

Differential or Alternative Response in Oregon: Transforming Child Welfare's Front Door

I. What is Differential or Alternative Response?

Differential or Alternative Response is an alternative to traditional investigative Child Protective Services (CPS). The intent of implementing an additional track within the Child Welfare response system is to:

- Focus less on investigative fact finding and more on assessing and insuring child safety, helping the family identify their needs to keep their children safe.
- Allow and encourage agencies to provide services without a determination of abuse or neglect.
- Seek safety through family engagement and collaborative partnerships with community organizations.

This alternative or differential track is usually used for cases that are low to medium risk. The family is engaged in determining what is needed to ensure safety and strengthen the family, and services are identified to meet those needs. In states that have implemented differential response, the most common maltreatment type referred is neglect.

Last year in Oregon, allegations founded for Neglect and Threat of Harm Neglect accounted for approximately 48% of all founded allegations.

II. What are the core elements of Differential Response?

- Two or more discrete response paths for cases screened in for Child Welfare;
- Assignment to a path based on an array of factors that inform the level of risk to a child;
- The ability to change the original assignment to a path based on new information that may change the risk level or safety concerns;
- In the alternative path, services are most frequently voluntary;
- There is no formal determination of child maltreatment and the name of the alleged perpetrator is not entered into the central registry for cases in the alternative path.

III. What do we hope to accomplish?

In Oregon, we have strategic goals for Child Welfare of safely reducing the number of children in foster care by preventing entry and facilitating a more rapid exit for children that do enter foster care. Other states that have implemented Differential Response have documented:

- Families are engaged earlier in the case process.
- Families are more receptive to and less resistant to child welfare involvement.
- Families report greater satisfaction with the outcome of services and agency involvement.
- Multiple tracks of intervention allows agency to tailor child welfare response to the family's needs.
- Fewer kids enter the foster care system.
- A positive impact on the disproportionate representation of children of color in the foster care system.

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A Model for Differential or Alternative Response

