



Developments in Systems of Care

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This article provides an effective, accessible summary of the field of community-based systems of care for children's mental health; it is a helpful resource for those who are new to the system of care concept and history. The authors condense the development of the system of care into easily digestible chunks, briefly discussing the theory, practice, latest developments, and possible future of the system of care.

Theory and Principles behind System of Care

The development of Child and Adolescent Service System Program (CASSP) was initiated to assist all 50 states in the development of an infrastructure for publicly funded community-based services. The CASSP initiative set forth the initial principles inherent to the concept of community-based systems of care. Some of these principles include:

- Access to a comprehensive array of services
- Treatment individualized to the child's needs
- Treatment in the least restrictive environment possible
- Full participation of families as partners in services planning and delivery
- Interagency coordination
- No ejection or rejection from services due to lack of treatability or cooperation with interventions
- Early identification and intervention
- Non-discriminating, culturally sensitive services (Stroul and Friedman, 1986.)

Community-based care is recommended for the treatment of the majority of children with moderate to serious emotional disturbance or mental illness. It is most recommended to prevent the out-of-home placement of children and for the treatment of children and youth who have complex problems and multi-agency involvement.

What the future looks like for Systems of Care

Some early studies, including the well-known Ft. Bragg evaluation, raised questions and sparked debate about the most effective aspects of the System of Care (Bickman, Guthrie, and Foster, 1995). Since these early studies, there have been many new community-based programs that have been developed and are undergoing initial evaluation studies. These include different types of school-based day treatment programs and school-based interventions. To date, these studies have revealed that the outcomes have been significantly better than the outcomes of traditional outpatient or residential services. Some of these improvements are in the areas of: 1) improved family functioning, 2) reduced school absenteeism and drop-out, 3) reduced utilization of restrictive services, and 4) overall problem behaviors severe enough to put children at risk of out-of-home placement. Though developments of these systems of care are in their early stages, it is encouraging to have such positive preliminary results and that promises a brighter future for children's mental health.

This article provides a straightforward summary of the principles and concepts behind community-based systems of care. It is particularly useful for those new to the field or those who have interest in understanding more about community-based systems of care.