FOSTER AMERICA

Using mapping tools to analyze service gaps

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SUMMARY

Ida Tamarin, a Foster America fellow and now Senior Research & Evaluation Specialist with Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, helped to map client referrals over time to better understand client referral trends, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and identify and address potential service and referral gaps.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Like many jurisdictions, Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (Santa Clara) saw a drop in client referrals[1] when California instituted a shelter-in-place order. Santa Clara wanted to understand how the pandemic was affecting client referrals and service needs, beginning with whether particular areas of the county were experiencing more dramatic changes to the number of client referrals.

THE SOLUTION

Compare client referral numbers to similar points in time in past years. First, Ida sought out to understand whether the drop in client referrals were a reflection of typical variation in client referral numbers throughout the year. For example, like many jurisdictions, Santa Clara often sees a decrease in client referrals during the summer months when children are out of school. Ida graphed monthly client referral numbers for the past three years and confirmed that there was an unusual decrease in client referrals in March 2020, when the shelter-at-home order began.

Map client referrals in months pre- and post-pandemic. Ida also sought to understand whether certain communities were driving the decrease in client referrals, which, if true, may have implications for how Santa Clara plans its service offerings during and after the pandemic. To answer that question, Ida used GIS to map the addresses of clients that had been referred in the months before and during the pandemic. In the mapping, Ida found that the decline of client referrals was distributed proportionally throughout the county. In other words, the geographic distribution of client referrals in March and April 2020 looked similar to that in January and February 2020.

Continue to explore different research questions for service planning and delivery during and after the pandemic. With the basic client referral data mapped, Ida is beginning to explore different research questions that will help Santa Clara identify child and family needs and any service gaps. For example, Ida has begun to think about adding layers to the map, including service delivery locations and community demographics.

THE RESULT

Santa Clara now has a basic understanding of how the shelter-at-home order is affecting client referrals and can use data to inform how it meets the needs of children and families during and after the pandemic.

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[1] "Client referrals" are instances in which Santa Clara County has received a report of potential abuse and neglect and resulted in a referral of the child and family to an agency for follow-up