communities
- accessibility
- professional support

Figure 2
How would you define 'exemplary' children's mental health services? (cumulative number of defined qualities, N =14)



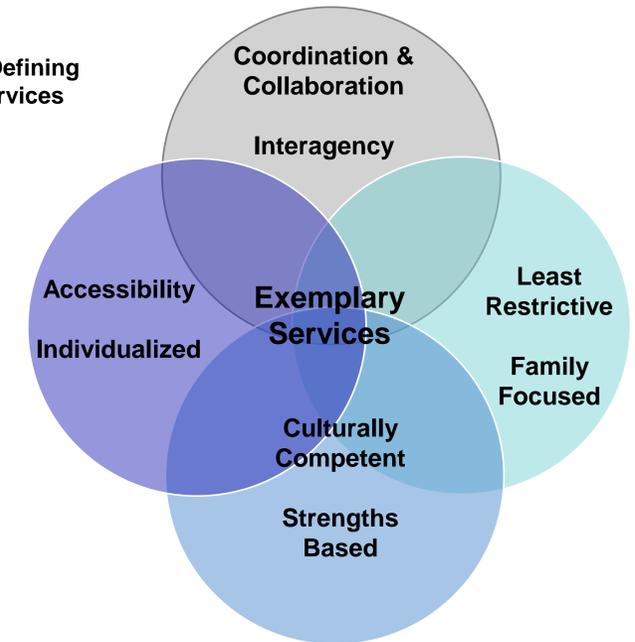
Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of the survey include the richness of the qualitative data provided by the participants. Survey respondents were consistent with the literature review in identifying both the barriers to clients receiving children's mental health services in rural communities and identifying 6 out of the 8 primary qualities of defining 'exemplary' services.

One of the primary limitations of the evaluation was the limited number of survey respondents in addition to the number of survey respondents that did not answer all of the survey questions. There was the potential to have approximately 30 respondents. However, despite the 11 south central Minnesota county children's mental health supervisors willing to forward the survey to children's mental health case managers in their agency, only 8 individuals participated. Of the 8 individuals that responded to the survey, only 5 answered all of the questions. The survey completion rate therefore was approximately 60%, or 5 participants.

Due to the minimal number of completed surveys, the ability to generalize the research findings does not exist.

Figure 3
Qualities for Defining Exemplary Services



Conclusions & Recommendations

The definition of survey participants and results of the literature review were, for the most part, consistent. Findings indicate that eight criteria for defining exemplary services in children's mental health can be used to identify existing practices that are exemplary.

It is recommended that county agencies utilize an evaluation form containing the 8 criteria to assist in evaluating both existing rural children's mental health services and in planning the addition of new services. (See Figure 3)

Implications for Practice

As outlined in the Minnesota Comprehensive Children's Mental Health Act (Minnesota State Statute 245.487, 1989), case managers are mandated to evaluate service providers. Utilizing an effective working definition of rural exemplary services will assist agencies in developing evaluation criteria to assist in ensuring quality children's mental health services are provided to clients and client systems. This will also equip county case managers with the capacity to develop and monitor best practices in compliance with Minnesota mandates. County agencies can potentially network in an effective manner with other agencies to utilize exemplary services in surrounding areas.

References

References are available from the author upon request.

