

# MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

## MRS: We've Come a Long Way, Baby!

by Holly McNeill

Welcome! This is a special issue of the MRS newsletter, because it is our last. Not because the work is done, or because there's nothing left to be said, but because we're evolving. As we always intended, the Multiple Response System (MRS) has become simply the way we do business in child welfare here in North Carolina. And you can be assured that we continue to work to grow and strengthen our practice to ensure that we are doing everything we can to achieve the best possible outcomes for families and children.



## MRS Yesterday

Oh, this is such a fun issue to write! It's fun because I get to brag about all the fabulous work that social workers, supervisors, administrators, agencies, universities, and the NC Division of Social Services have done since MRS began way back in the late 1990s. *continued next page*

## We're Still Here for You

Although this is the last issue of *MRS!* the Division continues to make past issues of this publication available. Topics addressed by past issues include:

- Shared Parenting: Overcoming Barriers (Dec. 2011)
- MRS and Rates of Juvenile Petitions (Oct. 2011)
- Working with the Courts (Oct. 2008)
- CFTs for Teens in Foster Care (July 2008)
- Frontloading Services (Jan. 2008)
- MRS and System of Care (July 2007)
- Collaboration with Work First (Jan. 2007)

Plus, we still have many really great and well-established publications, including *Children's Services Practice Notes*, *Fostering Perspectives*, and *Training Matters*. In these newsletters you can continue to find information that will be helpful to you in the work you do.



## MRS Meetings

*MRS and System of Care meetings take place three times monthly via conference call. To learn the dates and times of each call and to get other updates, be a part of the MRS listserv. To join, ask Holly McNeill to add you to the list.*

*Call-in and login information for MRS calls are always the same:*

10:00-11:30 a.m.  
Call-in number:  
218/936-4141  
Access code: 956303

Link to join in on the web:  
<https://dss.ncgovconnect.com/mrs>

## MRS Questions?

If you have questions regarding the implementation of any aspect of MRS, please contact Holly McNeill at 828/757-5672 or [holly.mcneill@dhs.nc.gov](mailto:holly.mcneill@dhs.nc.gov)

## Training Dates

### Adult Mental Health Issues Which Impact Families Served by Child Welfare

Aug. 6–22

Nov. 4–21

All online

### Child Development in Families at Risk

July 23–Aug. 20

Aug. 5–Sept. 4

Sept. 17–Oct. 15

Oct. 1–29

All online

To learn about these courses or to register, go to <http://www.ncswLearn.org>

## Vol. 8, No. 3 • July 2013

MRS! is published by the NC Division of Social Services and the Jordan Institute for Families at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work. This issue was created by Patrick Betancourt, Holly McNeill, and John McMahon.

### Comments?

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### Online

[www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs](http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs)

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MRS began for me while I was with Caldwell County DSS. At that point I was not at all convinced that this whole “MRS” idea was going to work. After all, it just wasn’t the way we had always done things in child welfare. In particular, I had my doubts about the use of an alternative response in child protective services.

You know how this story goes: Girl doesn’t believe. Girl is schooled by open-minded colleagues. Girl sees amazing results in families. Girl becomes head cheerleader!

Without getting too lost in the history of it all, I do want to send a shout out to my many colleagues across the state who were present at the beginning of MRS, both in county agencies and at the Division. Some had their own misgivings about MRS. Others had a fearless vision. Each of us played a part in starting what I believe is the most comprehensive system reform effort in this country.

We MRS pioneers share a special secret. If you promise not tell anyone I will share it with you. . . what we developed was only a seed. A magic bean, really. It has been nurtured with the sunshine of many ideas, cultivated with an innovative spirit, and watered with showers of questions that helped us make changes when changes were needed. And oh, what seed it was. . .

### MRS Today

Where is North Carolina’s child welfare system today? Things aren’t perfect, but let’s do what we do with families (parallel process!) and consider what is working. What has the magic bean that is MRS produced?

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*When I saw how MRS helped families I overcame my initial doubts to become its biggest cheerleader!*

### The 7 Strategies of MRS

NC’s Multiple Response System is a multi-pronged effort to make its child welfare system safer, more effective, and more family-centered. It uses seven strategies:

1. Strengths-based, structured CPS intake process
2. Choice of two approaches to CPS reports (i.e., differential response)
3. Coordination between law enforcement agencies and CPS on investigative assessments
4. Redesign of in-home family services
5. Child and family team meetings
6. Shared parenting meetings
7. Collaboration between Work First and child welfare programs

### Principles of Partnership

The NC Division of Social Services used the following six family-centered principles of partnership to help agencies engage families and implement MRS:

- *Everyone desires respect*
- *Everyone needs to be heard*
- *Everyone has strengths*
- *Judgments can wait*
- *Partners share power*
- *Partnership is a process*

Today, the Division’s vision is that all programs it administers will embrace family-centered practice principles and provide services to promote security and safety for all.

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**A New Way of Thinking.** Over the years, my fellow trainers and I have seen a tremendous shift in the way social workers think about families. It not would be an exaggeration to say that five years ago, a majority of the child welfare staff we saw in training judged families quickly and harshly. They believed that when families missed visits or failed to follow through in some other way it was due to a moral failing (laziness, apathy, etc.). Thanks to MRS, today most tell us that families are just scared, or struggling with change—just as we *all* struggle with change. That’s a huge shift in our thinking, one I believe makes us better at engaging families and therefore better (more effective) at helping them.

**New Language.** Can changing a word here or there really make a difference? North Carolina’s experience implementing MRS shows that it can, as long as there is an underlying change in thinking to go along with the new language.

Now, to be clear, if you call something a “Family Assessment,” but it still looks and feels exactly like a traditional CPS investigation, then the change in language won’t make much difference. But when we use “assessment” language, rather than “investigation” language AND we demonstrate, through words and actions, that we are not trying to “catch” someone, but instead are genuinely curious about what is going on and how we might help, most families feel much better about our presence in their lives. They’re more likely to accept the support we can give them, which leads to better results for kids.

**Internal Partnerships.** A change brought by MRS that I think is often overlooked are the new partnerships that have been formed inside DSS. Before MRS, in many agencies there was quite a divide between Economic Services (Work First, Food and Nutrition, Medicaid...) and Child Welfare. Today, thanks to MRS, there’s more partnership and increased communication between these two very important parts of DSS. This, in turn, results in more resources for families, less duplication of service, and less confusion for families. *continued next page*

## MRS: A Timeline

### 2001

- NC Legislature mandates the NC Division of Social Services develop and pilot differential response system

### 2002

- Pilot of MRS begins in 10 counties
- NCDSS begins crafting MRS policy in close partnership with pilot counties

### 2003

- Legislature approves expansion of MRS
- MRS now in 52 counties
- Policy development continues

### 2006

- Legislature authorizes statewide implementation
- All NC counties begin implementing MRS
- Duke University preliminary evaluation of MRS. Findings are that under MRS:
  - Children are just as safe
  - CPS responses are just as timely
  - Frontloading of services increases
  - Increasing frontloaded minutes reduces probability a child will come back into the system within six months

### 2013

- Support for MRS implementation continues

## Training Dates

### Adoptions in Child Welfare Services

Oct. 22-25

Fayetteville

Dec. 10-13

Greensboro

### Child Welfare Practices for Cases Involving Domestic Violence

July 24-25

Greensboro

Aug. 19-20

Candler

Oct. 16-17

Wilmington

Oct. 24-25

Charlotte

### CPS Assessments

Aug. 27-30

Greensboro

Sept. 16-19

Wilmington

Oct. 8-11

Charlotte

Oct. 29-Nov. 1

Candler

### CPS In-Home Services

Aug. 8-9

Nashville

Sept. 24-27

Fayetteville

Oct. 15-18

Charlotte

Nov. 5-8

Greensboro

### Effects of Separation and Loss on Attachment

July 22-23

Greensboro

August 22-23

Candler

Oct. 15-16

Lenoir County

## Training Dates

### Intake

Aug. 13-15  
Halifax

Dec. 10-12  
Greensboro

### IV-E: An Overview

July 18  
Lumberton

Sept. 11  
Greensboro

Oct. 17  
Wilmington

Nov. 6  
Clyde

### Legal Aspects

Aug. 7-8  
Boone

Sept. 5-6  
Greensboro

Nov. 21-22  
Morganton

Dec. 12-13  
Beaufort

### Life Books: Motivating the Memory Keepers

July 22  
Fayetteville

Oct. 21  
Greensboro

### Medical Aspects

July 30-31  
Fayetteville

Aug. 13-14  
Smithfield

Oct. 9-10  
Greenville

Nov. 5-6  
Candler

Dec. 2-3  
Winston-Salem

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In county DSS agencies, everyone is busy. Often we don't feel we have time to learn what our colleagues are doing "on the other side" or "on that other floor or building." But MRS has helped us realize that the truth is we don't have time not to partner with our internal colleagues.

**External Partners.** Another big shift we've seen over the "MRS years" is the way we work with external partners. I believe that North Carolina was fortunate in that at about the same time we were developing our MRS, three counties were also learning about System of Care through a federal grant, and we discovered that the philosophies of System of Care were a great fit with the tenets of MRS. Many counties have made huge strides in how they work with community partners. This includes having regular meetings, educating each other, and sharing work and even—gasp!—money. Which of course leads me to what I think is one of our biggest achievements since implementing MRS . . .

**Child and Family Teams.** The use of Child and Family Teams (CFTs) has supported great growth and change in our journey towards partnerships with families and others. In the training room, my colleagues and I hear that fewer service agreements are being written at the computer in a social worker's office and many more are being developed during CFTs—with families in the driver's seat.

Research tells us that plans developed with the family and their natural supports are much more likely to be successful. CFTs have helped us to put that into practice. Although before MRS there were some counties that were using some form of family meetings (e.g., Family Group Decision Making), today North Carolina's child welfare system has a model of its own, promoting consistency across counties. We also have seen the use of CFTs picked up by many of our community partners, such as the schools, juvenile justice, and mental health. Again, anecdotal data tells us that CFTs are meeting several needs, including helping us prevent out-of-home placement, plan appropriately when placements are necessary, and holding families accountable for their own goals and behaviors.

**Shared Parenting.** For the counties that have embraced this MRS strategy, Shared Parenting has brought about a new kind partnership between birth and foster parents. Counties report that Shared Parenting provides comfort and reassurance to birth parents, early communication to ease the transition for children, and a chance to plan for those unplanned encounters that sometimes cause problems or hurt feelings. I hear wonderful stories of how Shared Parenting is being used and benefiting all parties.

### Empirical Evidence

Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy has conducted several formal evaluations of MRS. Here are some highlights:

**2004.** Duke's initial evaluation (done *pro bono*) found children were no less safe when agencies used the Family Assessment response during *continued next page*

*Plans developed with the family and their natural supports are much more likely to be successful. Child and Family Team meetings have helped us put that into practice.*

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CPS. It also underscored the value and efficacy of frontloading services: it found that the more time we spend on the assessment phase, the less time families spend in CPS in-home services.

**2009.** This evaluation reaffirmed that child safety is not adversely affected by the Family Assessment response. Furthermore, it found repeat assessments decreased after the implementation of MRS. Good stuff! Other findings:

- **CFTs.** Though families and social workers found CFTs effective, agencies struggled with fidelity to our CFT model. We continue to work on this.
- **Shared Parenting.** Though counties who used Shared Parenting found it very helpful, many had not begun to implement it. This is still true today, although I believe use of Shared Parenting is on the rise.
- **Supervision.** Supervisors play a key role in the success of the implementation of key MRS practices. (Surprise!) The Division engages supervisors whenever possible to inform the policy and practice across the state.

**2011.** Findings: there appears to be no connection between the implementation of MRS and the decrease in juvenile petitions. This final evaluation also looked at rates of TPRs and repeat maltreatment and found that child safety is on an upward trend in North Carolina.

## Conclusion

There are always new things to learn and brave new strategies to try. MRS continues to teach us to try something new, and not to be afraid of getting it wrong the first time. That's how we learn! Let's keep challenging ourselves, learning from each other, and working to better our partnerships with families, internal colleagues, and community partners.

And never fear, you won't miss me after this last edition of *MRS!* I'll still be on those 3 conference calls a month.

We've come a long way with MRS, North Carolina. And the journey continues!

## Evaluations of the Multiple Response System

Consult the following resources to learn more about the impact that MRS has had on child welfare practice in North Carolina. These evaluations were conducted by Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy.



- **2011 MRS Evaluation Report**  
[www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/MRS%20Report%202011.pdf](http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/MRS%20Report%202011.pdf)
- **MRS-System of Care Policy Brief (Spring 2009)**  
[www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/MRS-SOC%20Policy%20Brief.pdf](http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/MRS-SOC%20Policy%20Brief.pdf)
- **2009 MRS Evaluation Report**  
[www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/2009%20MRS%20Report.pdf](http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/2009%20MRS%20Report.pdf)
- **2006 MRS Evaluation Report**  
[www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/pubpres/MRS\\_FinalReport-06.pdf](http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/pubpres/MRS_FinalReport-06.pdf)
- **2004 MRS Evaluation Report**  
[www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs/docs/MRS%20Evaluation%20Report%202004.pdf](http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/mrs/docs/MRS%20Evaluation%20Report%202004.pdf)

## Training Dates

### Placement in Child Welfare Services

Aug. 13-16  
Greensboro

Oct. 22-25  
Fayetteville

Nov. 19-22  
Candler

Dec. 3-6  
Charlotte

### PS-MAPP

Aug. 27-Sept. 13  
Fayetteville

Oct. 8-25  
Greensboro

Nov. 19-Dec. 5  
Charlotte

### Shared Parenting

July 23-24  
Fayetteville

Oct. 28-29  
Greensboro

Dec. 16-17  
Charlotte

### Understanding Child Mental Health Issues

Sept. 3-Oct. 3

Nov. 4-Dec. 10

All online

To learn about these courses or to register, go to <http://www.ncswLearn.org>