



STRATEGY BRIEF

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How was Safety Organized Practice implemented in San Diego County?

Safety Organized Practice (SOP) is a collaborative practice approach that emphasizes the importance of teamwork in child welfare.¹ SOP aims to build and strengthen partnerships with the child protection agency and within a family by involving informal support networks of friends and relatives. 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 to find solutions that ensure safety, permanency, and well-being for children.

SOP consists of practice strategies as well as concrete tools for child protection caseworkers to engage families, enhance family participation in case planning, and facilitate shared, equitable decision-making. The primary objectives of Safety Organized Practice are to:²

1. Create effective working relationships and a shared focus among all stakeholders, including the child, family, kin, caseworker, supervisor, and extended community.
2. Enhance critical inquiry and minimize the potential for bias by workers through a rigorous “mapping” of safety, danger, and risk, which all stakeholders complete collaboratively.
3. Develop a joint understanding among all stakeholders as to what constitutes dangers, risks, protective capacities, and family strengths, and what clear



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behavioral changes and goals are needed to create and sustain safety for the child.

4. Utilize research-based tools to enhance consistency, validity, and equity in the key case decisions that child welfare practitioners have to make every day.

Implementing SOP

Safety Organized Practice was implemented in San Diego County in 2010 through a partnership between County of San Diego Child Welfare Services (CWS), the Academy for Professional Excellence at San Diego State University's School of Social Work, the National Council on Crime & Delinquency, and Casey Family Programs. After implementing Structured Decision-Making (SDM) in 2006, CWS realized that staff needed an engagement-focused, [trauma-informed practice model](#) to more effectively utilize SDM and other available tools. CWS built upon the engagement strategies inherent within the Signs of Safety model and incorporated the actuarial tools available through SDM to implement SOP.

As one of the pioneers in implementing SOP, CWS identified 60 staff from various program areas to be trained as the early adopters and developers of SOP. Using a structured method that included coaching along with testing various components of the model each month and providing feedback, the early adopters spent a year carefully refining the Safety Organized Practice model. When SOP was formally launched, the early adopters also became the first trainers of SOP.

Since then, SOP has been gaining momentum across California. The state's regional training academies have been working to support counties in their implementation of the practice model, building in part from San Diego's experience. Lessons learned from San Diego County have contributed to a refined approach toward SOP implementation and practice. When California expanded

its Title IV-E Waiver in 2014, SOP was one of the integral components of the waiver, and implementing SOP across the state is now part of the state's Program Improvement Plan.

Key elements

Safety Organized Practice is informed by an integration of practices and approaches, some of which are evidence-informed. They include:³

- Solution-focused practice⁴
- Signs of Safety⁵
- Structured Decision-Making⁶
- Child and family engagement⁷
- Risk and safety assessment research
- Group supervision and interactional supervision⁸
- Appreciative inquiry⁹
- Motivational interviewing¹⁰
- Consultation and information sharing framework¹¹
- Cultural humility
- Trauma-informed practice

The most critical elements of SOP are a rigorous and balanced assessment, transparency, and [making time for authentic family engagement](#). SOP includes a number of tools to support transparency and effective engagement, such as:

- **The Three Questions:** What are we worried about? What is working well? What needs to happen next?
- **Safety Mapping:** A facilitated process that helps a group gather information such as the responses to the Three Questions, organize that information, and create group agreements.

The relationship between the investigator and the family can be an intervention. Healing and change can take place in the context of that relationship.

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- **Harm Statements, Danger Statements, and Safety Goals:** These statements rely on critical thinking and using behavioral details rather than jargon to keep all stakeholders focused on what happened, what are the concerns, and what needs to happen for the child to be safe now and into the future.
- **The Three Houses:** The House of Good Things, the House of Worries, and the House of Hopes/Dreams are developed with the child and help the worker to learn about danger and safety from the child's perspective.
- **The Safety House:** Developed by the child, the Safety House is a tool to include the child in safety planning, and illustrates the child's desired state regarding who lives in the house, what activities go on in the house, the rules of the house, who can visit, who should not be allowed in the house, and the safety path.
- **Circles of Safety and Support:** A strategy for identifying and building a family's safety network.

The San Diego County experience

Training

San Diego County's CWS delivers a comprehensive SOP training curriculum for caseworkers and supervisors, which includes a foundational overview that is two days for caseworkers and three days for supervisors. In addition, caseworkers must complete one SOP training module every month over the course of a year, for a total of 12 modules. Supervisors must complete a series of four half-day modules, once they have completed their foundational overview training. In 2015, CWS took the important step of establishing an internal SOP Coaching unit, which now includes nine full-time coaches and one supervisor. This unit is spread out among the CWS

regions and available to staff to support and deepen their SOP practice.

Implementation lessons learned

CWS built upon earlier lessons learned from implementing SDM to improve their implementation of SOP, and experimented with strategies such as:

- Supporting internal trainers so they have the time and comfort level needed to effectively train their peers.
- Utilizing early adopters.
- Using a training module series that allows workers to learn new tools and practice skills, and then incorporate them into their practice at their own pace.
- Providing storytelling to help spread successes and build desire to "try on" the practice.
- Offering coaching to support implementation.
- Structuring supervisor learning to be more heavily emphasized earlier in the implementation process and to support ongoing implementation.
- Connecting SOP to other key initiatives and embedding it within all aspects of the agency.

Upon reflection, CWS realized that it could have [engaged other stakeholders better and earlier](#) in the implementation process. For example, SOP has had such a significant impact in reducing the number of children in care that the county subsequently has closed some dependency courtrooms, impacting court staff and other legal partners. While this impact was positive for children and families, it also was unexpected. CWS could have educated its legal partners earlier about SOP, which would have helped them better prepare for the transition. Nevertheless, the legal partners ultimately

We wondered, 'Can families handle us being this direct?' And you would be surprised by how much families really can handle if you give them the tools to have these types of conversations. ... Families were more transparent than we ever expected.

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have responded positively to feedback, especially to the language now used in court reports, such as the Danger Statements and behaviorally-based case plans.

As the number of ongoing cases decreased, CWS also experienced staffing changes. The time needed for investigations, however, increased in order to allow caseworkers to meaningfully engage families. The agency's changing needs meant that CWS had to move staff from the back end to the front end of the CPS case continuum. This shift also required CWS to be more thoughtful about how to train investigators, as most new staff are now starting with investigations rather than being assigned to ongoing cases.

Ultimately, SOP is a system and practice change that takes time, and CWS emphasizes that jurisdictions considering implementation of this approach need to be "invested for the long-term." Since implementing SOP, CWS has built on its practice by developing the Safety Enhanced Together (SET) Practice Framework,¹² which encapsulates the vision and values that are at the core of the agency's work.

Outcomes

While it is difficult to attribute changes in jurisdictional outcomes to a single practice or policy change, it appears that SOP has had a significant impact on outcomes for children and families in San Diego County. From FY2011-12 to FY2017-18, the number of average monthly referrals increased from 3,319 to 3,748. However, during that same span:

- The number of average monthly petitions filed decreased significantly, from 163 to 81.
- The number of average monthly removals decreased by 43 percent, from 207 to 119.
- The percentage of families engaged in case planning increased from 38 percent to 79 percent.

Furthermore, while the number of children in foster care in California remained relatively flat between 2012 and 2018 (Figure 1), **the total number of children in foster care in San Diego County has steadily decreased year after year, resulting in a 38 percent decrease over six years** (Figure 2).

Figure 1

California (statewide), Children in foster care (Ages 0 to 17, as of July 1 for each year)

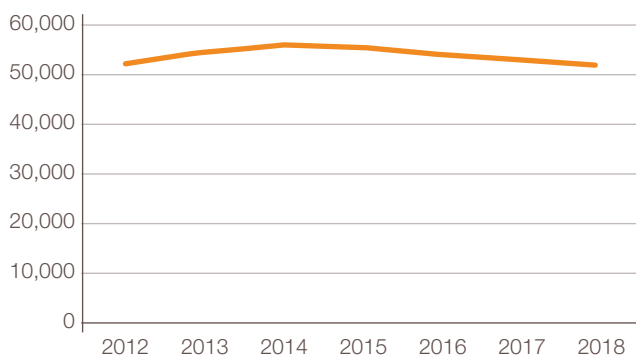
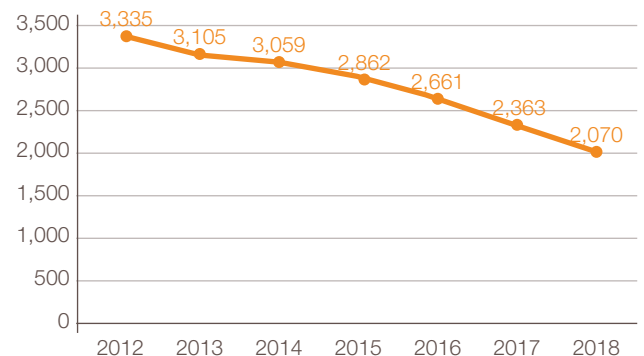


Figure 2

San Diego County, Children in foster care (Ages 0 to 17, as of July 1 for each year)



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It takes time to learn the new skills and to get good at using them. And it takes time for the system to change and map to SOP, and for the infrastructure to change to support this new practice.

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1. Information for this Strategy Brief was obtained through personal communication with Kimberly Giardina, Acting Director, Child Welfare Services, County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency, November 27, 2018.
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