Innovations in Implementing Safety Organized Practice

San Joaquin County’s Journey

Holly Hatton-Bowers and Jason Borucki

Background
Within the field of child welfare services, there has been an emerging interest in identifying a more focused, active and effective approach to the implementation of evidence-informed practices. As with any large hierarchal organizational structure, implementing new ideas, practices and skills requires substantial support, planning and time. At UC Davis Extension's Center for Human Services, Northern California Training Academy Director Susan Brooks has championed the continuous quality improvement (CQI) framework for implementation within child welfare systems. Informed by the CQI framework and focused on helping Northern California counties improve internal structures that will directly benefit child and family outcomes, Brooks pointed to San Joaquin County, California's implementation of Safety Organized Practice (SOP) as a strong example of CQI in action.

“San Joaquin’s child welfare agency was chosen to be highlighted because the agency is committed to a continuous quality improvement framework in implementing SOP,” stated Susan Brooks. “They have learned a lot over the past several years to support others in their implementation efforts, they used their child welfare data to identify areas where SOP could impact their child welfare outcomes, and the agency’s leadership is now actively supporting the implementation of SOP.”

This case study highlights how one county in California has excelled in thoughtfully implementing Safety Organized Practice. Interviews with key stakeholders, such as staff, coaches, trainers, and consultants were conducted to share the successes and challenges of implementing SOP within San Joaquin County. It is hoped that this case study will provide some guidance and ideas to other agencies adopting SOP and aiming to implement the practices and tools using a continuous quality improvement framework.

Introduction
In the summer of 2012, Susan Brooks attended a supervisor management meeting and shared the value and excitement of Safety Organized Practice (SOP), a collaborative practice approach that emphasizes the importance of teamwork in child welfare. SOP aims to build and strengthen partnerships with the child welfare agency and within a family by involving their informal support networks of friends and family members. A central belief of SOP is that all families have strengths. SOP uses strategies and techniques that align with the belief that a child and his or her family are the central focus, and that the partnership between the agency and the family exists in an effort to find solutions that ensure safety, permanency, and well-being for children. Safety Organized Practice is informed by an integration of practices and approaches, including:
• Solution-focused practice
• Signs of Safety
• Structured Decision Making
• Child and family engagement
• Risk and safety assessment research
• Group Supervision and Interactional Supervision
• Appreciative Inquiry
• Motivational Interviewing
• Consultation and Information Sharing Framework
• Cultural Humility
• Trauma-Informed Practice

---


Early Implementation Efforts

After being introduced to SOP and agreeing that the approach could help improve child welfare outcomes such as reunification and reentry, San Joaquin County sent a few staff, supervisors and a division chief to a three day SOP foundational training at the Northern California Training Academy. The staff left the three day foundational training with great enthusiasm to begin implementing what they had learned.

Unfortunately, but not uncommonly, the first year of implementation efforts was filled with setbacks and road blocks. Many in the agency did not have the benefit of attending the SOP foundational training and were not onboard and/or did not understand what it took to implement the practices and tools. While enthusiasm waned and frustrations grew over the next year, staff decided it was time to rethink their implementation plan for SOP.

In 2013, a workgroup was developed to focus on strategically implementing SOP within San Joaquin County. Informed by earlier implementation efforts, San Joaquin County child welfare supervisors Tasha Dunham and Sally Castillon were appointed to lead the SOP implementation process and re-approach implementation by starting at the infrastructure level. This meant that everyone in the agency, from line staff to the agency's top leadership, needed to participate in the SOP training and remain actively committed to its implementation over time.

“A lesson we learned is that originally we sought volunteer at the social worker level to use and be trained in SOP,” observed San Joaquin County supervisor Tasha Dunham, “but then workers wanted to do things differently (like make changes to reports and case plans, for example) and management didn’t have an appreciation for those changes because they didn’t understand SOP. Without the active participation of upper management, what is learned in the foundational class is unlikely to be transferred successfully into the county. The training and active buy-in has to happen from the top-down.”

In rethinking the agency’s implementation approach for SOP, San Joaquin decided to begin integrating SOP into the agency as a learning organization. Safety Organized Practice’s perceived role thus changed from being compliance-focused (or as being additional work for the agency) to serving as the catalyst to sustaining a cycle of continuous learning and quality improvement.

Implementing SOP within a CQI Framework

As part of the vision of implementing SOP as a continuous cycle of learning, the agency looked at some of their data to inform their use of the practices and tools. In implementing SOP, San Joaquin wanted their timeliness to reunification to improve, as well as the discharge planning process and service planning for families after reunification. The county also added SOP as one
of their strategies to their System Improvement Plan, linking the SOP tools and practices to the agency’s outcomes.

The agency explicitly developed an SOP Implementation Team in the summer of 2013. The team consisted of approximately 23 individuals with representatives from each program, in addition to division chiefs. During the first meeting, the group agreed to examine San Joaquin’s child welfare data to assist in determining the best rollout plan to begin training in SOP. The team also agreed to meet regularly moving forward. The group examined the data at their next meeting to identify areas where SOP could have positive impacts on their child welfare outcomes. Part of the data they examined was the usage of Structured Decision Making and recognized that usage needed improvement for the Family Social Worker program. Also, based on previous experience and knowledge, they found that starting implementation at the front end did not result in the successes they had hoped. After considering this information, the group agreed to invite the Family Social Worker Program and Voluntary Family Maintenance Program to attend a SOP foundational training offered in October of 2013. The attendees at the training included the supervisors working in the units as well. As one strategy to help ensure staff would utilize the tools and practices with families successfully, it was ultimately determined that everyone within the agency needed to participate in the SOP 3-day foundational trainings. The follow up advanced SOP trainings would be offered to everyone as well, but would be optional.

As Sally Castillon, Division Chief in San Joaquin, commented during an interview, “Support means more than just agreement, actually participating in the training yourself. Why? Because you have a supervisor wanting to discuss a case. As a division chief or as a manager, I [now] have the opportunity to ask the supervisor: Have you considered the three houses?9 You ask the key questions. Then staff learn I need to have the families involved in the questioning process as well. Support goes beyond sending staff to trainings. It’s the support to spread the practice impacting all of our units so all families can have the opportunity to be impacted.”

The three day foundational training was viewed as helpful by most of the 111 staff who attended throughout the 2013-2014 year. In a pre/post survey administered by the Northern California Training Academy at UC Davis, 81% of San Joaquin’s staff who participated in the training stated that they “agreed” or “completely agreed” that the training provided them with the information needed to begin using an integrated approach; 75% “agreed” or “completely agreed” that new ways to practice social work were learned that could be used immediately. Additionally, 77% “agreed” or “completely agreed” that understanding SOP would strengthen their supervision with their staff, and 79% of the staff “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the SOP training content was consistent with their agency’s mission, philosophy and goals. After

---

9 The Three Houses is a tool designed to assist child protection practitioners to elicit children’s and youth’s views about what is happening in their lives and what they want for their future. The Three Houses information gathering tool was designed in 2003 in the New Zealand child protection setting and has gone on to be applied in a variety of ways around the world. It originated by the work of Nicki Weld and Maggie Greening, social workers and trainers. Weld, N. (2008). The Three Houses tool: Building safety and positive change. In M. Calder (Ed.) Contemporary risk assessment in safeguarding children, Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.
participating in the three day training, one person remarked that they hoped their agency would support the use of the SOP practices and tools.

“I would be disheartened if the upper management did not implement and/or back the use of SOP!” they wrote.

Another person who attended the training commented, “CPS [child protection services] needs to be more modern and revolutionized by implementing SOP as soon as possible.”

Following the SOP foundational trainings, participants were offered coaching from a person working for the Northern California Training Academy (NCTA) at UC Davis. During their third coaching session, workers were given the opportunity to present safety maps they had completed and obtain feedback from the coach and their fellow co-workers. As a result of implementing this team approach, the use of SOP began to be adopted in a more dynamic, authentic way, with many opportunities for collaborative learning. With this more collaborative, partnership-based approach in place, the implementation for Safety Organized Practice was more successful.

“When supervisors are invested, workers are more invested and on board to use the practices,” said Tasha Dunham. “You need more oversight from the managers to make sure the supervisors are actually talking about the practices. The use of the tools and the benefits of the families are dependent upon who the worker is. It is also important to have accountability…Expectations are becoming more standardized. [It is] very important to be strategic, [and to] do things systemically.”

Margo Hinson, an academic coordinator with NCTA at UC Davis, also supported the county in improving implementation for SOP.

“Implementation efforts improved with the incredible commitment to the practice, with dynamite organizational skills, and good leadership qualities,” she said. “Tasha Dunham and Sally Castillon set up regular internal meetings and recruited early adopters who wanted to participate on the committee.”

Nearly three years after San Joaquin's reinvigorated, more collaborative approach to implementing SOP began, the county has not only expanded SOP principles and practices throughout the agency, but they have also taken the initiative to create innovative ways to sustain the practice. As of today, approximately 90% of staff, 100% of supervisors/managers, and the deputy director have attended the three day foundational SOP training.

“The SOP tools and processes have allowed practitioners to rethink their day to day practice,” observed Sally Castillon. “It has provided them with questions to more critically think and be more intentional in their practice.”

---

10 Safety mapping is a process of organizing information known about a family at any given time. It is a process that can be done by a family and a worker, a worker and a supervisor or worker alone. It provides some simple, easy to use definitions and a process that organizes the information allowing increased clarity about the purpose for any particular child welfare intervention.
Currently, staff and supervisors in San Joaquin County are using professional development coaching to assist with implementation. Advanced trainings are provided on a monthly basis to help practitioners gain a deeper understanding of the practices and tools of SOP.

“The leadership staff in San Joaquin were thoughtful in rolling out the training and mindful of the caseloads and requirements the staff have,” said Nancy Goodman, a coach of Safety Organized Practice from UC Davis. “Management sought information beforehand and feedback to constantly provide helpful training. Management is all trained and enthusiastic and have made themselves available to broaden staff skills on a daily basis. They listen to what staff wants and needs and really try to provide it.”

Lora Larson, a child welfare supervisor in San Joaquin County, comments that participating in the three day training is not enough for implementing and sustaining the practice. “It’s important after the training to get out there and try the practice,” she said. “Even though staff have been through the trainings, [it is] so important to encourage application.”

One way of encouraging the application Larson touched upon is by having the support of coaches and having supervisors also coach their staff in using the SOP tools and processes. In thinking back over the past few years, Sally Castillon emphasized how important it was to have the entire agency involved in the implementation process.

“Communication among divisions is paramount,” she said. “Even if a county wants to start at the front end, that’s great, but managers in the second and third divisions need to be a part of the planning process, being in the know and being aware. If you want to start in the back end, there should be active involvement of the other managers. Don’t see at as, ‘I have to wait to be a part of the conversation.’ It’s a mistake. In doing so you get left out of a lot of rich conversations. Being a part of the early discussions helps with lessons learned. Everyone needs to work together to foster a solid learning organization.”

Creating a Shared Practice in the Agency

Current success in San Joaquin County’s Department of Social Services in implementing Safety Organized Practice is in part due to the creation of and advocating for a shared and sustained practice. The following paragraphs provide examples of the innovative ways they are implementing SOP as a learning organization, adopting many of the principles of continuous quality improvement.

**Monthly Implementation Meetings:** An important piece to successfully implementing SOP are having monthly implementation team meetings. The SOP implementation meetings have representatives from each program within the agency. In the spirit of operating within a continuous quality improvement framework, these monthly meetings incorporate participation from all levels of the agency, including line staff, supervisors and division chiefs. The meetings offer a consistent place for upper management, supervisors, line staff, to discuss what is working well and what needs improvement. The meetings also provide an opportunity to share new tools or ideas for using SOP.
**SOP Steering Committee Meetings:** In January 2015, San Joaquin County developed the Steering committee which includes representatives from supporting county agencies, as well as parents who have been through the Child Welfare System and other stakeholders. The purpose of the Steering Committee is to provide oversight to the agency’s implementation of SOP; address any barriers for implementation and provide feedback to improve implementation. Steering Committee members were given a general overview of the Child Welfare system and a brief overview of SOP to give context for the goals of the agency. The Steering Committee will meet frequently but on an as-needed basis when there are items to discuss about SOP Implementation.

**Weekly SOP Champion Emails:** Each week, the agency sends out an email highlighting the Safety Organized Practice Champion of the week. These emails are not only about success stories, but also showcase workers who take chances and “try on” the practice. Sending out these emails has helped ensure the continual engagement of staff, and has also helped reaffirm that adopting SOP results in positive outcomes and continuous improvement. These emails also provide weekly reminders that the leadership of the agency is committed to the practice.

Below is example of such an email [note: the worker’s name has been changed for confidentiality]:

>Cara is the SOP Champion of the week!! Cara received a new court case on December 9, 2014 and her petition to court resulted in the child remaining in foster care. As Cara worked on her new case she continued to assess for risk, she quickly realized that the initial risk that brought the child into care was mitigated and she felt the child should be returned home. Cara returned to court and asked that the case be dismissed. However, the Judge declined to hear from the social worker and the child’s attorney asked that the case continue. Cara then requested a case consult to organize the facts of the case as well as develop Harm/Danger Statements; the case consult confirmed the risk to the child was no longer present. The following week Cara scheduled a safety mapping with the family and invited all attorneys involved. The Safety Mapping resulted in the same outcome as the case consult; the risk to the child was mitigated. Today, January 15, 2015 Cara and the family returned to court, Cara shared the outcome of the Safety Mapping with all parties; the case was dismissed without prejudice. Today, a child was returned to her parents after 36 days in foster care and a dependency case closed. As they said in Safety Organized Practice training, we have to slow down in the beginning to speed things up. Cara’s caseload is minus one today because of her efforts up front. Thank you for your efforts and sharing your story!

**Weekly Solution Focused Questions:** An aspect of SOP that is highlighted every week is the use of solution focused questions. Each week staff receive a solution focused question of the week along with an example and ways to use the question. These weekly emails further demonstrate the commitment of the leadership and the agency as a whole to SOP. Below is an example of the weekly email.

> All Problems have exceptions. Contrary to what words like “abusive mother,” “drug-addicted mother”, “mentally ill mother”, “uncaring father”, and numerous other such
labels, they imply the abuse occurs 24/7. Even the most chronic alcoholic, drug addict, or abusive parent does not do drugs or abuse the child 24 hours a day, every day. Any time, place, or situation that the person could have done drugs, drank, slapped, cursed, or left a child unsupervised, but somehow managed not to, is a treasure chest of resources to build on. Instead of brushing off such small, seemingly insignificant successes, pay attention to the details of how the caretaker managed to avoid lashing out at the child. These can become the building blocks of bigger successes in the future. (Insoo Kim Berg and Kelly, 2000).

How to phrase an Exception Question: I am going to ask you a strange question. Could you tell me when this (whatever the issues is) problem was just a little bit better?

1. Tell me about a time, in recent days, when you could have hit Lora (screamed at her, called her names, etc.) but somehow managed to handle it differently?
   a. Can you explain to me how you did that? How did you know that just “keeping your mouth shut” would work with Lora?

2. In what other situations have you been able to manage your temper in such a way that you did not have to regret it later?

3. Tell me about the most recent times when you had a little more energy, even for a short time?

4. Can you think of a time in the past when you were not using drugs? What was different then? What helped to make things better? Can you tell me what you did? How did you do it?

5. Can you think of a time in the past when you were able to consistently ensure your child received/you followed the necessary medical care? What was different then? What helped to make things better? Can you tell me what you did? How did you do it?

Give it a TRY!!!!

Instructional Coaching: An important part of the implementation of Safety Organized Practice in San Joaquin is offering coaching and having the coaches participate in the monthly SOP implementation meetings.

“The external coaches are a definite help,” said Tasha Dunham. “We wouldn’t be where we are today and as successful without the use of the coaches.”

The coaches have experience as direct practitioners doing field work. They provide support and direction at unit meetings with a small group, such as seven staff, or at management meetings with about 21 people. The coaches also arrive early before the implementation meetings to hold office hours with the supervisors. The supervisors use the time to meet with the coaches to assist with problem solving and to identify ways to support their staff in using SOP.
“The coaches provide a key resource when workers are trying on these tools and challenges with what to do next, and when supervisors don’t know how to problem solve with the worker the coach really comes in handy,” said Sally Castillon. “Workers don’t have to be worried about the coach using information in the performance evaluation. [Their presence] provides someone who is removed and not employed by the county.” In addition, the agency’s commitment to coaching provides a consistent process for staff to feel supported in building upon their knowledge and skills.

**SOP Corners**: These are areas in the San Joaquin County building where there are tools and reference sheets that staff can pick up on the way out the door to see a family. For example, the SOP Corners include the “Solution Focused Question (SFQ) of the week” or “Super Staff moments,” which celebrates SOP successes of social workers and supervisors who tried on tools while engaging with families, plus written supplies and SOP forms.

“The staff I interact with are all excited and appreciate having the tools readily available,” noted SOP Coach Nancy Goodman. “Most want to use the tools, but when it comes down to it they just don't have the energy to think about much less look for supplies.” Now staff can readily grab the useful tools as they walk out the door to work with families.

*One SOP Corner (above) in San Joaquin County offers materials for working on the Three Houses and Safety House information gathering tools*

**Safety Organized Practice Consult Rooms**: To provide space for group supervision, Lora Larson developed four rooms which include whiteboards in the room for supervisors and staff. The rooms also include encouraging phrases such as, “shoot for the moon even if you land among the stars.” On one wall of a room there is an example of a safety map completed with a family that has solution focused questions in speech bubbles. Another wall is decorated with the five steps for the SOP process, and yet another wall of the consult room reads, “Just the facts.” These rooms highlight the core practice of SOP by providing visual reminders of what the practice is about and contributing to the goal of implementing SOP within the continuous quality improvement framework.

**Key Lessons of Implementing SOP as a Learning Organization**

Infusing Safety Organized Practice into the agency as a learning organization is already showing positive impacts as perceived by the social workers using these practices and tools within San
Joaquin. After conducting interviews with some stakeholders involved in the implementation process of SOP within San Joaquin’s child welfare agency, there are some valuable lessons that can be summarized in five statements:

- **Achieving increased transparency in the agency and with families in a meaningful way is possible.** Many staff are talking about the substantial gains that can be made in involving families and children more in the process of decision making, and the agency as a whole is talking about how respectful and less fearful staff are in their day-to-day practices. “This practice has given people greater insight, resources, and is breaking down the barriers. There is less tension, increased trust, greater cohesiveness in the organization as a whole and increased transparency” – Sally Castillo.

- **Supporting innovation, experimentation, and creativity in rolling out SOP agency wide brings about greater adoption of the practices and tools by staff.** San Joaquin promoted a collaborative attitude toward trying on the practices and said it was okay to make mistakes. In doing so, staff, such as Lora Larson, felt comfortable to identify practice innovations for involving families in the decision-making process and making the tools more accessible and usable.

- **Identifying and engaging stakeholders in the process of implementing SOP increases engagement in the practice and contributes to cross-system collaboration.** San Joaquin’s creation of an SOP Implementation team, which consisted of defining their stakeholders, has led to a process that better ensures lasting improvements for the agency and the families they serve. There is a shared responsibility across the agency and community in implementing SOP. “The use of SOP is having an impact on the community as a whole because we are including family members. It really feels good to talk to people in straightforward language. From social workers using the family engagement tools is impacting the community positively. It’s opening a different type of dialogue with the family. It’s really changing the dynamics of our conversations and building on the past successes, providing hope to the families and the workers.” – Lora Larson

- **It is important to collect and examine both qualitative and quantitative data and information from children, families, and staff in the agency as an ongoing activity.** San Joaquin has highlighted how important it is to use information as a way for assessing progress in implementing SOP. The implementation team used child welfare data to inform how they would roll out training and support for adopting the SOP tools and practices and they shared both successes and challenges from staff and share this information on a weekly basis. By using data, or information to inform practices on an ongoing basis, this has supported informed decision making and better allocation of resources in implementing SOP.

- **An essential ingredient to achieving success in implementing SOP is having leadership commitment and support.** In all of the interviews, leadership was identified as an essential element of successfully implementing SOP. Greater strides were made when the agency’s leadership was enthusiastic, committed, and thoughtful. It was important for
staff at all levels, especially those in leadership positions, to have knowledge of SOP so that true change could occur, such as supervisors being more equipped by understanding the complexities and speaking the language of SOP. “For true implementation, the words need to be put into action,” added Lora Larson. “Supervisors are key. The staff need someone to support them. Management is key in that they produce an environment that allows us to try the practice. Supervisors have to be on board to support staff and try the practice on themselves. Staff can’t do the practice on their own.” It was also important for the leadership of the agency to comprehend the total process involved in implementing SOP. “Management has been extremely supportive. They are giving us the leeway to try on the practice. For example, we are starting to work SOP into the court reports and management has really supported us in doing it. Management support is key. We feel supported to try new ways to implement the practice throughout the agency.” – Lora Larson

Conclusion

As exemplified by the early work of San Joaquin County, implementing Safety Organized Practice within a continuous quality framework can transform a general intention to improve practices into a concrete set of highly focused strategies that are results oriented. This transformation better equips an agency to measure its success and determine next steps toward the goal of positively changing the way child welfare agencies provide services to families to promote safety, permanence and well-being of children. The case review of San Joaquin’s implementation efforts for SOP demonstrate how important it is to involve staff at all levels in the agency for true systematic change to occur. While it is too early to examine child welfare data to identify if and how the implementation of SOP is impacting child welfare outcomes, the interviews provide evidence that families are more involved in case planning and a shift to being more collaborative and transparent is ongoing within the agency.