



OSU Center for Family Research
OSU FAST Evaluation Team

Evaluation of FAST\$06*
Focus Group Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FAST\$06 FOCUS GROUPS

- Focus groups were conducted throughout the state of Ohio to gather qualitative information in order to determine the benefits of FAST\$06 (Family and System Teams 2006) and strategies for improvement.
- Three categories of focus groups were identified: service providers/program administrators, parent advocates, and family caregivers.
- Focus group data were analyzed for the primary FAST\$06 variables of family empowerment (including aspects of respect and support), service enhancement, systems collaboration, and success outcomes. In addition, participants were asked to provide their perspectives for improving FAST\$06 program management.
- The **service provider/program administrator** focus groups indicated:
 - FAST\$06 **empowered families** through parent advocacy, options for using FAST funds, and through an environment of family involvement in the decision-making process;
 - FAST\$06 nurtured **support and respect** for service providers and program administrators through positive intra- and inter-agency communications by valuing decision-making skills and abilities. Also noted was the belief that when the stakeholders of the program are empowered, then family empowerment will follow;
 - FAST\$06 **enhanced services** by providing help for families that otherwise may not have been possible with existing lines of funding support. Respite was the most frequent type of service discussed in the focus groups. Other service enhancements for families included: outdoor education, mentoring, parent education, camps, Y memberships, and instructional activities such as karate and gymnastics;
 - FAST\$06 influenced **systems collaboration** in large part because of how FAST funding is structured. Individuals, teams, and agencies partnered with each other to effectively serve families in their communities. Collaborations included faith-based groups, state agencies, and Family and Children First Councils;
 - FAST\$06 brought about **successful outcomes** for children and families. The outcomes can be categorized according to 1) service enhancements, 2) family preservation, and 3) parent advocacy support;
 - FAST\$06 can be **improved** through increasing the role of parent advocacy, more effective communication, streamlining data reporting/collection procedures, increasing the flexibility of FAST funding, and greater respect for the decision-making abilities of FAST personnel in terms of empowering FAST families.



- The **parent advocate** focus groups indicated:
 - FAST\$06 **empowered families** by giving them a “voice and choice,” resulting in parent confidence and a better understanding of their parental rights and options;
 - FAST\$06 helped parent advocates perceive **respect and support** in their advocacy roles for families when they were valued by their supervisors and peers for their abilities and skills for serving FAST families;
 - FAST\$06 **enhanced services** through a variety of family-supportive services in an atmosphere characterized as caring and empathetic. Some of the service enhancements discussed in the focus groups included biofeedback, respite care, summer camps, Y family memberships, family/child mentors, art therapy and school assistance;
 - FAST\$06 strengthened **systems collaboration** as different organizations worked through the structure of FAST funds toward ultimately benefiting families;
 - FAST\$06 resulted in **successful outcomes** as advocates were able to initiate needed services and advance family preservation;
 - FAST\$06 can be **improved** by offering training and education for effective parent advocacy. Other suggested strategies included: early referrals identifying FAST families, greater availability of FAST to more families, providing additional funds for parent advocacy, parent advocacy needs respected by and valued inside and outside of FAST programming, assigning parent advocates automatically with a follow-up decision by families regarding their actual use, and allowing for greater flexibility of FAST funding to include basic family services and medicine.
- The **family caregiver** focus groups indicated:
 - FAST\$06 **empowered families** through advocacy efforts by listening, encouraging family decision-making, being available, conferring ultimate decision making to families, and effective family services;
 - FAST\$06 instilled **respect and support** via family empowerment strategies. Family caregiver decision-making, valuing opinions, listening, and encouraging families to help themselves were shared as important elements that brought about respect and support;
 - FAST\$06 **enhanced services** to benefit families by building relationships formed through the services for family preservation, success, and resiliency. Some of the services that were mentioned involved youth programming, respite care, mentoring, and purchasing material goods;
 - FAST\$06 fostered **systems collaboration** to benefit them and their families when systems, agencies, and organizations created a collaborative environment for positive family outcomes;

- FAST\$06 resulted in **successful outcomes** as expressed by family caregivers for maintaining or getting custody of their children, positive parent advocacy, and beneficial services;
- FAST\$06 can be **improved** by educating families about available services, clarifying the role of parent advocates, lengthening time families can receive FAST funding, and the need to extend services to families who might benefit from FAST.
- Comparative data analysis between focus group results for 2005 and 2006 revealed similarities (e.g., importance of parent advocacy for family empowerment and positive outcomes, increase FAST funding, and promotion of family preservation), differences (less creative use of FAST funds due to restrictions on approved services and greater attention given to families to value their “voice and choice”), and FAST improvements (less focus on video conferencing issues, timeliness of communications, and clarification of FAST guidelines).
- One general improvement, as evident from the three categories of focus groups, was the need to further clarify acceptable use of FAST funds in areas of transportation, home-based tutoring, FAST funds for immigrant families, and age boundaries for FAST children (funds available until age 21). It should be noted that some counties may restrict the use of FAST funds based on their priorities.

Purpose and Procedures

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather information about the FAST\$06 (Family and System Teams 2006) program according to the following outcomes variables: family empowerment (including aspects of respect and support), service enhancement, systems integration (collaboration), and FAST\$06 program success. In addition, aspects of respect and support for decision-making and strategies for continuously improving the program were captured.

Focus groups were utilized to gather high quality data in a group/social context whereby participants are able to express their own views and consider the views of others (Patton, 1990). Focus groups are particularly useful where there is limited information available on a topic or program (Ary et al., 2002; Morgran & Krueger, 1993). Hence, the qualitative research method of focus groups is an ideal data collection tool for the FAST\$06 program.

To create a comfortable and open environment in the focus groups, confidentiality was promised to the participants whereby names would not be identified with comments, nor would their input in any way affect their county's ability to receive funding or families to continue the services they receive.

Three categories of focus group participants were identified: service providers/program administrators, parent advocates, and family caregivers. To get statewide input, the focus groups were conducted using multiple strategies. The service provider/program

administrator focus groups were conducted¹ in each of the five Ohio Family and Children First (OFCF) regions: East (3), Northeast (3), Northwest (9), South (10), and Southwest (9). Potential participants for the focus groups were generated by the five regional OFCF coordinators in cooperation with their county Family and Children First coordinators. All names submitted to the OSU FAST\$06 Evaluation Team were recruited for participation.

The parent advocate focus groups were conducted in conjunction with the annual statewide PAC conference (Parent Advocacy Connection) which is administered by NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) Ohio. An advantage of this strategy was to gather input from parent advocates from across the state who were in one location thereby preventing additional travel on their part for a regional focus group. A total of three parent advocate focus groups were conducted; one in the morning (3 participants) and two groups in the afternoon (10 and 8 participants).

Because of recruitment issues in 2005, only one family caregiver interviewer was conducted. Steps were taken in 2006 to insure that family caregiver focus groups were conducted. Based on input from FAST program administrators, four specific locations were selected² that received FAST funding: Cincinnati, Hamilton County (3); Cleveland, Cuyahoga County (7); Columbus, Franklin County (3); and Steubenville, Jefferson County (7).

¹ Number of administrative participants is given in parentheses

² Number of family caregiver participants is given in parentheses.

A total of 12 focus groups were conducted, 5 service provider/program administrator focus groups, 3 parent advocate focus groups, and 4 family caregiver focus groups. The focus groups lasted 90 minutes and were audio taped and transcribed for data analysis to maintain accuracy and content validity.

Results

Open coding was used to analyze the data. Open coding is the process of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Data were analyzed line-by-line to form “chunks” - words, sentences, or phrases, (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Themes or categories were developed from the data “chunks.”

Focus group methods do not allow results to be generalized, but rather are used to gain an in-depth understanding of a program or topic issue. The data are analyzed for transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), whereby the results can be applied to a particular program.

Brief summaries are given at the beginning of the each variable examined. The summaries are followed by selected comments as evidence of the findings as reported in the participants’ own words.

Service Providers/Program Administrators

The findings from the five service provider/program administrator focus groups (one session in each of the five OFCF regions) are reported according to the primary FAST\$06 evaluation variables and the interview guide (Appendix A). Data analysis summaries are given for each variable, followed by illustrative comments from the focus group sessions.

1) FAST\$06 Expectations

Expectations and impressions of the FAST\$06 program varied from excitement to uncertainty to disappointment. Some respondents indicated their expectations have not changed much from Year 1 to Year 2 in their continued role of helping families, while adjustments in services were necessary to accommodate the 06 guidelines for utilizing FAST\$06 funds. These reactions were connected to the following areas: opportunity for systematic changes, flexible and non-flexible use of FAST funds, service coordination, and the basic needs of families.

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

In terms of my expectations on how they use the dollars, it didn't change significantly from the beginning to now. We did use some of the dollars in the first year for treatment which we no longer do, but in terms of using it for other support things: do the dollars help us divert from placement or at least extend time before placement? Absolutely, I think it did have that effect because we didn't have flexible dollars prior to FAST. (SW)

For me, I think it was the excitement: "Wow". We're going to have resources for families that we didn't previously have, and got pretty excited about some things that we could do, and then found out we couldn't do those things, and the rules continued to change so the expectations and the excitement kind of diminished over time. (E)

I think from Year 1 to Year 2 the guidelines changing and not being able to access dollars for certain things we did in year one some of the families that were carried over were a little disappointed in that. (NE)

My initial expectations were that it is just another acronym that I am going to have to learn and figure out. In the short 4 ½-5 months that I've been here, I'm excited at the potential that we have for the money, but in our county there is already a design on how the money will be spent from some other power, I guess I've charged myself with finding the proper way that this money should be spent, and not just brute force or will that these people are spending the money improperly, I want it to be the right way to benefit a greater number of people and families. (S)

They expected confusion, but not as much as they got. The thought they would be able to put some data behind the anecdotal data that they already knew. They expected a bigger buy in from their agencies initially. (NW)

I had two expectations; the first expectation was that FAST project would help us locally leverage some systemic changes. Specifically there were so many components of FAST that were aligned with wraparound, advocacy, strength based, etc. So these expectations were actually realized, we were able to completely revamp our service coordination mechanism and adopt wraparound, so that expectation was met completely. I had the same expectation that you did with regard to what the financial focus of FAST would be, I expected it to be much more like family stability, very flexible, community based, home based, emergency or urgent needs to be addressed quickly. And the change that occurred this year “to be” money, which is federally funded so in October when those restrictions hit, it became quite a challenge to use the dollars that are available to us and we won’t be able to expend them all, even though we’ve been fairly creative. That change has been hard for our families and our teams to accept because last year it could help them get other things other than Y memberships and social recreational things accomplished. I know it is not anybody else’s problem except for those of us in the trenches, trying to figure out how to make that translation. (SW)

So my expectation, and the other children’s provider, was that the FAST dollars could allow two things: some kids that didn’t really need the intensity of a connections mental health case service to access flexible dollars with their current mental health providers with a wrap around approach and it would allow others who did need the intensive mental health case management to be able to get that because we would be able to graduate the clients who no longer needed the intensity back into their other mental health provider and they would be able to continue to get the one and two needed services. (NE)

The most critical issue is the issue of poverty and that is what families are grappling with before they can deal with anything else, and initially we thought we could use some of these dollars to address that and it has become clearer what we can and can’t use them for. So what we initially thought we could use the dollars for, we now know can’t and that is becoming an increasing issue. The other piece too, expectations this was directed at families, and it is really directed at individual children within the family and our systems have more of a family approach, it’s not necessarily any one identified but with this we have to make it very specific to each individual child, and if there’s three kids in the family then we’ve got three sets of data and all of the stuff that goes along with that, and I think families have a hard time understanding that too about having to do that every time. (E)

My expectations, and I’m relatively new to this too, was a very flexible pot of money and sounded at first very easy to get to and it hasn’t been as easy to get to with dealing with the paperwork issues and research part of it and sometimes the question on the enrollment the families didn’t understand, and we’re having to go back and get the answers. (S)

Their expectations did not change at all. He still sees it helping the same families and serving the same purpose. The managing of it is different, and he thought it would be an easier thing, or better thing for the FAST initiative and it hasn’t been for their area

because they had to set up a lot of procedures, and there were hoops that people did not want to jump through. (NW)

2) FAST\$06 and Family Empowerment

Parent advocacy, family-focused programs, and family mentors were frequently cited by service providers and program administrators as the key components for creating an environment to empower and engage families. Mechanisms stated for empowering families were advocacy efforts, flexible use of FAST\$06 funding, providing options for families, and inter-agency networking. Evidence indicating family empowerment was expressed by an increase in family involvement in the decision-making process for dealing with their particular situation.

Methods for improving family empowerment centered on the importance of parent advocacy by increasing the number of parent advocates and reaching families before their problems become too severe. Recommendations included the practice of learning from other counties and programs about family empowerment success and giving counties options in how parent advocacy is implemented. In addition, FAST personnel at all levels need to be empowered themselves (respected and decision-making abilities honored) for FAST families to be empowered. It was also stated that parent advocates should serve in the role of empowering families rather than as educational advocates for schools.

A) Family empowerment and what is working

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

Along the lines of empowering parents, I think that FAST has supported our process in such a way that parents are subtly told that they can really focus on what they think their family might need. One family had an 18 year old in the home, pregnant, unemployed, both of the parents are challenged by a variety of medical problems and health issues, and the child that the referral was on was a 16 year old with severe behavioral health needs and the family dynamics were such that this family was constantly blowing up and the child that was the referral was frequently being hospitalized. Through some of the structure, the advocacy etc. gave the family the ability to think about what they needed differently. We gave them Y membership that included everybody, not just targeting the special child. I think FAST has really encouraged people to be able to focus. (SW)

The ability to be able to show outcomes based on flexible funding and non-traditional services are the best thing about all of this. Her training, you know in your gut that something works, you just don't have the outcome measurement, you know that flexible funding that fits what families need makes a difference, and they are thrilled that someone is actually studying this. (NW)

I think it gives more options when you are doing your service coordination plan and that empowers families because they have choices because we have some money to spend for some things to provide them respite and enhance their family. I think it works because we have those choices and they get to choose when they need to use that. (S)

Well, I think that we've seen a little bit in the parent advocates program. We're looking to reconstitute our parent advocate program to set up differently, maybe using other dollars to expand it to not just FAST eligible families. I think that is the one piece from my perspective that really has the empowerment. (E)

Just giving the families the voice they didn't have before. We've had a lot of families that felt that they would not be able to say that in the past, to say what they wanted and to feel that people were listening to their needs. (NE)

We've had a very positive experience with the PAC volunteers, in the county. Even though families are at the table for our cluster meetings, long before the FAST initiative started, I think the PAC volunteers and the push from the state with the FAST initiative has strengthened the family voice and it's not just me saying families need to be at the table, now other folks are saying that families have to be at the table. So we've had a very positive experience to that. A really good example of a PAC advocate getting involved at a very crucial time, was for a 17 ½ year old youth who was having difficulty in school, who has an auditory processing disorder, and made a Columbine-like threat, he did not have a weapon, he didn't hurt anyone, but the school expelled him, and this kid was not going to be able to graduate, because this happened mid year in his senior year.

The parents were just devastated and didn't know where to turn, fortunately the PAC advocate that was involved had a lot of experience with schools in general, knew what the law was, and went to that with that parent to get an appropriate IEP, and get that kid through the rest of that school year, and he was able to graduate there was absolutely no other threats, no body was harmed. But had there not been somebody on board to take that parent by the hand to help them walk through this, he would not have been able to graduate. (SW)

In our situation, because the advocate and the family care manager are NAMI people and they control the money which makes a huge impact, how the agencies have to work and how the providers have to work with the families is a whole different ball game. It has been extremely helpful in seeing the process and what happens when you stir the process a little bit, and when you say it has been this way forever it's not going to be this way now. It has been very useful in making decisions, excellent in terms of being able to get families in to be able to say specifically this is what happened or what did not happen or this is what happened when we got a parent advocate involved. It definitely stirred things up. (NW)

I would say that's the same thing (family empowerment) that the communities and I are working on doing. A couple of the communities have used that for a parent advocate or parent mentor-type position where they're responsible for some case management-type stuff, but I'm still not so sure that is its sole motive or intent to empower families as more to facilitate services. (E)

An example of mom feeling empowered: since she got some respite from the child she's created girl scouting for girls with disabilities, she has been able to keep her job, and she is her biggest advocate, I mean she has an advocate and loves it. Since then she's gotten involved with a counselor that was more open to the parent management part where she wasn't even able. (NE)

In our county, getting the families to the table, they seem a little more involved when they know that there is some money to work with. Also some of the things we do is a family mentor so a lot of our families that struggle through the year to keep themselves self sufficient, and how to put all of that together through the family mentor has been empowering to make them drive their lives in a positive way. (S)

B) Family empowerment and what can be improved

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

We need more and help from the PAC initiative folks from NAMI to really do some recruitment, that is something that I don't have time to do, and we need help with recruiting some additional volunteers. (SW)

If we could spend that money for parent mentoring and someone to go to the home to help the parents get ready for the kid to come home, and Children's Services has expressed a really great need for that, because in our county they don't have any funding for that. We need to build it into a plan to get children out of custody too, not just to keep them from placement. (S)

Well in my situation, I'm new to the systems approach, but I am a parent of a child with special needs, so when I was in the family perspective, I just didn't feel like there was a lot out there. Now I'm in the agency perspective and I'm saying boy this incredible years out there that we can help parents know what to do with their kids, to be ready for those behavior outbursts and those problems, we've got to do more proactive things to help the family empower themselves, and it's got to be proactive it has to go to the families that are just entering this new world of behavioral health problems, and then help them. If FAST could be more family focused then it could be more proactive and then that would lead to the empowerment. (E)

We liked the first year's funding mechanism. I wasn't surprised though that it changed but we really appreciated that flexibility. (NE)

Finding out from other counties what is working and what kind of progress the families have seen in the intervention, that would be something that they would be able to share with families and providers and here is the progress that other counties have had, and look at these scales and that is where this took them. (NW)

I think it was hard in the first year, because inherently you can't skip a level and think empowerment is going to occur. Basic to empowerment is knowledge, so in the first year we didn't know that it is very awkward to pass on empowerment and support to families when as providers you didn't feel empowered or supported. It was like people would meet with the parent, and they would say: we don't really know if we can do that, to a parent that just seems like more bureaucracy and craziness. Then we come back from the table after the team had been involved, and we say okay we have to check with this entity and that entity, more craziness. I think that it is better this year and it's clearer and we're not getting that same kind of you have to check with seven people before you can tell the parent yes we can do that. I think the second year that barrier has been removed or decreased. The first year conceptually you can't empower parents if the people working closely with the parents aren't empowered. I think it's gotten better. (SW)

I would voice that if that could be used for treatment dollars or not even treatment but if it could provide a trained other, not necessarily a licensed counselor, but somebody that could provide the education to empower the parents to give them the skills and the tools for those incredible years or one of the other parenting models are just overall skills to empower parents to manage their households; if we could use it for those to educate parents. (E)

I do have a concern, and I think that PAC would agree with this, what they're finding through this process is most of the advocacy needs seem to be with education. I don't know if they can identify another way, and there is a conflict with the education

advocates in that they are employed by the school districts. The concern is that the PAC advocates are not supposed to be doing educational advocacy, they do it with families that they are already engaged with some other way and I hate to take up their time doing educational advocacy, when they are supposed to be doing social service advocacy. I don't know if it is a valid concern or not. (SW)

Seems to be a good pool for parent advocates that is what I'm discovering. As we develop our partnership with our families then I start looking at people for their abilities to maybe become a parent advocate, and we've got some pretty strong parents that could do that. (S)

I would guess that there are some families not a large percentage, that utilize their parent advocate for just the purpose that it was created for, they are just an ear or a support they are not connected to any provider, God bless that because that is important too, there is no bias there, and they feel more empowered, and they bring some experience which is important. (NE)

3) Aspects of Support and Respect through FAST\$06

It is believed that a program is more likely to be successful and reach its program outcomes when the individuals who staff the program are given the respect and support for their abilities to make decisions and be effective. One question in the service providers/program administrators focus groups was developed to gather data within this dimension. In addition, when the stakeholders of a program are empowered, the probability of empowering the target audience is greatly enhanced.

Frequently cited examples of how service providers/program administrators were supported and respected within FAST was evident through intra- and inter-agency communications. A key component was identified by supporting FAST decision making and actions through FAST referrals and positive dialogue.

Suggestions for improving aspects of respect and support were within the areas of communication and funding. Issues around communication were expressed as the lack of communication and interactions when needed, while funding concerns for respect and support related to understanding the proper use of FAST funds and how funds are controlled and disseminated. Therefore, by improving communication and supporting the decision-making abilities between individuals within and outside of FAST, along with the clarification of FAST funding, children and families of FAST will benefit.

A) Aspects of support and respect that are working:

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

I think that the whole teams feel empowered. The other day the judge tried to court order respite, you can't court order it, so everybody is really buying into that is empowering everybody to not have to look at those options.

I've also had good local support from the mental health board and the agencies and the families, and really good response from you guys, sometimes when we've had data that didn't match up or things that have not gone smoothly, OSU is always quick to get back with me to pick up the phone. (SW)

It depends on how much they know about FAST, if they know what it's about and how it can be spent, then I think that they understand, and we get respect for what decision we make, but it is hard for us sometimes, it's the probation officer sometimes that it is hard for them to understand what it can be spent on and what it can't. (SW)

From tri-county area, we have complete control, we were given a budget and plan and if they need to modify that they set up the probation officer and ask that they be kept up to date. They have freedom and don't have to jump through hoops. (NW)

I think that at child and family team meetings, those that I do attend, I feel that families and other system representatives, you know there used to be a sense that everybody was trying to get everybody else to pay, and so I think in a sense of equal partners at the table and asking what each of us can bring and that there is a little more flexibility about mental health can bring, and that is the part that is important. So respect for the sense of there isn't as many of the nasty comments that mental health doesn't do anything. I also think that in the sense that families that really do want to keep their children there is gratitude that they are being heard and options are available. I also think that one of the nice things I see is in court, that there have been times when a magistrate or a judge have

said look, take that back to the child's team because the family has made an impression on the judge, or the probation officer, or the court that what the team comes up with matters, when it's not a matter of one person thinking by themselves, and that has been an important effort. (NE)

Most of the time, I think there are times when we are all around the table and there is still that struggle, are you the probation officer we really need you, there is still that struggle, with the availability. But I think that one of the things that FAST did really well, was model to the community that type of process, where you are thinking about things a little bit differently, instead of weaknesses, you're thinking about strengths, abilities and you're giving the family tools to maximize those opportunities. I think the community senses that, and some of the community providers gave positive responses. It was beneficial as it came right before our county's training in the wrap around concept, the timing was good because there are some people that need to hear some of those things that have just witnessed that occurring, and if you get that, you might get some minds to change about what you can do, and that sets us up well for the next year. (NE)

What backs us up is the security of knowing what the rules are now, since they did not know the rules the first year. (NW)

B) Aspects of support and respect that can be improved:

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

We wanted to do a training for a sex offense training for deputies – how to do questioning for rapist and rape victims, because we have some overlooked things in our county that get overlooked. And I got told by the meekest mildest never gets mad in the world person, that it is none of my business, and I said huh!!!!??? (S)

I think, in our case, now that we have the guidelines more clarified, we know the boundaries so within those boundaries we feel that we have the say. If we want to go outside of those boundaries we don't have the ability, we have to go ask for permission, it makes you feel that you are powerless, you have to make sure that somebody else understands what this family needs so it goes through quite a few layers, and you have to say please, please approve this and when it gets approved you're really happy, and when it doesn't it tends to make you say well... we can't go outside of that box any more, we have to stay inside of that box. (E)

From the council as a whole, I think I feel very supported, but the people that control the funds I don't feel very supported at all, because they already have an idea of how they want to spend that money already, it's not just me coming with ideas of how to spend this money, it's members of the counsel, great but what about this family coach that we have hired, but nobody knew about it. I am very hopeful, and I think that we are going in the right direction I wish we had a better grasp on how the funds are controlled. (S)

And I have not had the experience where I've always had my questions answered in a timely way. I think there's been too at some of the meetings where FAST has been talked about, there's been well, this county isn't doing it right or that county, and they are doing it in a meeting when the county participants have not heard from anybody that they are concerned about what we're doing or not doing, so I guess that would not be a demonstration of respect. (E)

4) FAST\$06 and Service Enhancement

Many types of services were provided to FAST families – services for families that otherwise may not have been possible. The most common type of service reported was respite care. Other services reported as beneficial for families were outdoor education, after-school programs, Y memberships, camping, instructional activities (gymnastics, karate, etc.). Some prevention efforts were also cited by enhancing services for young children.

Flexible use of funds was a common theme for improving service enhancement.

Desired services for families currently not part of FAST involved funding for basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) and emergency cash assistance of FAST monies. Other strategies for advancing service enhancement were to make sure that parent advocacy served in a positive role for families, develop teams with specialty areas such as de-escalation and keep service family oriented rather than individual oriented.

A) Enhancing services and what is working:

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

What is going to happen this summer is an outdoor education component on a 500 acre farm that will give kids some experiences that they may not otherwise have, like: row boats, fishing, lake, map reading and how to use a compass, things that they would not normally get in a regular setting, and we are using these funds to pay the tuition for these

kids, it is pretty exciting. We are collaborating with the local YMCA, and there is a retired teacher that has been gracious enough to continue her summer outdoor program with the Y, so it has inspired a needed services, and will be beneficial for a large number of youth, overall there are 80 kids registered and we are able to sponsor 10-12 of those kids with that FAST money. (S)

I think in our system, more people have had more access to respite that might not have had it in the past. (E)

Non-traditional firm foundations, a group of guys that used to work in a juvenile detention center that started this program and they primarily do recreation with some homework help, and because of FAST just used it a lot. (NW)

For years we said for a cluster diversion team that is very placement-oriented: if they would only would refer them a little earlier, instead of waiting until they are 14 and 15 and everyone is ready to ship them up the river, and I think we have seen that with these flexible dollars, and the agency knows there is flexible dollars out there and we are having team meetings now of 4, 5, and 6 year olds and being able to put some services in place that the plan is for them to be preventive in nature. (SW)

I am participating in a meeting with one young man, who was briefly in a residential assessment program and came out after a 30 day assessment and we enrolled him in FAST as he was coming out of the assessment, the goal was to be able to provide the home-based support so that he didn't land back in a residential program. The worker found a number of respite programs in the community, and some other very traditional kinds of non-traditional "Medicaid" such as overnight respite. But this young man has mental retardation and probably would be court involved except that his IQ isn't high enough to allow him to be competent to have a hearing. Plus mental health problems, plus special education academic problems, and Department of Children and Family Services is involved, so all of these people are around the table. Right now we are meeting weekly, because we have had to revise the respite program can't keep him because he is too disruptive of the other kids, and he's become violent there. But we were able to get from that program two people that were able to be behavior aids for the mom in the home from after school till his bedtime. We hope that it will decrease after that because the whole goal is to ask mom permission for whatever he does for the child, so he is going to model that mom is in charge, he is not going to just take the child out for respite he's going to sometimes take the child out when mom gives permission, and sometimes be there when mom says no, to be a support for mom, because mom is 4'11", a tiny little person and can't physically control the child who would take off. (NE)

That's been our goal is to keep kids out of placement. In one month we've prevented three placements and juvenile detention centers, where law enforcement said: we're going to take him to jail, and they weren't offenses that were JDC offenses, so it's helped educate law enforcement and getting a better understanding of what is or isn't appropriate. It really has prevented JDC placements, through education and having the option to do respite and those kinds of things. (S)

Planned respite has been the greatest thing for families. CSV has said they could cut their crisis calls in half, they have not tested that, but there is a correlation between the crisis calls to CSV vs. not having some sort of planned respite available. Families have said they are more willing and open to talk to providers and willing to discuss different interventions due to the time out and rest. The parents see the system as useful. (NW)

I can think of families that have had kids that have some behavioral health challenges that have been able to give the families a break in the summer that they wouldn't have had earlier. (E)

We've been able to provide summer SACC which is the summer after school program, which is for the kids that during the school year are supervised until mom gets off work, so we've been using some of our FAST dollars to provide that so that parents can continue to work, plus the kids are getting some good positive activities that if mom were home they wouldn't be able to participate in. (SW)

For some families we looked at when we staffed, for some families respite is perfect but for others it might be the opposite. Them being apart is further disassociating them from the family and not fixing anything, and for those families the Y is perfect because they could go get along, and it was relaxing. And they said it was perfect, they could see their child get along and interact in a different way. And they felt more a part of their communities, but they had real positive experiences. (NE)

B) Enhancing services and what can be improved

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

I think it's just a greater flexibility on how the dollars can be used. I also wonder if because our systems are primarily funded through funding services and programs and this is a process that funds individuals and sometimes it's hard to have those two things come together in a way that isn't an administrative nightmare. I think sometimes we try to come up with some things but didn't realize what it takes to really make it work, and I'm sorry but that just doesn't work. (E)

It would be great if we could have one provider that had a well-trained team: trained in CPR, trained in de-escalation, that could go out and provide respite. Unfortunately most providers will say to us, there is not enough dollars to hire this crew and train them and provide the services. But for us it sure would ease and cut down on the time it takes to find the perfect fit for the families. (NE)

It always seems to come back to basic needs, I know FAST s is not for health care dollars, but it really comes down to families that are marginalized poverty wise, they are not completely in poverty, but they really don't have enough money, and you look at their basic living needs and you're not able to find anything to address those needs, and that just seems wrong to me. It seems that everyone should be entitled to a basic quality of

life, and not that FAST dollars should be able to do that it is a societal, governmental problem, but that is the frustration of FAST. (S)

Spend a little more time with family advocacy piece.....We have had some problems with the family advocates being on board and or understanding what their role is and I really think they can get something. I don't know what that is, maybe it is just training, I don't know, maybe that is something FAST needs to look at. We have pushed people away from FAST because of family advocates, we have pushed agencies away from FAST, because we have family advocates who have been part of setting up a meeting and then allowing the family to read a page and vent and then fire everybody and walk out the door; that is not collaborating or bringing the systems together. All it did was bring a bunch of negative energy to something and you don't get other agencies to want to play nice. (NW)

I think the money should be allowed to be used for tutoring. Some of the kids just cannot make it in the regular classroom, and you cannot or they need the extra tutoring for them to be successful or you need the parents who also need additional tutoring to be able to help the child with homework. (SW) [Home-based tutoring is allowed with FAST funds.]

I really miss the emergency aspect of being able to help a family or being able to pay for: we had a mom who just snapped one day, she had a baby, she wasn't working and her child brought home a bad report from the school, and she just snapped and children's services got involved, but knew this was a unique situation, and all she was, was stressed out about phone bills, day care bill and rent. We were able to help her in other ways like a family coach to help deal with anger management, but that immediate need: we were not able to fill that immediate need through FAST, and the child had a mental health diagnosis so we could not use the non-behavioral dollars that are allowed. (SW)

Well, but I think that if you're talking about how to enhance it, and you don't want to stray from: how did this come about. This came about because families were relinquishing custody so that they would get services for their kids. So I think we have to go back to that family level, and help the families and know that the families are maxed out, they most often have been through all of the doctors, the counselors, the medications, the school being upset, and everybody they have been in contact with is upset with them, telling them that they should do something. I love the idea that you guys have done home based, because going into the home is finally like: come into my world. This is my world, this is the problem, because this child might be good for this visit out, but on a normal basis getting through breakfast is the problem. So come into my world and tell me how I can get through breakfast with my two quote "normal" kids, and if FAST could be enhanced that way to really reach into the families' world. (E)

You might have a family or child that is not a full blown cluster kid that doesn't need to go through the entire service coordination process but could have those quick easy diversion, without going through all of those processes it would be a lot easier to help them, when you know that they are pretty high functioning, with out sitting down and having these meetings. (S)

To do what the family is asking to be done because every agency is different. (NE)

I think that there has been a lack of appreciation for supervision that is needed for advocates. Think if the supervision is not there, there are people out there to supervise, their issues have never healed over. (NW)

5) FAST\$06 and Systems Collaboration

Service providers and program administrators indicated the structure of the FAST\$06 program influenced agencies and organizations to collaborate and work with each other. They frequently mentioned that the structure of FAST\$06 encourages collaboration and that in order to have success, individuals, teams, and agencies must work together and partner to effectively serve the community. Evidence was given as to how various agencies and organizations were willing to work together. Some of the agencies indicated were faith-based groups, transportation authorities, Family and Children First Councils, and other major child and family serving systems.

Tactics for improving systems collaboration were centered on increasing advocacy efforts for bringing about interagency collaborative connections to achieve desired outcomes. There was some discussion in which schools were suggested to serve as early warning systems to help identify potential children and families for FAST services.

A) Systems collaboration and what is working

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

Before FAST we did sort of a pooled funding that was kind of hard to get everybody to share the cost of different things, and since we've had FAST everybody has been working together, and that is strengthening still. We are at a really good point, and everyone is very willing to work together, the mental health systems aren't arguing over clients and everybody is realizing that there are enough kids to go around and the county is working very well with the agencies for the kids and the families. (S).

It's hard for me to separate FAST from Tapestry, here in Cuyahoga County. But I think we have some outstanding system collaboration; I think there are representatives from all of the major child serving systems that know each other. Well part of the service coordination team and Children's First Council and all of the service coordination team at least have an orientation to FAST and their workers can go to them with questions and there is a strong push to maintain children in the home. (NE)

I think having the regional transit authority at the table to talk about transportation, and saying that they are willing to partner with us, and provide bus tokens or groceries stores that are willing, who were not willing to take appeals are now saying we'll take appeals and we'll match you dollar for dollar, and that has been real helpful. (SW)

Collaboration is not perfect, but the collaboration is there as a basis of strength, but I think it makes FAST more effective. (E)

I'm a tri-county board, when FAST was thrown on the table the other two were handling with certain agencies taking on the role; it made them develop service coordination. With each county, the funds that go to each county and kid, attention and time they spend on it has been good. (NW)

I would voice that in the counties that I work in the Family Children First Councils are very strong and have strong participation from all disciplines. (E)

We've pulled in a couple of private foundations that are providing some services to families that maybe would not have without the FAST initiative. More and more of the faith-based community; I've got more families that are saying: I think I would like to have my minister attend the team meeting, that's new. (SW)

They have a team that meets every two weeks to discuss cases and wondering if beneficial to have the parent advocate, they have one parent mentor paid for by the county, so they know what the process is and how things go, so when they meet with the families they know how to be a team player. (NW)

I think in our county it (FAST) has brought more people and agencies to the table to bring their children that they are working with that maybe aren't in the other systems to the table. Juvenile court which has really hooked onto these FAST funds and have put in a lot of really good requests that have kept the children out of trouble and out of care and residential placements. (S)

We've learned a lot in the past couple of years talking to people we didn't talk with, different churches with youth related activities, drug and alcohol providers that were providing the services that we didn't even know in the schools. And really that expanded our awareness and built relationships up and that is the key – somebody you can call and ask questions; we have all learned from each other from going to these meetings the past couple of years. Those things carry over, and that is the most beneficial. Our county tends to be challenging, but people tend to stay, I don't know why but in our city they tend to stick around. (NE)

B) Systems collaboration and what can be improved

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

I would like to see a statewide effort around advocacy. We use other dollars to try to recruit advocates locally but I think it would be great to have some social marketing going on about recruiting. (SW)

I think under the current guidelines what occurs to me is under, the child already has a case open with an ODMH or ODADAS funded entities, you are already talking about a family that has found its way into at least one system. Maybe they haven't been there very long, but I worry more about the families that haven't found their way. I meet people in the schools saying: why aren't you referring people to these FAST dollars? I think there is some disconnect. I think FAST is still built on the present systems and so we're still providing help to people who have already found at least one step to the road that they are on. I think schools are a big resource that possibly giving the schools more training or people so that they identify. Because in my experience with schools, the school counselors is where you think that would happen, but it can't because they do administrative work, so they can't be looking at Johnny and saying: boy there's something going on, he's always at the office; I talk to him and there's something going on but send him back. I would love to figure out how they could be the early finders in this concept. (E)

If the state decided to put more money toward FAST ABC, you might really be able to cut the number of custody situations in the county, and that would be better for kids and families than losing custody of their kids, because it is so hard to get them back together once they're disrupted. (S)

It needs a philosophical shift to occur and you need buy in from the executives to make that happen. You need Family First Councils, not a job or mission; something they believe in and they should help that. (NE)

It seems like it would make a lot more sense if the coordinators were responsible for service coordination, and the people in accounting would do the initial intake with families and ask the questions right off the cuff, and be done right there, because we are wasting time that could be used to help the families. We have to get the power to improve what is going on. (S)

They still have their issues that are probably not going to get resolved by having FAST, helped some communication with agencies and parent advocate, one thing happening, agencies recommending services, advocates were telling the parents about services that may or may not be available. They do not have it going through their cluster or service coordination mechanism and that is the flavor of the issues, there is a reason. (NW)

I think because we have gone through a lot of ABC planning because it was more program oriented and wasn't specific to individuals and we had more flexibility in what we could do with that, that brought systems together to talk about issues and gaps and problem solving got creative. But when it's individually funded I'm not sure that supports that kind of thinking and creativity or we're just dense in how we're doing it, which is possible too. I think the more limited and restrictive any funding source is you're going to see more limited and restrictive planning around it. (E)

I think through the FAST initiative and the PAC advocates that have been so helpful in our county. It has raised the awareness even at our council level of the need to have parents at the table and parents involved in the decision-making. There has been a different flavor in our council meetings and committee meetings over the past year and I think that is a direct result, particularly with having the PAC advocates and our regional coordinator in particular sitting at the table raising that awareness for this. It was moving in that direction before this but it has really taken off over the last year. (SW)

We're working on a lot of orientations; it is a combination of Tapestry and FAST working together. (NE)

Enhanced communication from the top down, with the directors example video conferences. They send the e-mail, and Job and Family Services says that they did not receive notice, and they did not know they were coming. (NW)

6) FAST\$06 and General Strategies for Improvement

Approaches for improving FAST efforts emerged from the data in four elements: 1) increase parent advocacy, 2) effective communication, 3) streamline reporting and data collection procedures, and 4) increase funding to provide quality FAST programming. Within these elements, specific details for improving FAST were provided: increase flexibility of funding usage; decrease paperwork; increase positive collaboration; increase duration and awareness to community about FAST; increase quality by decreasing the number of the families program can adequately serve; funding should match administrative time and energy, and develop web-based data entry technology.

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

I've heard other people say that when they do send an e-mail you're sending it to one person and their response gets broadcast to everybody and I think sometimes that is a deterrent. I know the idea is we want to get the information out to everybody because everybody might have this question. But other people have commented that they're not going to ask any more because I feel stupid and I don't want that broadcast to everybody. (E)

I think for me, more county specific data, that would help in their local planning, not just looking at the state as a whole, because the kids in their county is very different. It would help in future planning; having county specific data would be very helpful. (NW)

Agencies taking the lead, if they refer the FAST plan we say: yea go ahead you're the lead, we really try to articulate those expectations of them then as the lead; here's what you'll get for the family, but here is what you're going to have to do. We can't micromanage that, we can if they are on staff, but we can't if they are somebody else's, so there might be some things that are missing that we get frustrated with. (NE)

Any way to increase the flexibility, decrease the paperwork demands, having to do the scales has tied our hands, people do not have the number to provide transportation, frustrating doing the scales and getting feedback on the report, that would be helpful. (NW)

I think the biggest thing that I feel about the FAST program is that it shows that there is a need for more resources to be put into children with behavioral health issues and never have we in our county ever had a discussion where: gosh we just don't have any kids out there that a need our help, that is not the issue. I hope that the strong feeling is that this money is definitely used well, but I don't know if it is being used creatively, but it is going for really good things in our community and it would be a shame to not see that because there is still a huge need out there. (E)

We have another agency that provides services and that becomes a turf war because that agency is on a contract with our Job and Family Services and they weren't in the home; because there is such a push, who knows if that paperwork has been done. (S)

I think the other thing when talking about community awareness, just the whole there is a way that the training wasn't so facilitator specific, just a brief training that could be given to the community, when you touch FAST understand the child and the team process, so it is not just a foreign concept. But that would take all of the different systems to have their probation officers, their caseworkers, and support administrators. (NE)

Workers in the trenches giving feedback are frustrated not being able to use the money for psychological evaluations. And the paperwork is labor intensive; working with

people for a short period of time there is a great deal of paperwork, not so bad if long term. (NW)

Eliminate all of the paperwork. We have parents who are absolutely refusing the services because they say they don't want to do all of that paperwork, the parent says they don't want the advocate, and the parent says they don't want to give the information. It is the number one complaint from the parents, they want the services, and we have to remind them: try not to see it this way, but to access this money this is what we have to do but we have a lot of parents that absolutely refuse, and then they won't answer their phones, their cell phones, or their e-mail you knock on their door and it becomes a challenge. (SW)

Some type of technical assistance, an upgraded website, a manual type thing kept up to date, especially addressing what all requirements are needed but also what FAST has been typically used for and what is allowable, and then you have questions around those things. (S)

As much as I support family advocacy, and I see that as a great responsibility of my own, I am very concerned of coming from the top down. For example, the service coordination booklet that was put out, and that we may be set up by factors outside of our control to provide more than we can provide, and it is going to set us up in the same position that the education system is in, where you have all of these rights and you're entitled to everything for your child, except for there is no funding for it, and there are no staffing for it, and this and that and the other. I support the Parent Advocacy piece and the Family Advocacy piece but to a point to where we have to be very careful of how we pursue it and how we enforce it. It's always a dangerous sign when lawyers get involved. I think that is very true, I hadn't connected it to where we were in this discussion until you drew that connection. From the meetings there is almost an obsession with increasing awareness and educating. There is probably 100 times the number of people that need to be helped, and the resources just aren't there, and I don't think the state knows where to get them so they don't want to deal with that as an issue. I would rather serve 50 families well than 500 poorly, and the state is really pushing for numbers served, this is a population that I don't like those games being played, with, I see a lot of pressure to, you know the glossy brochure, and to me there is an adversarial tone to it that doesn't help anybody. It doesn't help the parent, I don't think it helps the provider, and I think that is coming from it being developed from the legal system that has that tone to it. I'm not naive, but I think that some parents are doing, probably all parents are doing the best they can, but some I think for whatever reason don't have the resources to understand that, the idea that we're going to be the next educational system is very real. I don't think there is going to be unlimited resources so how we are supposed to do that, it increasingly feels like an unfunded mandate. There was a letter very recently that one of the senators got, where he got a call from a family who couldn't get hooked up with a system, and so he sent a letter to the director, and so now we have to come out with these actions plan and go out and tell everyone. I'm thinking, that's crazy, but there is a political motive behind that, and I think there is always going to be a family that doesn't get hooked up, and I think we should educate, but the concept of going in and continually

educating is going to create a waiting list and less quality services, I don't have an answer. (SW)

Are there some innovative things that people are doing that we just haven't thought of, and how did they do that; how did you make that work? And when we heard about stories of individual children and families but are there some other things about how people have figured a way to do AB& C and it's legitimate and it works. (E)

Just as frustrating as it is at times it is just as rewarding; I would hate to see it disappear. Because I think we have had the opportunity to do some really great things for families that otherwise wouldn't have been done. I hate the term "thinking outside the box" but it gives us the opportunity to expand and enhance what we have been doing and that is always a positive at least in my book. (S)

I think that the dollar amount, the administrative cost and time for the dollar amount seems disproportionate. Oh, I know something else that would be helpful, just thinking purely data entry stuff, if there was ever a way that we could have a web based of entering our enrollment stuff, that would be way cool, and that might save money in the long run, and have access to it as well. (E)

What it has done for us is keeping the families intact providing services to the families in the least restrictive way possible. When you think about it, we need administrative money. What we are doing is spending less money on direct service provision, but giving them more of what they want, which costs more administratively, with more people involved administrating those services, with more people involved. (NW)

The families that I see that are falling through the cracks are typically families involved in the juvenile justice system and to a lesser degree, but still a significant degree are families involved in the children's services system. I think the shift that needs to take place, is getting back to the family and asking them what they think would make a difference and help your family. That mind shift still has to take place with the juvenile justice system and the children's services system. They are still working, at least in my county, from the punitive perspective, rather than from the therapeutic or family driven perspective. Anything that could drive the family advocacy piece I think will have an effect on those systems eventually. It would be real helpful if it could come from the top down, but it probably won't. It's going to have come from families themselves, getting strong enough to be able to speak their mind and get their voice heard. That's probably the most frustrating part, is seeing families fall through the cracks that could have been helped with very simple procedures if we just had the opportunity to get them to the table. (SW)

I think that people just need to experience it, you need people from other agencies that had the lead that had success that can go back to other people and say: hey don't forget these dollars are over here, this is how you access them, it's not that impossible. (NE)

7) FAST\$06 Success Outcomes

Numerous examples were given by the focus group participants of how FAST\$06 has brought about successful outcomes for children and families. The success outcomes can be categorized as 1) services for children and families, 2) family preservation efforts, and 3) parent advocacy support.

Comments by service providers/program administrators included:

Respite is our largest percentage of our service. We do have summer camp; we have one child that received some tutoring that they really benefited from. (E)

They had a parent living in an apartment with three children, and she needed the space walled off, we had another parent that needed to access laundry service to get rid of some of the clothes, and it was great. (NE)

We had a family that was close to losing custody of that child, we were able to provide respite, stabilize the family, the child is now back at home and everything is not peachy and wonderful, but there are enough systems in place to try to preserve that family, and we were able to do that with FAST funds. (S)

We had a real positive one where FAST could fund functional family therapy: there was two adoptive kids with the family was literally only looking at adoption, and we were able to pay for FFT the first year and turned that family around 180 degrees, and stayed functional and more importantly stayed together until the oldest child turned 18, that literally saved that family.

Once a month we offer a lunch for the FAST parents. We have 100 FAST families, mostly moms and grandmothers, some fathers. They arrange and pay for transportation from 11:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. We have someone come in to speak about other services, such as the furniture bank or food, and then they ask them for input, which is very nice. They also offer childcare during the lunch, they are below poverty level, and they feel comfortable because they are all on the same level economically. They serve a real lunch, hot food, dessert, and this is paid from the ABC money. (NW)

The positive outcomes are about those families who have those young children who were sexually acting out. Positive outcomes is from being able to wrap services around them: providing respite and training for the parents, and all of the children were adopted, and one of those parents in the adoption, they did remove one child, but through the wrap services they were able to keep the remaining children in the home, they are in therapy and she is giving hope to the three other children, she did not say to take the children

back. They were our first family that came in, four kids all acting out, no one had told the adopted family about the family history; basic parenting, coaching, use the V chip in the television, that was a positive outcome. (SW)

We primarily use it for respite, parent advocacy, and summer camps. It gives those kids the experience that they're not going to get without somebody else funding it for them. Those families would never be able to afford summer camp. We did a band camp, things that kids would not have gotten to do. (E)

It's been good for us to do some strategic stuff, we have two brothers that are in competition together, and have awful behavior and try to out do each other, and we'll just go get one from school one day and take him to respite, without them knowing and it makes one each week feel special. (S)

Art therapy that would not be Medicaid funded, or therapeutic riding, we've had some kids that have had that and it calms the children. (NE)

We have a mom-diagnosed with melanoma and borderline MR with six children all of whom have some sort of disability. She is very confused; three of the children have mental health issues. Wrap has forced everyone to come to the table to address the family issue and not just the MR issue and when you do something with this kid, how does it affect the other children and members of the family. That has been a huge difference for the mother. We used ABC money on this one, they have sent the mother to budgeting, houseclean, cerebral palsy classes; with the family approach, people have come to the home to help the mother, to organize the records for each and every child and the budget, hands on showing the mother how to do intervention that will not upset all of the other children. The transportation issue has also been dealt with because bussing with six children was impossible. They contracted with neighborhood properties, mental health consumers, one on one in the person's home. The mother accepted that, and was not real accepting of some of the other services. This is making a difference for the mother to know what is going on with her children. (NW)

We had a family whose father had abused the children and they were hiding from him. He was in the next town, but by giving them a Y membership, they knew that he would not be able to get a membership because of certain restrictions, that they were safe there, they could go as a family and have recreation; it empowered them so much that they closed their cluster case last week and mom is now functional. (SW)

Parent Advocates

The findings from three parent advocate focus groups were conducted at the annual statewide PAC conference (Parent Advocacy Connection) in cooperation with NAMI (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill) Ohio. The results are reported according to the primary FAST\$06 evaluation variables and the interview guide (Appendix B). Data analysis summaries are given for each variable and followed by illustrative comments from the focus group sessions. There were three focus groups with participants from various counties throughout the state. Comments are indicated by group numbers 1, 2, or 3, although different voices are reported within each focus group.

1) FAST\$06 Expectations

FAST\$06 expectations from parent advocates varied from enthusiasm and happiness to feelings of being overwhelmed. Parent advocates also had expectations that were about making a positive difference in the lives of children and families. Also parent advocates believed their own experiences with numerous family serving systems enabled them to benefit other families in similar situations.

Comments by parent advocates included:

I didn't expect to get as much opposition from agencies that we did. Because I'm the regional coordinator, so some of the counties said they wanted it but their actions were opposite of what they said they wanted. I just expected everybody to be excited about having extra people to help their families and it really wasn't that way. (1)

I was involved in NAMI and I thought, oh good this will be a neat way to help some families that I already knew through my NAMI stuff and it just became overwhelming, coming out of the woodwork. I thought oh my god I can't do all of this, and I said I'm going to keep the ones that I have and don't give me anymore; but it has been a good, positive, experience our agencies work together and I'm just really happy with it. I think that together we have shown that we do care about our kids. (1)

For me I think it was just so diverse: we have a 10 county region and I thought people would really be enthusiastic, and many of the counties were enthusiastic but many of them were just, they gave a lot of lip service without a lot of substance behind it, like sure, we want advocates and then you never heard from them again. I went in thinking that everybody does everything the same, and every county does everything different and so you have to learn every county's systems and advocates. I thought it was going to be so easy just with families, and people were going to be helpful and I am amazed in the beginning how the bottom line effects what people are willing to offer families. And as advocates having to consistently not think about the bottom line, because if you know an agency well enough you know they won't spend it. (1)

If we had advocates working with parents mentoring parents, it would be a win-win situation, show them how to navigate through the systems, to give them support, that there is a need for that. (2)

What was so surprising was of course I expected to help the families but as a parent advocate, I still have a child in the system, and the thing so surprising for me and other advocates in the county, they ended up getting so much support from each other, and they did not expect that. It turned out to be such a boon, we ended up finding support for ourselves and that was an unexpected bonus. That does not answer your question, but that is the answer that I have. (2)

I'm very pleased that my expectations have been met; in fact I never expected to feel so good – just helping someone gives me a high. (2)

I have learned tons of stuff along the way – things I never wanted to know but had to know. I have a daughter with a mental illness and then her son as well. It has been a real struggle for me for many years, and I feel that the system has failed us in many ways, and I was very anxious to have the opportunity to share what I have learned with other families, knowing that I was not the only family that was going through the same thing. (3)

My expectation initially was to be a parent advocate, but I haven't had one case yet. (3)

I went to the regional meeting with the Ohio Family Care Group and they introduced the concept of the program. I filled out an application then to become a regional parent advocate and I have been from the beginning; I'm just finishing up my second contract with NAMI Ohio. I've had the same expectations from the beginning: to help as many families as I can, but there have been some roadblocks. (3)

2) FAST\$06 and Family Empowerment

Many of the parent advocates stated they were effective in empowering families by giving them a “voice and choice”. The parent advocates achieved family empowerment by increasing parent confidence and letting them know their rights and options as parents.

Suggestions for improving aspects of family empowerment to further support families and promote the benefits of advocacy included: 1) having additional funds, 2) conveying messages of hope, 3) making sure message, education, and information are accurate about FAST parent advocacy, and 4) considering parent advocates as a vital part of the overall team for helping children and families.

A) Family empowerment and what is working.

Comments by parent advocates included:

You know money is power in our society and a lady she is working with was terrified with all of the people and meetings she was involved in, and now this morning in a school setting she is confident and clear, she was alone and didn't have her boyfriend with her, and she has come a long way. (1)

I think that we are there for the families to be the parent's friend, and we empower them to not be intimidated by the system. They come in terrified because of all of the professionals around the table, but they learn that nothing bad is going to happen to them. (1)

I think that the fact that the advocate is there with the parent at meetings gives more clout to that parent, and that parent begins to feel that, and other people at the table begin to give them a little more respect or pay a little more attention to how they feel and what they say because that advocate is sitting there and that advocate is going to tell that parent if there is something that is not working. And after you have been with a parent a number of times, and they begin to feel more respected by the people around the table, they are then able to step forward themselves. (2)

One of the things I have found to be helpful is that the advocates are able to educate the parents; in many cases when parents are at the table so much is thrown at them in terminology itself. It is such an unknown for parents, and having advocates there to help them understand what is going on and break that piece down and to empower the parents to help them understand and speak up for their rights, and to know what their rights are, has made a significant difference. Funding has made a difference, because even though you see all the children with mental health and other problems, without this type of funding or FAST money put in place these parents were never going to (get a) break, and I think that results into abuse and other agencies have to come in and remove children. (2)

I have some families that I work with that do not speak out and you just want to say something, but you can't because you're not supposed to speak for them. Do you know what I do? I meet them before the meeting and we go over exactly what you want for your child, and write it all down, and I say okay here are your rights, by law; this is what you're entitled to. Sometimes you have to encourage them, speak up and I did this just the other day, for a mom who is not real comfortable speaking out, and we had it all written down numbered through 10, and during the meeting I would just point to the item and she would bring it up and then I would ask a question or whatever. I would encourage her before the meeting, I know you will be out of your comfort zone, but you really need to speak up, I can't speak for you, but I will help you any way I can. Some of the people like the school officials get upset if you take notes. (3)

The parents I work with have come a long way, they do know their rights, they do have a right to speak out, not to be shy, this is your legal right, to get an education for your child; the school is mandated to help and if you really feel that it is for your child's best interest, you may have to push the issue, and don't take no for an answer. There are ways to go about really pursuing what it is you feel is the best for your child, and I try to educate them a lot. I have so much information that I share with everyone. I'm not shy to call the US Dept. of Education and ask for brochures to give to people. I have a couple families that you were talking about that are harder, you have to advocate for the parents as well as the child. That is a delicate balance to find. I was at a family that was really involved with the system, juvenile court involvement, medication involvement, special education with the schools, I went into her home from a referral and were talking about her needs, and I asked about respite, she asked what respite was. I was asked to come and speak at their in-service, I shared that these people are hungry for the information. I am adamant about making sure that parents are heard, and they do have a voice. Make sure that parents have a voice and a choice, and that is really what I try to do. (3)

B) Family empowerment and what can be improved

Comments by parent advocates included:

More money! (1)

I think the greatest thing is hope. There are a lot of families that deal with their situations without any help and now there is someone to help them there is hope and give them ideas that they may not have thought of themselves. (1)

In FAST the focus is the child, but when the child turns 18 the family is dropped, and I think that it should continue. In fact there is one child that I am still working with, although I am off of the books, I am still helping them, and have been with them for one year. The child is mentally retarded with the grandmother, along with other children to take care of and she needed the program longer. (2)

One of the things I've wondered about: is everyone getting the same message about advocacy, is it being delivered in the same way? How are families getting, everyone is not going to explain it the same way, or is it really being presented by someone who has the same consistent message by even the administrators of agencies what advocacy is? The other thing is FAST funding is great, going back to the proactive; if someone is not involved in FAST but we can see them coming, is there any way we can get these people involved instead of waiting for them to become eligible. (2)

Put together a packet of information for that county of all of the stuff, don't leave it up to the advocates to dig, beg, crawl, and scratch to find, have it available for us. For the district or county they are in should have all of the necessary information available to the advocate. People don't understand NAMI, they don't know about other agencies. I'm a board certified foster parent, I deal with children there, I'm PAC, I'm NAMI, I'm a grandmother who has custody of really sick kids. That's my expertise: getting on the Internet, coming to workshops, listening to people, and getting ideas. I always take away something that I didn't know about. I could never have done it if I didn't seek it out because it wasn't given to me. I had no idea what was available; I'm very limited in knowledge about what is available. People look down at you asking who are you with, and as an advocate you should have more credibility given to them in order for them to work in the best interest of the families they are in charge with. (3)

One way that FAST could improve is: every county does its own thing. We occasionally have state trainings but in our county we really don't have a whole lot of training. I know more about the resources in my county because I have been accessing them for the last 20 years with my family. Originally it was my expectation that we would be parent advocates, help with the families, but we would be more involved with the professionals and be considered part of the team. But I don't really see that happening a lot; if you were one of the team you would have the information, people would share the information with you, but because they're not sure what to do with us when we come into the meetings, then sometimes we're not well received. (3)

3) Aspects of Support and Respect through FAST\$06

Parent advocates who perceived respect and support in their advocacy roles expressed this viewpoint based on interactions with families and the individuals who help serve them. Also accessibility and time given to questions and support from parent advocate supervisors and colleagues were cited for bringing about a sense of respect.

Support and respect for parent advocates is an area that clearly warrants attention. A common perspective shared by parent advocates was a lack of respect for the parent advocate from other systems (i.e., juvenile courts, schools, and within their own family-serving agencies). Parent advocates suggested that their role needs to be valued by others through education and understanding about the importance and functions of parent advocates.

A) Aspects of support and respect that is working

Comments by parent advocates included:

I think that the people that come to the table at the treatment team, viable part of that team and find it in some counties invaluable to have them there for the family support, if removal of the child is supportive to the family, but we don't make the decisions, we can inform family members, we just make suggestions. (1)

I think as regional coordinator, if I walk into a meeting with advocates they automatically assume that there is some trouble in the county. That says that they recognize that they have knowledge of their system, and there is fear there that the advocates are bringing about change, and the advocates are offering suggestions, and made them feel more welcome at the table, a viable part of the team. The advocates help the families find the information that they are needing. (1)

I don't make any decisions and I don't know how to answer that question; we don't have any power to make the decisions. As far as respect from the treatment meetings, so far I have been very happy with them asking my opinion and asking me to be a part of the

planning meeting. I was impressed that they asked me to be a part of that, the agencies value their life experiences. (1)

I feel very supported, that I can ask questions and she gets back to me quickly and I feel very supported by this and the program. (2)

I feel overwhelmed most of the time. My regional coordinator gives me so much information and so much stuff at one time. I am supported, she wants me to really do a good job and she does follow up. (2)

I get aggravated with systems not coming together when it almost feels like the systems have become a part of the problem. So she is good about allowing me to call her on the cell phone on my way home, and cuss her out and the systems too, and she allows me to do that vent thing. (2)

I think that is the role of the regional parent advocate to train their local parent advocates. I try to have meetings once per month either in a group or one on one, and just talk about their families or ask if I can help in anyway, and discuss any upcoming event. (3)

B) Aspects of support and respect that can be improved

Comments by parent advocates included:

They (other systems) lack some of the tact and respect that we as paraprofessionals might hope for, we as parents, we as human beings might hope for. (2)

If they could look at the parents that we work with, with dignity and respect, it would be easy to transfer that dignity and respect to us, that's helping the parents to do what they need to do: but there is no respect for the parents initially. (2)

When we come into this thing we get the same thing that they get. We don't have badges, we don't have social work license, we don't have a juvenile court to take the kid to do any of those things, so we are treated just like the parents are treated, and I find that and I think that is what frustrates me a lot. I go to a team meeting and I realize that they have no respect for the parents, the kid, for the house they're sitting in, so they really don't have any for me either. (2)

One of the things I heard that disturbed me and one of the other coordinators, when you are sitting at the table with all the cluster of agencies and how they are so downgrading the family in front of the advocate. One of the problems I think needs to be addressed is for them to use a little respect. You have your opinion of me, but you keep your opinion to yourself, you don't sit around the table with professionals and talk about how this

woman stinks and how her breath smells; that is so so unprofessional and inappropriate, especially when you have a regional coordinator and an advocate at that table too. (2)

I feel that the parent advocates do not get the support and respect that we need. I don't feel that we have the respect that is due and any decisions that we make, and since we are just the advocates, there is somebody above us, and if they decide to wash out what we are doing, then what good is the advocate anyway. (3)

I do (get respect and support) from the families, and most of the case managers yes, there are some even at a higher level that I think that I don't get a lot of respect from. I do in appearance but when push comes to shove, I think sometimes, I think you have that in every county. From the parents yes, I get support and respect. NAMI Ohio for the most part, (but) there are some things I've asked questions and not felt satisfied with the answer and you do have to go searching a lot. At the mental health level, support and respect, yes. Go a little higher it's questionable, but then you're getting into personality. I don't really feel that I've been involved as much as I could have been or should have been and I don't know if that is a program thing, they're not on board with the program or a personal thing, I really don't know and I wish I did know; all I want to do is help the families. I have really learned to do that, trying to develop every day to build rapport and try to be very firm and precise in a nice manner, but don't let people walk on me. There are a lot of territorial issues when you get in the school systems. (3)

4) FAST\$06 and Service Enhancement

Parent advocates were clear that FAST\$06 enhanced services for families not only through a variety of family-supportive services, but by the parent advocates serving as family guides in caring, empathetic relationships. Some of the services provided through FAST were biofeedback, respite care, summer camps, Y memberships, family/child mentors, art therapy, and IEP planning.

A frequent strategy for service enhancement was to make FAST funds as flexible as possible by expanding the types of FAST services allowed; services such as family emergency funds, medicine, and other poverty assistance support.

A) Enhancing services and what is working

Comments by parent advocates included:

Biofeedback services. He couldn't manage his anger and goes to this lady who does electrodes on his back, and he looks at a TV screen and she talks to him and that is awakening a part of his brain, and it has helped him one more step. (1)

I have a child, 15, his mom has cancer and a brother, the whole thing that she creates is a package: last year when she did FAST, art therapy. Their county is all about making an all inclusive package, her point is that the 15 year-old is old enough to go to summer camp, brother goes to the REC center and the mother has respite, set up a whole plan for the entire family. With FAST I can create an amazing network of services; their county is very slow with limited resources, and FAST allows her to go outside of their services and their county. (1)

One of the things that happen with parent advocates, it's not so much the services that help the families to do what they need to do, I think it's the relationships that we form with those parents and those kids. And the other thing is that they know that we're not there to do harm, we're there to assist. So I don't think it's so much the identified service, as it is someone being there to help them interpret the information to help them move through, to bounce off, like well this is the thing that you should be talking about, these are the things that should be happening and supporting them while they are doing that, and not walk away and let them figure it out by themselves. (2)

For a family in crisis to have someone who has been through crisis themselves to be able to say: I'm gonna walk you through this, and especially to say: I don't have the answer, but I know how to get the answer. You don't need to be a police officer, you need to be able to say: I'm gonna help you, and that is what we can do. (2)

To me, this is my vision of being a parent advocate – it is like holding a baby's hand, teaching them how to walk, and knowing when to let go. Because we are there to support them and when they get their feet on the ground and can take off, then we back off. That's how I keep myself going on this. (2)

A lot of my families are getting (more of) their services through the schools, that they're entitled to, than they were in the past. Well, of course the kids have IEPs, even having an evaluation in the schools; some of the schools say they're not going to do it. I've talked to parents who have said that they have asked for an IEP, 1-2 years ago, and it never happened, and I tell them that they have to put it in writing. I have a parent advocate in another county that has dealt with the schools for years – she came on board to help this other family, and she got things done very quickly; the mother said that she has been battling the schools for years. I encourage a lot of families to set up plans for the summer. Do you know about Camp Nu Hop? Do you know about Salvation Army Camp? Do you know about all of the possibilities for your child for the summer, and I can say well here they are. (3)

In our area wrap around services (before FAST) were only available to children who were multi-system involved and at imminent risk of placement. FAST allows children of families to receive desperately needed wrap services earlier, before the child/family reaches a crisis point. This frequently results in better outcomes and overall reduction in need for intensive services. (3)

B) Enhancing services and what can be improved

Comments by parent advocates included:

I think they could refer back to the first year; they have limited and narrowed it more this second year. She has one county that is not using FAST at all because they received a large grant, but the restrictions do not allow the freedom. The grant helps to replace the wraparound or cluster funds. (1)

Since we're advocates we are not involved with the money, but some of the agencies that I have worked with they have complained about the amount of paperwork that they have to deal with, and the reports necessary. (1)

I think one of the things, and something I found out: If FAST could have been a emergency fund and could have paid for the medication, that would have really resolved the problem, but the first thing we heard was that it could not pay for the medication, so that is why the job for us was so difficult. (2)

I think the concept of FAST is good, but there are too many family needs falling through the cracks, because of whatever the regulations are. I think if it is flexible dollars, then it needs to be flexible dollars. (2)

The clarity would be a really helpful thing. I am working with a family who does not have a lot of systems involved but they have been transplanted from another culture – they have only been in the United States for about nine months, they are not in the juvenile system, not mental health, but they need help. They definitely need an advocate, the kids are not at risk for removal but they're in a different culture, they are in a different world. (2)

The one part of this that's frustrating is I usually get these cases two, three, four months before they close. It is hard for the families when agencies will only work with them for only 6-18 months at the most, and I think that is totally unfair to the people involved and more unfair when the people have an advocate who is working for the best interest of the child, and when they are cut off from the agency that has this FAST money, that we are only permitted 30 days after the close to have any further contact with these people and that is so unfair to the family. (3)

I think that advocacy (should be) tied to the money I understand that we are only supposed to be helping FAST families but when a family then becomes a non-FAST family, and I get referrals all of the time from non-FAST families, and I can't help them because they haven't accessed FAST dollars, I kind of understand that but it is doing a disservice to the families actually. (3)

5) FAST\$06 and Systems Collaboration

Parent advocates agreed that FAST\$06 is helping different organizations and groups work together to benefit families. Systems collaboration was happening because agencies were working together through FAST funds for children and families. A common perspective was that by being “at the table” with families, agencies and systems, families were benefiting from this cooperative effort.

Parent advocates believe strongly in what they do. Many indicated that parent advocates should automatically be assigned to families and then after a period of time let families decide whether it is working for them or not. Many families initially do not have information when they begin to receive services to make an educated decision about wanting a parent advocate or not. A recommendation was stated that parent advocates need to get on board with families sooner rather than later to begin effective collaborative programming.

A) Systems collaboration and what is working

Comments by parent advocates included:

I think the FAST requires them to work together because the families have to have the cluster, and that pulls the agencies together and having to learn to work together, they actually have to cluster. (1)

I think it could break some of the territorial issues down too because it's not "well this is what my agency provides" because there is this little different money that they can creatively use, instead of being responsible for their service. I can just see a difference in interaction between the people. I was there when Family and Children First services started and you saw how the people reacted to each other, and now these people are at the same table and are great friends. (1)

They (other agencies) respect the parents and the advocate because we come to the table with knowledge and prepared to advocate for that parent. It has been my experience especially with the school system, that they are very very kind to the parent. I guess it's because I am sitting next to them. I would think it is respect. (2)

I think the accountability and the family that I am talking about is a little girl with Down Syndrome. There is no mental health issue involved, because the mom could not get what she needed from MR, she could not get respite, she couldn't get help, she is a professional woman and did not qualify for the financial part of it, but still she had no family, no support. She needed someone to help with respite; she was able to because of her anxiety she got into mental health. They had a meeting, and as the advocate she was able to help mom in an appropriate way, because she was so frustrated, to express her concerns with MR/DD and then they began to realize that she did need that help, they've managed to find funds to help. If FAST is no longer involved there, and this mom goes down hill, who would be there to help? So I've come on board that way. (2)

I've been involved in a few family team meetings with three, four, five agencies coming together, but that wasn't because of anything that I did. Therein lies a huge problem: by the time the parent advocate has been invited into the family, in order to come a point where you have a case manager and they have put together a plan to access FAST dollars, they have already been through a lot. (3)

B) Systems collaboration and what can be improved

Comments by parent advocates included:

I would like to see there be something in place. We have this one psychiatrist – trying to get a report from him and there is something going on, something in place so that this doesn't happen and the doctors have to be accountable. (1)

The majority of kids that we work with have to qualify through the next tier system. It would probably be looking at how kids get to have an advocate rather than other agencies or someone that would actually do that referral piece so that you would be in it at the beginning. (2)

Every time that I've heard that a parent has been offered a parent advocate, maybe I'm biased, but I think they should have to have one. I guess partly because if they are in a crisis and they say they don't know who any of these people are, they should be given a

parent advocate, and then if they decide that they do not want a parent advocate then they can have a choice to delete them from the team. Is this explained to them clearly, thoroughly, and equally, is each family given the same opportunity to know what a parent advocate is, and I would hazard a guess to say, I bet not. Maybe every family should be given a parent advocate, and then the opportunity to see how that goes, and if they find that this isn't helpful for you, then they can let them go. That way they have somebody on their team already and maybe it's helpful for them and they do not have to make a decision about something that they do not even know anything about in the first place. Because how many families knew anything about it in the first place, and how can they make a decision about something that they don't know anything about? (2)

Have parent advocates available at this end, but the only way you could do that is they can't be a FAST family, because they can't be considered a FAST family until they go through all of this, go to request funds, then they are a FAST family. (This) lets (them) get a parent advocate. It ought to be way back here when the kids are struggling in school or the mental health agency gets the phone call that they should be hooked up with a parent advocate. (3)

6) FAST\$06 and General Strategies for Improvement

Parent advocates frequently cited training and education for effective parent advocacy as an important strategy for improving the FAST\$06 program. Specifics of the training theme involved regional training meetings, learning from other parent advocates, and lunch and learn meetings at the county level. Other perspectives for improving FAST included the process of early referrals for FAST families, greater availability of FAST to more families, and sharing across and within counties constructive ways for utilizing FAST funds.

Comments by parent advocates included:

The initial explanation to families about parent advocates needs to be family friendly and put to them in such a way that helps them to understand what they are doing, and it is done differently all across the state, and in other counties it is done differently, and it is not a very friendly atmosphere. (1)

I still want a list, a creative way to use the money. (1)

I think the FAST money is a great idea, and I like finding weird ways to use it. (1)

I think it's going to evolve even more over the next year; it is good but can be improved, even the advocacy portion of the program. I think if the parent advocates could get together more often and share with each other, regional coordinators could get together, probably not realistic that every advocate could come. (1)

You touched on a point that I feel would be nice if we would try to get the advocate involved before children are so highly involved in the system. (2)

The referral process needs to be changed; it would help us do our job better if we could get them initially at the beginning – that would help our job and our families. (2)

I would like to see some kind of a luncheon for the local advocates and also the parents that we are serving. I know that there is a confidentiality issue, but something that gives some kind of humanness, some kind of social component that we are all together in this with the families we serve, with the parent. (2)

More training, I don't feel like we get enough training. Our schedules, most of us are parents or grandparents, some of us are working, many of us are dealing with families as advocates. If there were ways to get more training it would be nice. (2)

I think more interaction between the coordinators: to find out you know we have this problem in this county, and you may have a similar problem and how are you guys helping with this; if we could communicate a lot more. (2)

Continued training. (3)

Someone come to the counties to the cluster meetings. Because there are 20 people in the room, invite the parent advocates in the county and explain what we are really doing, this is what we expect you all to do; this is what needs to be done. The county people will not come here most likely. (3)

What about a regional parent advocate asking to speak at the local community Children and Family First Council, and have you along with the brochures and say this is the Parent Advocacy Connection program. But I think the thing that ties your hands is the referrals have to come from certain agencies. Initially when I first started, we had a State Coordinator, and we were told that we can help any family, then we were told oops you can only help FAST families, and then there was discussion about that. It ended up after a year or so that: a FAST family is only a family that accesses FAST dollars, but how do I know that? I don't know that. It would be wonderful if you could tell all families about this, but you can't, it has to go through the agencies. (3)

I think it is a wonderful much needed program and I don't think it's ever going to go away. I hope it continues to be funded, but I think it needs to be available to so many

other families who just don't access FAST dollars. I am very happy to be part of this great program. (3)

7) FAST\$06 Success Outcomes

Parent advocates cited numerous examples of how the FAST\$06 program has specifically helped children and families. Illustrations were given in the context of helping families keep or gain custody of their children. Services through FAST funding were also shared as success outcomes.

Comments by parent advocates included:

We had a family recently, they had seven adopted children through custody of children, two of his own, most of the children were grown out of the home, with three remaining in the home with disabilities, and his wife just walked out on him and he couldn't handle the children. He wanted to be in control, but there was a 14-year-old girl left in the home, and the team was able to pull together respite, mentoring, a tent and fishing poles for him and the boys, and he ended up on his own as he had an attorney to help him; a huge conglomerate of not regular stuff. (1)

We have a family that had door alarms put on because their child would disappear at night and that simple thing has been a big help, at the team meeting when it was brought up they were amazed that they could use that, and it was not expensive and was a huge benefit. (1)

I ran into a problem yesterday. I received a phone call from a lady and she said: will you go to court with me? She is a 70 year old lady, very low functioning, trying to raise a 6 year old grandchild with multiple disabilities. The child took off running from her and she could no catch him; she had to call the police twice, to bring him back home. Children's Services stepped in and they told her that they were going to help her out; however, they took her to court to take custody of the child. The woman thought that she was there and they were going to help her and she was going to take the child back home. When I walked in, they knew me, the prosecutor said: I thought this was cut and dried, what is she doing here? I said: this is not right, she has no idea what is going on, she thought they were helping her. She thought they were going to take the child for a couple of days to give her a break and then they were gonna help her, she had no idea. Had the lady not called it would have been all over. But now we are going back to court. All I did was make an appearance, and I am very well known in our county, and the judge said: wait a minute, if she wants a parent advocate, she also needs an attorney to represent her, and we will keep the child in foster care until we can get back in ten days. But had I

not been there it would have been over. The lady is very hard of hearing and she would nod, but doesn't hear anything you are saying. But her rights were being so violated, the 6 year old child had no idea what is happening and it is so wrong that they did not call anybody on her behalf. (2)

I think one that stuck out in my mind, and I was impressed that FAST money was able to step in and do that. A young man who is blind and the main thing that he and the family has asked for is ZoomText and all of the equipment that goes with that, I was impressed that FAST was going to pay for that. I was really impressed with that because without that I don't think he would have gotten that, and there is some summer stuff that they are going to be doing with him. (2)

In our county we are doing an equine program. There are eight kids that are having a lot of behavioral problems, and they are using the equine program to (teach about) how the horse gets upset and how you have to approach them, which has worked on their behavior too. We have worked on grooming with the kids on the horse, and that has helped them understand their hygiene, how the horse has to be clean before you can ride it as important as it is keeping themselves clean. They have done a program taking families fishing to have an outing together, to do something together. (2)

I taught a class in another county, and because of that class several people went on to become trainers to continue teaching to other families in the counties. They joined NAMI. Actually I had been in their homes, as a parent advocate I had received referrals, told them about the class. They came and because of that they formed a support group for other families, they have gone on to be trainers themselves, we are now putting together another grant to help other families, it is like a snowball effect and a wonderful thing to watch. I have a grandma that I am helping right now, she has three grandchildren that she is raising right now, but she only officially has custody of one. She really doesn't want the system in her life, she is really afraid of Children's Services taking her children away from her. So she doesn't want to go the normal route to receive services. She heard about me and she called me. We went to see an attorney to find out about legal custody. We've been to Children's Services to find out about benefits, hooked up with the mental health association to begin counseling. This lady has just made step after step. You have to encourage her a lot, and I don't think she would have done any of it if she hadn't hooked up with me, because she came to my door step when she was ready, she had put the other stuff off far too long. I tell her all the time how proud of her I am. She calls me crying that her daughter is going to be upset with her, and I encourage. I love this part of that. Just been tested in school getting ready to see if he qualifies for special education, has been struggling for years just started counseling, looking for a diagnosis, he is on his way to get the services that he needs. He has a mental health diagnosis for the rest of his life, it is not going to stop when FAST stops, they have only just begun. (3)

The family I was talking about before, who I spent 2 ½ hours with. She told me that I was the only one that listened to her and took the time to help her. (3)

Parent advocates are helping decrease feelings of isolation by sharing their personal experiences and linking families with one another. Parent advocates are modeling effective advocacy skills so that families can learn to do this for themselves, both in securing services for their child with IEPs and in other areas of their lives. (3)

Family Caregivers

The findings from the four family caregiver focus groups are reported according to the primary FAST\$06 evaluation variables and the interview guide (Appendix C). Data analysis summaries are given for each variable, followed by illustrative comments from the focus group sessions.

1) FAST\$06 and Family Empowerment

A general theme across focus groups for family empowerment was the dynamic role of parent advocates or family mentors who listened, cared, and guided families through family service systems. Ingredients for empowering families consisted of: listening, providing a supportive voice, encouraging family decision-making, employing holistic approaches, being available, and making sure the ultimate direction for FAST programming belongs to the families being served.

The data analysis revealed ideas from family caregivers about various ways to improve family empowerment. Some of the suggestions were directed to clarify the role of parent advocates for families whereby families can better utilize advocacy efforts; lengthening the time that families can be involved with FAST funding; educating families about the numerous options they have for family services and assistance; and setting up situations for families learning from/helping families.

A) Family empowerment and what is working

Comments by the family caregivers included:

I am skeptical of letting people in. Our parent advocate took what we needed and put her heart into it. She gives good incentives-making the kids earn instead just giving them money; how I used to. She helped me in areas I couldn't get through like court, she explained things to me. (1)

My son is now motivated to do the right thing. His parent advocate and probation officer listen to him and they make good comments. (1)

The camp is very good; the mentoring is excellent, Claudia's House, those are basically the ones that are currently in place. Having foster kids in the past mentoring programs were always part of the kid's curriculum. I can say that the case managers and the workers are very supportive. I think what I find is that they are non-judgmental, and are truly confidential to the extreme, if you will, which empowers us to get better. (2)

I hate to hog all of the time, but I have to speak praises. Don't wait until you're gone to put the roses on a person, but I think that what it (FAST) has done for me – I think that in trying to keep my physical, my mental, my emotional, I don't know about the social; but you are afforded the opportunity to work on yourself. I think that if you are so stressed out and so caught up with your personal issues and you don't have time to sort those through, you're not going to be able to give your kids the attention and all that nurturing that is necessary. So I am pleased that it has helped me and the child, so I look at it as a holistic approach to the family. (2)

We had a meeting at school and a supervisor came in. I had a lot of questions to ask and the advocate asked a lot of questions; how can we help and what can we do. I see more and more teachers starting to want to jump in to be supportive and counselors making themselves available to talk. (3)

We have monthly meetings with all of the people involved. She is very diligent; she is always on time; and she tries to make sure that everyone attends. There are 5-6 different groups involved and she follows an outline. She asks the kids, the social worker, but I am the bottom line about what I want, and I like that. (3)

With her being there she is working with the whole family. She is correcting our behaviors that we don't think is affecting our daughter, but in fact they are. Once we change the family it changes the whole dynamic of the whole entire environment in which we live. I can't imagine not having that and don't realize that what you say impacts everybody around you. She's right there to make sure that if it could be said a different, better way, and she does not correct you (demeaning). She does it encouragingly and that is what you don't get a lot of times from other people. It works and she listens, because I'm very combative with her and not always agreeable, and I'm not afraid to tell her. So we have a real good rapport where I don't always like what she says to me, but she

knows that I'm not afraid. I like that open forum where we can come to a lot of compromises, where everybody has an opinion in the family and everybody has a voice, and she tells us the way that it really should be. (4)

Just say what you feel, and if it is wrong she (family mentor) will put you in check and tell you the right way to go about it. Instead of flying off the handle or losing your mind because of what she puts us through, she is right there to talk to and she can calm you down. (4)

It's like they give you the tools to make the choice but ultimately you make the absolute decision. (4)

B) Family empowerment and what can be improved

Comments by the family caregivers included:

The only improvement I would have is for it (FAST) to last longer with more follow ups. I would like to see the program expanded. Fliers, maybe little letters in the mail....so more people like us can receive the help. (1)

I think in speaking from a systems perspective: the whole parent advocacy component of FAST, I'm not sure that families understand that piece of it and understand what the role of a parent advocate is. I'm not sure how it's presented to families, or if there is a universal way because it hasn't been utilized. Not a lot of families are asking for it from this part of the state. I'm wondering if that has been looked at, at all. Because everybody I think has their own idea of what parent advocacy means, and that may be a narrow idea of what that is. When I think of it, I think of it as being very broad. It can be just another parent to talk to or something very informal. I don't necessarily think of it as when there is a grievance you have to bring in an advocate and fight for change. It can be that, but it doesn't have to be. I see it as lots of different things that can be helpful for the families. I would like to see a standardized explanation of what it can be and explore different ideas, and inform families that (FAST) is available to them. (2)

My concerns are being addressed now. We are having a meeting next week and that is what I like about the program. The program was a little bit too late for me and my family's situation because I had an older child that was in and out of the court system because of her behavior and nobody offered anything like this. I asked her if they work with kids in the court system, not one judge, not one person offered this service. I found out through Job and Family Services in an open case with them. I became so frustrated that they knew they had to do something. I thought that was wrong. If the services are available, it has to be offered to parents who are asking for help. We don't know what is out there because the courts won't tell us that and I don't see advertisements. (3)

Like a support group for the parents, maybe we could meet some other parents that may or may not have more ideas of something that worked on their child that might work and share things. (4)

2) Aspects of Support and Respect through FAST\$06

The dimension of support and respect, as perceived by family caregivers, was intertwined with family empowerment. When family caregivers were given respect and support they were empowered to better cope with the difficulties and challenges they faced on a daily basis. Family caregiver decision making, valuing opinions, listening, and encouraging families to help themselves were shared as important elements that brought about respect and support.

Comments by the family caregivers included:

My parent advocate lets me make my own decisions but she will make suggestions and I usually go along with what she says. (1)

My family will only survive with FAST program providers and services, very helpful! They listen to suggestions, working as a team with teachers. They really value opinions from service providers. (2)

I have some emotional issues myself. I take a lot of medication for them, and some days I'm not doing too well. I call for assistance or one of several other people that I can call if I'm not doing well. They come by my house quite frequently, and sometimes it is a blessing in disguise because I am just unstable. So trying to deal with my problems and my kids problems and my husband has emotional issues too, if it wasn't for the people involved with my family: the community psychiatric support worker, the counseling, and a lot of different groups that are involved in our family. If it wasn't for these groups I don't think that our family would be surviving, I'm not saying there's not room for improvement in our family, because there is a lot of room for improvement. But if it wasn't for the help I get and the respite workers and stuff like that, listening to what I have to say and where I'm coming from, I don't think that my family would be together today. (2)

Yes, it (FAST) has been a big blessing. She is always encouraging and says good words to lift me up and is never negative. She is the type of person that loves what she does and she is very nurturing. (3)

I have a younger son that has a lot of problems both at home and at school, and we had two options, actually only one option. They offered respite care that offered time away from their children, but because of my son's situation I didn't think that was a good option. I wanted a different option and she sat down and listened to me, and she told me that her supervisor may not agree with...and I said well I don't care what your supervisors say, this is an emergency and we need to take care of this, and she did it and it happened. I was very happy that she did that. (3)

I thought it was a negotiation session – like you make a decision and we'll like tweak this a little bit. It is a compromise. Like I said before, it's my way or the highway. She'll sit down and talk things through when you just can't figure things out. (4)

My family mentor gives her opinion and she tells us what she thinks would be in our best interest, but she also reinforces the fact that we are still the parents. We have been there for 16 years – she hasn't; and she can look at it and put things in perspective...but ultimately she tells us all of the time, I can only tell you what I see would work; but ultimately you are the parent. There is just a lot of feedback and I think she still positively reinforces that we are capable of making decisions and you have to look at everything as a whole. (4)

3) FAST\$06 and Service Enhancement

FAST\$06 allowed for numerous services which were considered beneficial for their families. Not only were specific services cited, but also the relationships that were formed through the services for family preservation, success, and resiliency. Some of the services that were mentioned involved youth programming, respite care, mentoring services, and purchasing material goods.

The most frequently discussed strategy for service enhancement was to lengthen the time frame that families can receive FAST funding. Also pointed out, was the need to

have more education and information about the types and forms of services available to family caregivers and their families.

A) Enhancing services and what is working

Comments by family caregivers included:

We had a problem with a flea infestation because of our cats. Our parent advocate helped us to get furniture at MAP (Material Assistance Providers) and FAST funds have helped us to get coupons to do stuff... These incentives have helped the kids to work on their grades, which have improved. This program is good for people who are struggling. (1)

My son needs incentives. They gave him gift cards and we are starting to plan family activities to do things together. Through FAST my son has a mentor and is in karate lessons. (1)

In February of 2004 we had a fire and lost everything. A neighbor gave me some cabinets and they were infested with cockroaches. Our parent advocate helped us with FAST funds to get the house exterminated. The parent advocate got my son ready for camp. (1)

Number one way FAST has helped me is with respite services. No special place exists for a child who is still learning potty training. Try being a working single mom; too much to do everything, too much, going to lose my mind: family is at a distance; my son and I can now go places because she was in respite care. FAST came into my life and I can now do things. Thank goodness for FAST services, every day after school for two hours. Because of FAST funding, her teacher is able to take her to gymnastics class. FAST is paying her teacher from school to provide services. (2)

A lot of my son's problems stem from hyper sensitivity to sounds. With people running water in the house or crunching food or talking or normal everyday activities are very hard for him and cause him to have temper tantrums and blow up. So now we're looking at getting him a headset or something to filter out the sounds or give him white noise or something like that. Rather than just approaching it from a mental health perspective, and saying well he can earn such and such if he doesn't hit anybody for making noise or restraining him or all the other things that we had tried, and maybe we can approach it that way; but that might be something we need help paying for. (2)

Okay, my son has hidden talents. I was trying to find out what could I do to angle his hyper-activity in a positive way. I went out and bought a unicycle and introduced it to him. He got on it for about 2-3 hours, and he would fall, but now he is very good on it. He has a good 10 speed, but he threw it to the wayside, and goes all over the neighborhood on the unicycle. He gets to show all the kids in the neighborhood what he can do, what a powerful ego and self esteem booster. He is very healthy: muscle no fat,

rides the unicycle really good, he can juggle good, and he can walk on his hands. When we had a meeting at FAST, we are trying to find someone that can do the same thing to spend one on one time with him. I called gymnastic places, he has excellent balance. I haven't found one yet, but FAST will find whatever I find to help him in that area. I've been calling bike stores, the circuses, for anybody that might want to be on-on-one. I exercise and walk around the neighborhood, and he will be on his unicycle, and he never gets tired. He also likes the pogo stick, and really athletic. The problem comes in when he has to follow directions, and when you say no to him he flips. These activities are more one-on-one, and not a group sport and no rules. It's strengthening him as well. (2)

If they didn't have the camp or the mentor, he doesn't leave the house. During Easter break, he does not leave the house or get off of the couch. He wants to stay with me, he wants to sleep with me, or sleep on the couch and leave my door open so he can watch me. We left my ex-husband, he was a batterer. Since then he always has to see me. He doesn't like to go to school, he doesn't like to go outside, he has to be near me, but I can't talk because he is hypersensitive to sound, he freaks out. I have to be close by. If I'm in the shower; he is sitting on the toilet. If the advocate didn't take him, he would be attached to my hip. That is the only break I get. (2)

My youngest child is attending a program (through FAST) referred to him to monitor his behavior because we were having a lot of behavior issues at home that I was unable to handle. My concern was medicine. I wanted to know if the medicine was working, and I felt that the medicine was covering up his behavior, and in the process we were not dealing with his actual behavior because he would have medicine; and he was doing wonderful in school with the structure. (3)

A program that has 10 kids and they talk about the different behaviors, and they are not just there for the job and that is a big positive – my daughter's attitude in wanting to do better, and looking for her career. The program is for teenagers to get a summer job and they talk about different issues about how they got there; and talk about this being a struggle and how they can overcome this. They can help them get a job in the fall, and she will be able to shadow somebody, which is a big plus. She has been involved for two weeks. (3)

In fact my son was taken out of the home once. He was such a story teller, such a liar, but with my family mentor in the home she could see what was going on and tell them, no, that is not what happened. It was a relief, I had somebody to back me up and see how the family was working and what was going on, the first time that it happened they didn't question because he had a history with his mother, but the second time I had somebody to talk to them, otherwise he would have been in foster care. (4)

It is incredible, because we were on FAST and then when we went off. We broke down. Things went really wrong in the household; it was everyone in the home. And now she (family mentor) is back, and it is great to have her when we need her. If it wasn't for this we would not have her. (4)

I think I was one of the first families to be involved in this FAST program. I thought I was going to see her a few extra times a week and it was so much more than that, so much more. I don't know how else to describe it. The children are still home, the kids could be in so much more trouble right now, so appreciated at that point in time. (4)

B) Enhancing services and what can be improved

Comments by family caregivers included:

A while back I needed help getting my license back but this wasn't something that was available. I had gotten jumped at the bus stop and so when they give me a bus pass I get scared to stand out there alone. Something like this would help single parents. (1)

Well, I think there should be more knowledge out there for families that are low income. (1)

Need services for an extended period of time. Not sure about the future. (2)

I wish they had tutoring, my son can't read and he is going to be 11 in a couple weeks. He doesn't want to read with me because I think he's embarrassed, but at school he tries really hard, but there is just not enough time in school. So if there was somebody that could come over or if he could go somewhere that he could get tutoring and not be embarrassed that would help a lot. (2)

Everything is just now starting to come together, and they have been involved since February, and you don't know what is going to happen in that year so I think that they maybe could extend the services longer if the family needs it. (3)

Longer, make the services longer. It was just such a good program while I had it. I just hated to see it go when it ended, and I still have her available to me, but I don't feel right calling her since I'm not in the program. Longer would be better. (4)

4) FAST\$06 and Systems Collaboration

Family caregivers were explicit in their descriptions of the benefits to their families when systems, agencies, and organizations created a collaborative environment for positive family outcomes.

Perspectives from family caregivers about how to help systems work better together on their behalf was centered on promoting community collaboration to assist families, improve communications between systems, and whole-family participation, including children that may not currently qualify for FAST funds.

A) Systems collaboration and what is working

Comments by family caregivers included:

It has put everyone on the same page. In the family meeting everyone is there – the mentor, the parent advocate, and everyone is working together on an issue. Sometimes the kids don't agree but usually everyone comes to an agreement and everyone knows what is going on. (1)

Working with me and MR/DD and other groups work together such as the schools, special education, FAST, and parent advocates.(2)

Let me throw this in before I leave, I am a part of the system. They have been very supportive from the top level to the case managers; and the little one (child) was adopted. All of the case managers that I have worked with were very, very supportive working to get the FAST money, and everything was smooth sailing. I have nothing but positive to say about the systems. I think that I am like a dog, I will stay on it, on that bone, to get it; so I think that we all have to be that way and hold people accountable. That is something I would say to everyone, never accept no without two more tries. (2)

They do all the work together, because my coordinator calls all of them. That is how I got with all of them because of her, so I would say that they all work together. A number of agencies and the parent coordinator, because she called me too, and they did hook my kids up for the community center in my area for the summer, which was wonderful. They can go to summer camp. This is the first summer. That was one of their observations was for the kids to get out more. (3)

Children's services work hand-in-hand with the parent aid. She is there to let them know that this is what she is looking at, during holidays or if she is doing special things for the children in the area. Family mentor is like the information booth from heaven. (4)

B) Systems collaboration and what can be improved

Comments by family caregivers included:

Team meetings need to be for the whole family. My younger son is going down the wrong path. (1)

I wish I had someone to come out and show me how to be more aggressive. Usually they keep screaming and I say "do whatever". Help me be more consistent, because he doesn't leave the house. I can't ground him – he doesn't use the phone, he doesn't have any friends, there is nothing I can take away. He doesn't care, he'll turn off the T.V. He'll just lay there. My daughter will keep me up all night until I say I will baby-sit her child. My sister says I am their servant, I am not their mother. (2)

What are you doing or what aren't you doing to help that child, but again the whole concept is not so much the village but the community. The community is going to have to be a part of helping to raise these children, because times are so troubled, and they go out to the community every day, and we have to have a connection. The respite workers and teachers are going to have to be on the same page. When we are asleep, the kids are thinking about how they are going to beat us at our own game. I think it is key that we continue to link up and connect and say that this community is going to raise these children. (2)

It is like you have to hit bottom before they will come to your help, other than that when you file the charges, there should be some other type of options. (3)

If they (agencies) would provide information to everybody, even send one memo to our home agency I'm sure they will give it to the family mentor or the case worker. I'm sure they would distribute it, and I don't think they always do that. The sharing of information between the departments and who is doing this, that, and the other, sometimes falls by the wayside. (4)

5) FAST\$06 and General Strategies for Improvement

Recommendations from family caregivers to improve FAST ranged from: keep things the way they are to develop a better way to communicate with potential families the services available through FAST funding.

Comments by family caregivers included:

Our parent advocate is great, it's just my counselor isn't very good....." (1)

I wish I would have known about it sooner and some of the bigger problems could have been avoided. This program has given me confidence without all of the stress. (1)

I wouldn't change it. (1)

Is there provider training on this process? How are the providers learning about this, because she had a good point, besides respite and mentoring what else can FAST pay for? I'm not sure providers all have a great grasp on what can it pay for; and I realize that it is county-by-county and each county makes its own decision. (2)

It would be great when providers are trained or when they get together for meetings if they could share those kinds of unique thinking (examples) outside of the box. Everybody knows about respite and that is a need almost every family has, and you can't always find the person, but providers could benefit from hearing some of what's been said here today. (2)

The court, Job & Family Services, schools, community centers, you know there are a lot of children with counselors and psychologists at the school could refer them to the program (FAST). The school psychologist is not helping like they should because they have too many other kids that they are working with. (3)

Having the hospitals know what services are available to them to refer you to, and I think that doesn't happen. (4)

6) FAST\$06 Success Outcomes

Family caregivers shared successful outcomes of how FAST has made a positive difference in the lives of their families. Much of the success outcomes were discussed by the services received and the significant role of parent advocates or family mentors.

Comments by the family caregivers included:

I was having trouble with the school system and the parent advocate has helped me get a lot accomplished. My son needed an IEP and the school didn't want to do it but when other people got involved (FAST) she got results. The PA has helped set curfews and

chores. I have 7 kids and the PA helped put me back into perspective and get me on track and gives me the extra step I need that helps my kids get what they need. (1)

There was a lot before that I didn't understand about ADHD. FAST funds have been used to send him to Sylvan and his behavior at school has improved. I've gotten no bad phone calls, he has his confidence back. He got good results on a recent evaluation and he hasn't been suspended. (1)

My son got kicked out of school for 2 months. The parent advocate helped me to find assistance. His grades went from straight Fs to As, Bs and Cs due to incentives and a bus pass. His mentor is a karate instructor and is impressed he's got more confidence. He hasn't been associating with some of the same people he used to get in trouble with. (1)

I have two daughters; they both have been through the foster care system. During that time they were placed in a foster home that wasn't the greatest. They came back to me with mood disorders, post traumatic disorder, and one daughter with chronic depression. I've used the FAST funds for respite workers that come and take the girls, the younger daughter goes once a week, and the older daughter goes twice a week. They help pay for summer camp last year for both of them. They have helped out a whole lot, because they have tempers that are out of this world, and they need time with other people, which they are getting through the FAST funds. (2)

Well, I want to add to that, that my 11 year old was able to go to camp; was afforded the opportunity to go to camp. Two different camps last year and I was very, very pleased that they did fund the experience; and I think that particularly one camp really did make an impression on him. He has asked me emphatically to please let him go back to that camp. He has a lot of issues that he needs to deal with, and I might say to work with a younger, fresh out of college, female, he will chew them up and spit them out. The one camp that he had a real good experience was led by males, and I feel so good that there are experiences out there where he can be a part of a situation where it is specifically addressing his needs. At this point he does need to be around positive African-American men. His history has been that his exposure has been quite negative. I am very pleased that the mentor that he has is right on the money – he is timely, he is disciplined, he is no nonsense, but he can be a lot of fun for my son. (2)

My younger son is 14 and he is not currently in any public child serving systems. He just receives private psychiatric care, and until FAST, that was it. We weren't at the time going for counseling. We weren't involved in any of the children's' mental health agencies. Yet at the same time we had all kinds of needs for things that FAST could have been helpful with. So that is some feedback I wanted to throw out from my perspective. If you're not involved with a system that is knowledgeable with FAST, its chances are that you might not hear about it, that doesn't mean that the need isn't there. My son never had any kind of wrap around services, respite, never had camp, we never had a lot of the things that we really could have used. At the time we were in crisis, he had just been hospitalized. He was violent. Things were out of control. He is a high needs kid, but the private psychiatrist at the time didn't know how to make any referrals and never

heard of it. I just happened to be lucky enough to work around folks that happened to be knowledgeable about this. It's been great for my son, and he is an example of a kid who couldn't have accessed this stuff any other way than through FAST; and we've been able to use respite, summer camp, looking into some other things for the summer. (2)

The care coordinators have set up mentors for the boys. They really like that and they get to go out and do things; and they really like that because they don't have the dad in the home, so that gives them time to be out with the male influence, and that gives us time apart, and they really like that. That is the first thing that they set up. We already had counseling set up, but wanted more in-depth counseling to get my house in order. The mentoring is still ongoing for about one year. (3)

My one daughter is stressed. She can call the care coordinator. They help me because I have five kids, and I'm a single parent and a widow; and she has helped my teenager who has a lot of trouble giving me comfort that someone else is there. (3)

Recently we moved and with our daughter's obsessive compulsive (disorder) she does not like her things to be touched or moved; so we knew this was going to be a difficult time for us. And one of the things we loved was that our family mentor was right there with us – physically helping us pack her things so that our daughter was reassured that her things were being put in one place. Literally loaded them in her car, drove with our daughter with her, and unloaded them in the new home. She was right there, and it really helped with my daughter when she would get frustrated, she was right there to address it, and to also teach us how to not negatively respond to her episodes. To try to make it function better, and that was a huge help too. That would have been very traumatic, still had difficulties, but she was there 24 hours a day to try to help with things. (4)

I live on a very busy street for such a small town, and I have children ranging in age from 2-10. My older children are capable of going out in the back yard to play. But with the program (FAST), as a family, we were able to put the fence in behind my house so that I can go out with my kids and play with them and not have to worry about any escapees. It is very hard living on such a busy street. It was something I could not physically or monetarily have done by myself. We have a play set and a sand box now, and I could not have done that on my own. (4)

We received a pool pass last year and it was wonderful. I work afternoons, so on my days off and the mornings one of my older children, if not me, my husband, was able to take him swimming to the playground and it helped so much. All of that unused energy he had sitting at home instead of arguing, the family was not arguing because we had something to do that we could afford; and it was so nice and appreciated. (4)

Like you said, it's not just the conversation it's the painting a book shelf or putting a fence in the yard or taking something that your child enjoys. I'm spazzed so I don't know how to calm down and she is teaching me how to crochet. I'm learning so many things that I'm not very good at it and it annoys me to no end, but it is teaching me patience and

calming me down. It is hands-on interactive stuff. We do a lot of working as a family to be creative and be interactive, learning how to work with your kids. (4)

FAST05–FAST\$06 Comparisons

Findings from focus group data analysis in 2005 were compared with 2006 results. Comparisons were conducted for service provider/program administrator and parent advocate focus groups. Family caregiver focus groups were not part of the FAST 2005 evaluation. Comparisons were categorized according to similarities, differences, and improvements.

Similarities in terms of common themes included the following: the need to increase FAST funding, the importance of parent advocacy for family empowerment and positive outcomes, the promotion of family preservation, the structure of FAST funding in terms of how it fostered systems collaboration, the variety of services offered to FAST families, the importance of focusing on family decision making, and the desire to streamline data reporting/collection procedures.

Differences included: the perceptions of less creative use of FAST funds from 2005 to 2006 as related to restrictions for the types of services through FAST, greater attention given to families to value “voice and choice,” and the need for the flexible use of FAST to include family emergency funds, medicine, and other poverty assistance support.

Improvements noted by participants this year: less focus on video-conferencing issues, the increased timeliness of communications, the clarification of guidelines for the use of FAST funds, and the improved communication between state and local levels.

Conclusions

Focus groups are about honoring the participants' stories through a systematic process. Therefore, in addition to the data analysis summaries of the FAST\$06 variables, comments in the participants' own words were given to validate this qualitative inquiry.

Similarities were found in the results across the three categories of focus groups (service providers/program administrators, parent advocates, and family caregivers). Some of the common themes and dimensions included the role of parent advocacy for family empowerment, family services both in quality and quantity for service enhancement, and family preservation efforts. Similarities in focus group categories also were discovered regarding the need to increase parent advocacy efforts and keeping clear guidelines for utilizing FAST funds while allowing greater flexibility for creative family services. In addition, the data revealed that family empowerment was directly connected with the respect of and support for the skills and abilities of participants in all three categories of focus groups from their supervisors, peers, or advocates.

Comparative data analysis between 2005 and 2006 evaluations revealed similarities, differences and improvements for programmatic efforts through FAST. A significant change in the focus groups for 2006 was the addition of four focus groups with family caregivers. FAST was created for these families. Hearing directly from them has no substitute as expressed in this quote from a family caregiver, *"My family will only survive with FAST program providers and services, very helpful!"*

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Guide Service Providers and Program Administrators

Objective: To gather information on the FAST program's outcomes and processes for achieving them. (*Variables: family empowerment, service enhancement (program services), and systems collaboration.*)

Questioning Route:

[1] Think back to when you first became involved in your county's FAST program. What were your expectations?

- (*Everyone answers the first question, in turn*)
- Other expectations and comments? (*Ask only if needed.*)

[2] How have your expectations and the FAST program changed from Year 1 to Year 2, if at all?

[3] What is happening because of FAST that is helping to support and empower families (responsive to family questions/concerns, family's voice/opinions matter, families part of planning/treatment process) (county level; state level)? How has this happened through the creative use of FAST funds?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to support and empower families?

[4] What is happening because of FAST that is helping to enhance services (county level; state level)? How has this happened through the creative use of FAST funds?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to enhance services?

[5] What is happening because of FAST that is helping different surrounding systems collaborate and support one another (county level; state level)?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to help different systems collaborate with one another?
What additional support would you like to see?

[6] Can you give me a couple of examples about how kids and their families are being helped by the FAST program?

Appendix A (continued)

[7] In the context of FAST, how well and in what ways do you feel support and respect for the decisions you make and your ability to make them? What additional ways would you like to see the systems or people around you support your ability to be effective?

[8] What advice would you give to another county just starting out with the FAST program?

[9] What aspects of the FAST program (county level; state level) need to be improved?

[10] Is there anything else you would like to add?

Probes: Would you explain further? Is there anything else? Please describe what you mean? Could you clarify?

Appendix B

Schedule of Questions Parent Advocates

Objective: To gather information on the FAST program's outcomes and processes for achieving them. (*Variables: family empowerment, service enhancement (program services), and systems collaboration.*)

Questioning Route:

[1] Think back to when you first became involved with the FAST program. What were your expectations?

- (*Everyone answers the first question, in turn*)
- Other expectations? (*Ask only if needed.*)

[2] How have your expectations and the FAST program changed from Year 1 to Year 2, if at all?

[3] How did you become involved with the family or families you are assisting?

A. During the FAST program, how has this experience improved your relationship with the child(ren) and families you are helping?

[4] What is happening because of FAST that is helping to support and empower the families (i.e., responsive to family questions/concerns, family's voice/opinions matter, families part of planning/treatment process) with whom you are working?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to support the families with whom you are working?

[5] What is happening because of FAST that is helping to improve services for the family or families with whom you are working?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to enhance services for families with whom you are working?

[6] What is happening because of FAST that is helping the different surrounding systems with whom you are involved actually work together and support each other?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could FAST do to help the different systems with whom you are involved actually work together? What additional support would you like to see?

Appendix B (continued)

[7] Can you give me a couple of examples about how kids and their families are being helped by the FAST program because of your role as a parent advocate?

[8] In the context of FAST, how well and in what ways do you feel support and respect for the decisions you make and your ability to make them? What additional ways would you like to see the systems or people around you support your ability to be effective?

[9] What aspects of the FAST program need to be improved to help you in your role as a parent advocate?

[10] Is there anything else you would like to add?

Probes: Would you explain further? Is there anything else? Please describe what you mean? Could you clarify?

Appendix C

Schedule of Questions Family caregivers

Objective: To gather information on program outcomes and processes for achieving them. (*Variables: family empowerment, service enhancement (program services), and systems collaboration.*)

Questioning Route:

[1] How did you become involved with a family advocate or decide not to become involved with one?

- *Everyone answers the first question, in turn*

[2] Can you give me a couple of specific examples about how your child and family have been helped by the family advocate or the assistance (wrap around services or FAST) your child and family have received?

[3] What is happening right now that is helping to support and empower your family?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening or because of your family advocate? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. In what ways does the family advocate support and respect the decisions you make and your ability to make them? What about other program providers in regards to supporting your decision making?

B. In what additional ways might your family advocate or other program providers support and empower your family?

[4] What is happening right now that is helping to improve services (wrap around services or FAST) for your family?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening because of your family advocate? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could be done to improve services for your family?

[5] What is happening right now that is helping different systems work together to assist your family?

- What evidence exists that these things are happening or because of your family advocate? (*Ask only if needed.*)

A. What else could the different systems with whom you are involved actually work together?

Appendix C (continued)

[6] What “needs to be improved” with the assistance (wrap around services or FAST) your child and family are receiving in general and/or from your family advocate?

[7] If you could change anything about the assistance (wrap around services or FAST) your child and family receives, what would that be and how would you change it?

[8] Is there anything else you would like to add?

Probes: Would you explain further? Is there anything else? Please describe what you mean? Could you clarify?