

## Site Visit Report

### Child Welfare Training

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#### Project Information

- **Children's Bureau Funding Announcement:** Training for Effective Child Welfare Practice in Rural Communities
- **Award #:** 90-CT-0126
- **Project Title:** Training for Effective Child Welfare Practice in Rural Communities
- **Grantee:** Texas State University, San Marcos (formerly called Southwest Texas State University)
- **Co-Principle Investigators:** Dorinda N. Noble, Ph.D., LCSW; Mary Jo Garcia Biggs, Ph.D., LSCW
- **Approved Project Period:** October 1, 2003 – September 30, 2008
- **Other Projects Funded Under This Priority Area:**
  - Portland State University, OR
  - San Diego State University Foundation, CA
  - University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC
  - Sonoma State University, CA
  - Southwest Missouri State University, MI

#### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

##### *Abstract (from the project's grant application)*

The proposed project will develop and deliver a Master of Social Work program to qualified Child Protective Service (CPS) workers in rural areas of Texas. The program delivery will use web-based technology (including the BlackBoard course management program), class instruction via interactive television, video-teleconferencing, electronic chat rooms and discussion groups, and electronic library resources access, and will be supplemented by intensive in-person workshops each semester. Students will complete the MSW degree requirements on a part-time basis while maintaining their CPS employment.

The degree will be offered through Southwest Texas State University (to be known as Texas State University-San Marcos after September 1, 2003). SWT's fully accredited MSW program, with a mission of preparing professionals for public sector work, has a distinguished record of educating child welfare practitioners, particularly for practice in rural areas. Furthermore, the School of Social Work at SWT has already graduated, in partnership with University of Houston-Victoria, one cohort of MSW students in Victoria, Texas via a combination of in-person and electronically transmitted instruction, and will begin a second cohort there in August 2003.

The existing Administrative Leadership specialization curriculum of SWT's MSW program will provide the basic structure of the proposed degree program, though course content will be modified to increase its direct relevance to rural child welfare practice. For example, the two social policy courses will focus on the impact of current and proposed policies on rural residents and the services they receive, and methods of using local strengths to influence policy development and interpretation. Practice and research courses will include community development projects such as initiating community-based efforts to analyze local needs and

stimulate efforts to develop needed services. Two new courses will be developed to focus on Issues in Rural Practice and Methods of Rural Community Organization. Curriculum will be developed by the MSW Curriculum Committee of SWT, a committee of CPS senior staff, and a national committee of recognized experts in the areas of child welfare, rural practice, and distance education.

Applicants to the program shall meet SWT [Southwest Texas] Graduate School standards and School of Social Work admission criteria, which tend to favor practitioners in public agencies, and will need the endorsement and cooperation of agency superiors.

**Need for This Service** (*adapted from the original grant application and information and materials provided during the site visit*)

- Texas is an extremely large state which covers some 268,000 square miles. In such a huge state, distances between points can be enormous. The nine universities in Texas offering the MSW are all located east of or near Interstate 35, which runs from Dallas down through Waco, on to Austin, San Antonio, and points south. Potential MSW students in vast areas of the state, particularly west Texas (which covers approximately 130,000 square miles and is predominantly rural), would have to travel 300 to 500 miles and more to the nearest university offering an MSW program.
- As a further indication of the vastness of the geographic area targeted by this project, the largest city in west Texas is El Paso (population 550,000). El Paso is nearly 1000 miles from Beaumont, another community in west Texas, and it is closer to Los Angeles than it is to Austin. The next largest city is Lubbock (population 180,000), which is closer to Chicago than it is to Houston.
- Such vast geographical distances present major barriers to rural child welfare workers who are interested in furthering their education. In order to pursue their MSW degree, they would have to leave their jobs and their families for up to two years, totally disrupting their workplace and their home life. For the majority of rural child welfare workers, especially for the significant portion of the workforce who are mothers of dependent children, this kind of “dislocation” is impossible.
- Most social work education programs, as well as the majority of policies which shape those programs, ignore the fact that rural practice differs significantly from urban practice in a number of ways. Rural culture tends to be based on more conservative values, more informal relationships, and more fluid time schedules. Formal resources for families and children are few and far between, if they exist at all. Policies and practices need to be modified and informal resources need to be tapped in order to accommodate these differences and to achieve effective practice in rural child welfare.
- A strong partnership exists between the Texas State University School of Social Work and public child welfare agencies in Texas. For 14 years, through Title IV-E funding, the School and its Center for Children and Families (CCF) have been providing child welfare education, in partnership with the Texas Child Protective Services (CPS) agency. For 8 years CCF has sponsored an annual Child Welfare Roundtable, which has grown dramatically in attendance and reputation.
- At the time of this Program Announcement, the School had received numerous requests from a number of outlying communities for extension MSW programs. While they were able to honor some of these requests, there were simply not enough resources to honor them all. The work of this grant is in response to those requests for advanced professional social work education for state agency staff in rural areas. The online MSW program offers many rural child welfare staff the opportunity to pursue their MSW degrees which they would not have otherwise.

## **SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS**

### **The Agenda**

- This site visit, which took place November 1 – 3, 2007, consisted of many parts, beginning with a dinner meeting on November 1<sup>st</sup> with the Director of the Texas State University School of Social Work and two faculty members (the Director and one of the faculty members are Co-Principle Investigators on the project), where they shared the history of the project, start-up issues, an overview of the current status of, and future plans for the project. At a breakfast meeting the following morning, the project evaluator shared information on the strengths and needs of the project and the research opportunities it presents. This was followed by a live demonstration by a faculty member of an on line course she teaches on the DSM IV and by a discussion with the financial officer of the financial issues involved in rural distance education. At lunch two faculty members shared their experiences in developing on line curriculum delivery. The site visitor also had the opportunity to meet with the University's Assistant VP of Instructional Technology. These meetings were followed by a campus tour and a focus group with the Rural Distance Education Students participating in this project and then dinner with the same students. The final day of the visit included a breakfast meeting to discuss the research and dissemination plans for the project and participation in a delightfully entertaining and extremely informative workshop on "The Muddy Waters of Ethics". The information shared during these meetings and discussions is interspersed throughout this report.

### **An On Line Course Preview**

A faculty member previewed her DSM-IV on line course for the site visitor.

- The curriculum, which uses TRACS software, begins by providing students with information on the availability of technical support and how to access it. The University's Instructional Technology Department provides on line and call-in technical support to all on line students.
- Next is an instructional section on email etiquette, followed by a video of the professor introducing herself to the students and sharing information about herself and course expectations.
- This is followed by the series of Lesson Notes which are, in effect, lectures on line. The narrative of the lecture is interspersed with illustrative stories and "discussion" questions (the software has "chat" capability). Colorful and interesting illustrative pictures and diagrams also appear throughout the Notes. The student is not simply sitting and reading text from the computer monitor. The material is presented in a very interesting and interactive way designed to hold the student's interest and stimulate learning.
- Illustrative videos are used throughout. The site visitor was able to preview the video of a role play of a suicide assessment that is a part of this curriculum. The video stops for discussion at certain points during which questions are posed, students type their answers in the box provided and forward them to the professor.
- Students in this course are required to complete a research paper on a particular diagnostic category and a specific population relative to that category. They then post abstracts of their papers on line and are required to read the abstracts of at least three of their fellow students' papers and to select at least one to read in full. Students also have group projects and numerous other activities to encourage interaction between students.

### **The Role of the Department of Instructional Technology**

- The University's very large Department of Instructional Technology plays a pivotal role in the success of this project, by providing technical support to faculty and to students alike, ensuring that the Blackboard and TRACS sites work properly. They also provide training for participating faculty, not only on the use of the equipment, but also on teaching techniques designed to get the most out of the equipment. Management of the Department expressed the desire for the Department to "create an environment where faculty can publish in juried journals in the *information technology field* as well as in the *social work field*." This Department, as well as the Office of Faculty Enhancement, work with faculty to teach web-based teaching strategies and keep faculty current on new technology.
- Texas State faculty are using this project as an opportunity to extend their pedagogical skills, learning to use the technology more effectively with all their students in all their classes. To that end, they have brought in several experts in distance learning to work with the faculty in full-day seminars. They have also organized several day-long sessions with the Texas State Instructional Technology Department and the Office of Faculty Enhancement to instruct them in the technical aspects of Blackboard, TRACS, and Adobe Connect. The result of all this focused study is that faculty members are becoming more and more comfortable with using technology. Some faculty members are using web cameras and are maintaining "virtual office hours" for the on line students.

### **Plans for the Future**

- The School's Director is exploring the possibility of developing instructional CDs to provide continuing education opportunities for rural workers as they travel for home visits. These workers spend so many long hours on the road, this would provide them the perfect opportunity to further their educations in the process. The School is also exploring instructional uses for Pod casting and YouTube. The Department of Instructional Technology is even exploring the use of Second World environments in social work instruction.

### **Discussions with Students**

The site visitor got to spend a good deal of time, both formal and informal, with many of the students participating in the on line MSW program and to get a good sense of who they are and what the program means to them. Following is some of the information they shared and some shared by faculty as well:

- The students in this cohort are indeed diverse. They are African American, Hispanic, and Anglo. They range in age from 24 to 51, with the majority being in their 20s and 30s. They represent different interests and talents. One raises mules. One has written successful screen plays. Another is a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and another is the minister of a small rural church. One lives in a 1950s Sears Kit Home, which she is retrofitting to a 1960s décor. Another is a US Army veteran who served in Desert Storm. Two others, also members of military families, are living in Europe while participating in the program.
- Without exception, the students were very clear that, without this project, they would not have been able to pursue their degrees. Distance made it impossible for them to commute to a school offering the MSW and they were not in a position to be able to give up their jobs and relocate or to live on campus.
- One student shared privately the fact that she was an on-campus student initially. She then had a child whose special needs are such that the student had to quit work and stay at

home to provide care. Baby sitters and child care are not an option for her. Without the program, she would have had to drop out of school and give up her dream of obtaining an MSW degree, but she was able, instead, to move into the distance learning program and continue her education from home while caring for her child.

- Another student, a single mother, said that she could never have afforded to pursue an MSW degree without this program in which her tuition and books are paid by the grant, and she has access to an agency computer for her studies.
- Several of the students in the cohort are first-generation college students. Faculty members understand their issues because over half of the School's faculty are also first-generation college students.
- Most of the students say they are "lifers" with the public child welfare agency. They are all very committed to their communities and to their jobs.
- One student has a special assignment in a county that recently criminally indicted the public child welfare agency because of a child death. Another supervises child welfare workers in a district in which four child deaths have occurred within the past year. The judge involved in the cases has been so disturbed by this that he has taken an indefinite leave from the bench. These students hope that the program will help them develop strategies to deal with the seriously traumatized employees within their agencies.
- Students also spoke of the challenges of participating in the program. As CPS workers, they report that they already work 60 hour weeks. Finding study time is sometimes very overwhelming. Additionally, on line education is really a self-learning process that requires strong motivation and a lot of self-discipline. Students need to be made aware of this up front. They also reported missing the regular face-to-face contact and interaction with other students that is routine for on-campus students.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

- Teaching on-line is very different from classroom teaching. In the face-to-face classroom, for example, faculty can adjust their teaching to students' interests and can sometimes allow themselves the luxury of talking extemporaneously. On-line teaching is much more structured and must be minutely planned, with limited spontaneity on the part of faculty. It is an entirely different approach to teaching. Some faculty found that the format did not suit them well, while others were excited and challenged by on-line instruction.
- Preparing a web-assisted curriculum is extremely labor-intensive, requiring a great deal of up-front work and preparation. Participating faculty receive a two-semester, one-course release to develop each on line course they teach. They are very excited about the process and have learned to create on line courses in a rigorous and exciting way, using streaming video and Adobe Connect, as well as web pages, whiteboard discussions, diagrams, color pictures, case vignettes, and on line role plays. They also hold on line chats and virtual office hours.
- Faculty have learned to clearly define expectations and procedures in web courses. Toward that end, Texas State faculty who are involved in this project have developed several strategies:
  - They have developed and posted on line etiquette for each class.
  - They have created "Cyber Lounges" in which students can talk with each other on their own time and at their own pace.
  - They are using discussion threads, in which the instructor begins the thread on a topic. Students must respond. In the normal face-to-face classroom, about one-third of students actively participate in class discussions, while the remaining students are generally quiet. In large classes, this lack of participation can be

difficult for faculty to track. On the web, however, student responses are counted and electronically “stamped” with time and date of submission, so the instructor can see how often and when individual students participate and can follow up with those who do not. Students receive credit for substantive participation.

- As a way of combating the isolation of distance learning, faculty give frequent assignments or activities that require students to communicate, creating opportunities for students to “talk” electronically at least weekly. Virtual office hours with their advisor are available via web cam. Students are also brought in to the San Marcos campus as a group on a fairly regular basis where they are given the opportunity to meet and get to know each other and the faculty as well as to participate in various learning and skill-building opportunities.
- In a further effort to create a sense of camaraderie, early in their first semester students are required to construct their own web page, including a picture. The pictures students choose to include on their web pages are interesting and revealing. For example, one student posted a picture of her eye, a picture which generated quite a bit of discussion. Students receive credit for creating their own web page.
- Students receive instruction about the elements of copyright law that apply to web-assisted learning.

#### **Successful Strategies and Keys to Success**

- The Texas State University School of Social Work is fully accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). The on-line MSW program incorporates the same curriculum, learning goals and objectives, types of assignments, and is taught by the same core, doctoral-degreed faculty as the on-campus program. The School can therefore demonstrate that the web-assisted MSW degree program for rural child welfare workers complies with CSWE standards and with the high standards of Texas State University’s School of Social Work.
- Students who applied to this web-based MSW degree program were required to meet all admission requirements which apply to other MSW Regular-Track students. The public child welfare agency publicized the educational opportunity and interested individuals applied directly to the School. Applicants were evaluated by the same criteria as other MSW applicants, and were subject to the same admission processes. No student was given credit for life experience.
- In recognition of the fact that on-line education is only as good as the technology the students are using and their ability to use it, project staff made it clear to all program applicants exactly what type of technology students must have to participate in the program and provided them with training and with ongoing technical support on the technical tools and software being used. For the first cohort of students in the project, the public child welfare agency agreed to allow all students to use their office computers. This meant that students have ongoing technical support from both the University and from their public agency.
- The web-assisted MSW program is under the existing School administrative structure. Students direct all questions to their faculty advisor, who also administers this grant program. A student assistant works exclusively with the on line students to address their concerns and to ensure that communication with the faculty advisor and other faculty members is seamless. The School also has a full-time Administrative Assistant assigned to the MSW degree program, and she is available to assist these students as well as on-campus students.

- In addition to paying the tuition of students participating in the on line MSW program, grant funds are used to purchase books, videos, and other teaching materials that will enhance education for all students. Funds are also used to bring in experts to assist faculty in improving and diversifying their pedagogical skills.
- In the template which is included on each Blackboard and TRACS site, the faculty have included a link to the Texas State Library, which assigns librarians to work with distance education efforts. Librarians have posted instructional material on items such as how to identify scholarly journals, how to locate and assess reputable materials on the web, and how to cite such materials. When they need assistance, students can communicate directly with the Library through instant messaging and other chat options, including email, or by calling the reference desk. They can also use TexShare, the state library program which allows Texas State students to check out material in any state-supported university library close to their home base.
- Students in the program have a faculty advisor (the Co-Principle Investigator for the grant) and are free to work with the faculty teaching them when they need to, or to contact the School Director if necessary. The project has developed a template for all courses which addresses student rights, processes for termination, and other elements important for students to know. This template is included on all Blackboard/TRACS sites. In addition, these students received a copy of the MSW Student Handbook. Grading criteria are clearly delineated on the posted syllabi. The student organization includes the web-assisted students on its communication list, so these students know about University activities and are invited to participate to the extent possible.

### **Challenges**

- The students participating in this program, for the most part, did not know one another when they enrolled. They were linked only by their commitment to child welfare, the rural settings in which they practiced, their desire for education, and their internet sites. The faculty used the web to help them connect with each other through developing student web pages and on line icebreaker exercises. To help to achieve more of a sense of cohesiveness, the faculty also used grant monies to bring the students to campus for a weekend of face-to-face activities during the fall of the first semester and periodically thereafter. The first visit included orientation to the program, meetings with faculty, and opportunities to get together with each other in order to put names with faces. Students also met with the University librarians to receive instruction in on line research and with the Department of Instructional Technology to learn more about successfully using Blackboard and TRACS software. Later visits to campus included similar skill building experiences and focus groups where the students were given the opportunity to share their experiences in the program.
- While permission had been granted for students to use their office computers to access the on-line teaching platform, the agency firewalls and other security measures blocked out many Internet sites, including educational sites, and students were initially unable to access the Texas State University site on their office computers. Resolving this problem took extensive negotiation, but eventually, the agency unblocked the students' individual computers to allow the link to the Texas State teaching platform.
- While the state agency had agreed to support this web-assisted MSW degree program and agency leaders were supportive of the effort, support broke down initially at the level of mid-management when employees began working on their degrees that their supervisors and district administrators did not have. The faculty advisor and other participating faculty recognized the need to do a great deal of education and public relations with local child welfare agency management to ensure that students received the educational leave

- to which they are entitled, and the access to agency computer supports that they were promised.
- Originally, the course design relied heavily on the use of chat-rooms. Instructors quickly learned, however, that unstructured chat-room discussions can present major challenges for faculty. For example, in a Human Behavior and Social Environment class, students were assigned to read *Brokeback Mountain* and to discuss it on line. The 20 students posted 125 comments, many of them vigorous and provocative. Recognizing the limitations on their time and the inability to respond individually to so many comments, faculty found it necessary to set limits on how many postings faculty members would read and assess. Students can, however, continue discussing a topic among themselves until it is no longer of interest to them.
  - Faculty learned the benefits of continually reminding students of the need to follow appropriate email etiquette. Since computer postings and chats have a feel of anonymity to them, students sometimes feel emboldened to say things in a more direct way than they would if they were face-to-face with one another. Both faculty and students had to learn to use the internet capabilities in ways that would not offend others.
  - As with many social work educators, some Texas State faculty members were resistant to on line instruction. Though this resistance is being whittled away by increasing familiarity with the technology, there are still many social work educators who are skeptical of whether the internet is appropriate for teaching some professional content. For example, Texas State faculty continue to wonder how best to teach interviewing skills on-line. Originally, faculty had on line students develop their own role plays in their home communities, film them, and send in the tapes for faculty review and analysis. With improving technology and increasing skill on the part of faculty and students, students are now able to do role plays and get feedback in real time on line.

### **Unique and Innovative Features**

- Faculty members involved in this project describe their School as “the first university in the nation, and probably the world, to offer its entire MSW degree on line.”
- Developing and delivering the MSW program to qualified Child Protective Service workers in rural areas of Texas is possible through the on-going use of web-based technology, including the Blackboard and TRACS course management programs, the Adobe Connect synchronous delivery system, telephone and email conferencing, electronic chat rooms and postings, electronic library resources, limited face-to-face meetings and virtual office hours via web cam and Adobe Connect. Most electronic delivery is asynchronous, with the exception of real-time “chat” discussions conducted through the TRACS system and the Synchronous delivery of Adobe Connect. Through this modality, the faculty advisor is able to hold virtual office hours for the on line students. With this emphasis on using technology to enhance education, students in remote locations and faculty who are on-campus can maintain a real-time, face-to-face relationship through web-casting.
- All web-assisted students are full-time employees of a public child welfare agency, so they are attending school part-time, which means it will take four years for them to complete the degree. The grant is paying their tuition. They will be placed in appropriate field agencies under qualified supervision. All students will take the Administrative Leadership concentration courses in the last two years, which will equip them to be agency leaders in their small communities upon graduation.
- The web-assisted students are subject to the same rules and standards that apply to all other MSW students. They only differ from other students in their location of study, the

requirement that they take a course in Rural Social Work instead of an elective, and the means by which the curriculum is delivered to them.

## **OUTCOMES**

- This project has taken the Texas State University School of Social Work MSW program to the rural child welfare worker in his/her own community, allowing him/her to maintain employment and to remain with his/her family, throughout the degree program, and providing a curriculum that accommodates the specific needs of rural realities. The project team focused on five major goals as it prepared to deliver the MSW program on line:
  1. Increase the number of child welfare workers in rural Texas who hold the MSW degree, with specific training in rural child welfare issues and practice skills.
  2. Increase pre-service and in-service training content on effective rural child welfare practice.
  3. Develop a model Master of Social Work curriculum that is directly relevant to effective child welfare practice in rural communities.
  4. Develop and maintain service planning partnerships between the University, the local child welfare agencies, and rural community participants.
  5. Contribute to the knowledge base of delivering education for effective rural child welfare practice.
- Without exception the faculty members who participated in this site visit reported that they consider themselves better teachers as a result of this experience. Instead of focusing on *what* to teach, they now think about the most effective ways of *imparting knowledge*. For example, through video streams they are able to have well-known guest lecturers they would never be able to bring on campus for lectures. These lectures can then be used for multiple classes over time. And, of course, campus students benefit just as on line students do. This is just one of the methods they have identified for teaching in ways that can contribute to traditional, face-to-face classes as well as to on line teaching.
- The School now has a Blackboard and TRACS site for School faculty. This is essentially a learning community where they post and share teaching material, ideas for web-based teaching activities, and comments on how course problems have been solved. Faculty can examine this material and use it in their courses.

## **The Curriculum**

- The curriculum for this web-assisted MSW degree program is exactly the same as the MSW curriculum for San Marcos campus students, with one exception. Instead of choosing an elective course, web-assisted students are required to take a course in Rural Social Work. This course is particularly applicable to these students, who are responsible for services in rural communities.
- The faculty makes extensive use of Blackboard and TRACS, web teaching platforms which enable them to deliver distance learning by bringing their course materials, class discussions, assignments and quizzes to the web. Students can then view course work and campus announcements in one location, access direct links to course web sites and groups, and view and create a personal calendar and “to do” lists correlated with individual course calendars. They can download lecture notes, see their grades, participate in online class discussions, chat rooms, etc.

## **The Field Practicum**

- The School began working to develop appropriate field placements for students from the inception of the project. Many students have been able to complete field practicum in

- areas of public child welfare other than their primary work areas. Other students have enjoyed the experience of working in settings other than child welfare. Faculty members have forged connections with agencies across the state to accomplish this task. Day-to-day supervision of field work is provided by local supervisors, and the School-based Faculty Field Liaison visits students at their field placements three times per semester.
- Field placement requirements for on line students are exactly the same as they are for traditional MSW students. Internships are 16 to 20 hours per week with on line group discussions of the field experiences.
  - Students are required to keep weekly logs of their internship experiences which 1) describe their activities for the week, 2) discuss their integration of what they have learned, and 3) process their reactions, thoughts, and feelings regarding their experiences that week. The Faculty Field Liaison reads and reacts to those logs on a regular basis.

### **The Student Enrollment Process**

- The School followed its normal application process and employed its usual selection criteria to choose a cohort of 20 rural child welfare staff who held baccalaureate degrees in fields other than social work. These individuals came from across the state, on the Mexican border as well as the borders of New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana, and from “wide places in the road” in the Midland area of Texas. Students live as far as 800 miles away from the Texas State campus in San Marcos, and many had never seen the campus before enrolling in this program.
- Rural CPS workers generally work long hours, over greater distances, and with fewer formal resources, than those working in more urban or urban-accessible locations. The additional demands of a graduate education experience have been described as “pile on” stress, without the traditional resources and supports that would be available to on-campus students, resulting in a greater than average attrition rate among this cohort when compared to on-campus students. Schools offering such programs as this one need to be attentive to the impact of the added demands on students who are isolated from campus and the resources and supports that the campus environment provides.
- Of the original 20 students, seven decided that their life situations were not conducive to the heavy workload involved in this project, and they withdrew. Two additional students, both advanced standing, were recruited from CPS, bringing the grant-funded cohort back up to 15 students. Additionally, with an eye toward sustainability, seven “self-pay” advanced standing students who also live and work in rural/remote and/or isolated areas were recruited, bringing the total on line MSW initial cohort to 22 students.

### **Advisory Boards**

- The School’s MSW Oversight Committee oversees the curriculum in this web-assisted program, just as it oversees the MSW curriculum for on-campus and hybrid (on-campus *and* web-based) students. That group has worked to ensure that the web-assisted courses are comparable with all other MSW courses. Other than the additional rural social work course, the web-assisted students take the same courses that apply to all other MSW students. Faculty have adjusted the course syllabi only as needed to accommodate web-based activities. The same textbooks apply across the sites. The full-time faculty teaches the web-assisted courses, including field seminars.

### **Dissemination Activities** *(adapted from the initial grant application and from information and materials presented during the site visit)*

- The new knowledge gained through this project about rural communities and their diverse populations, effective methods of getting those communities involved in meeting

- the needs of children and families, CPS agency challenges and effective means of dealing with those challenges, on line curriculum development, and effective use of electronic technology for professional education in child welfare, will be disseminated on the state and regional levels through the annual Child Welfare Roundtable at Texas State University and the National Association of Social Workers, Texas Chapter, annual conference, as well as continuing education programs through the University.
- Project results will also be disseminated nationally through presentations at conferences such as the Council on Social Work Education's Annual Program Meeting, Baccalaureate Program Directors Conference, regional Family Preservation conferences, and the Society for Social Work and Research.
  - The several articles that are expected from the project will be submitted to journals in the specialized areas of child welfare, rural social services, technology, and teaching in social work, as well as the major general journals of the profession of social work. The final report of the project, including lessons learned, guidelines for replication, and implications for further development, will be made available to regional child welfare resource centers. All curriculum materials will be available by request to all accredited social work programs.

### **Sustainability**

- This project has a good chance of being sustained beyond the life of the grant. Faculty members report that they have found it to be an “invigorating adventure” that has given them the opportunity to delve into new teaching strategies and to learn new technologies. And it has helped them reconnect with the real reason they chose educational jobs in the first place: the love of teaching. They are clearly committed to continuing their on line teaching into the future.
- Texas State University adds a fee for information systems to the tuition for all Texas State University students. That money goes toward developing distance courses for each of the schools within the University. As a result, while the resources for on line course development for this project will diminish significantly once the grant ends, the capacity will still exist through the University's Department of Instructional Technologies Support.
- The seven “self pay” students recruited for the project prove that there is a cadre of potential students in the rural workforce who are willing and able to pay their own tuition for the on line MSW program. In fact, the group of students currently in the program has “marketed” the program to the extent that many of their colleagues have inquired about start dates of future cohorts and the possibility of becoming self-pay students. In addition, technological advances since the inception of the project have allowed for greater ease of use and accessibility of the course offerings.

### **Evaluation** *(from information and materials provided during the site visit)*

The School has a formal process in place for evaluating its educational product and for using the evaluation results to improve its curriculum and teaching on an ongoing basis. The web-assisted MSW degree program is part of that effort. Web-assisted students engage in all the course evaluation procedures, the entrance and exit evaluations, and all other elements of program review that all other MSW students complete. The first cohort of students also participated in a focus group in which they identified the strengths and weaknesses of the program and shared their experiences on the impact the program has had on their lives.

In addition, the evaluators for the project have developed a research protocol to assess this program. The Co-Principle Investigator wrote a grant which funded additional assessment of

student responses to web-assisted education. Through that grant student perceptions of one course taught three different ways (completely online, hybrid, traditional) were examined. Two articles were published regarding the findings. A number of faculty will continue to evaluate various aspects of this effort. Data gathering has been ongoing since the beginning of the project and results will be widely distributed once the grant ends.

## **Attachments**

**Appendix A:** *Training for Effective Child Welfare Practice in Rural Communities* Program Grant Announcement

## **2003C.2: Training for Effective Child Welfare Practice in Rural Communities**

**ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS:** Public or non-profit institutions of higher education with accredited social work programs or other accredited bachelor- or graduate-level programs leading to a degree relevant to work in child welfare. Under this priority area, only those institutions that have knowledge and experience in training professionals for work in rural communities and have child welfare-related experience in serving rural America would be eligible to apply.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this priority area is to develop, field test, revise, implement, evaluate, and disseminate a field-tested, competency-based training curriculum and training plan to enhance frontline and/or supervisory staff capacity to provide effective child welfare services in rural communities.

**NOTE:** The Census Bureau definition of rural will be used to determine eligibility under this priority area. The web link for this definition is: <http://landview.census.gov/population/censusdata/urdef.txt>. In the Census Bureau definition, territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban constitute “rural.” The Census Bureau defines “urban” as comprising all territory, population, and housing units in urbanized areas and in places of 2,500 or more persons outside urbanized areas. An urbanized area comprises one or more places (“central place”) and the adjacent densely settled surrounding territory (“urban fringe”) that together have a minimum of 50,000 persons. The urban fringe generally consists of contiguous territory having a density of at least 1,000 persons per square mile. The web link contains additional information and the complete criteria are available from the Chief, Geography Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC 20233.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION:** Recognizing the unique characteristics and needs of rural communities and the relevance of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) mission to these communities; the Secretary of HHS, Tommy G. Thompson, issued a charge on July 25, 2001 to all HHS divisions to improve and enhance the provision of health and social services to rural Americans. Five goals were identified by a HHS Rural Task Force: (1) improving rural communities’ access to quality health and human services, (2) strengthening rural families, (3) strengthening rural communities and supporting economic development, (4) partnering with States, local and tribal governments to support rural communities, and (5) supporting rural policy/decision-making as well as ensuring a rural voice in the consultation process for the 65 million people living in rural America.

The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFS) Reviews that were authorized by the 1994 amendments to the Social Security Act have shed light on the need to identify and address the unique skills and knowledge necessary for effective child welfare practice in rural communities. Reviewers are finding that the responsibilities of child welfare workers in rural areas are often more generic than specialized, as opposed to their urban counterparts. These rural workers need a different set of skills to deal with children and families across multiple areas of intervention.

There are also issues regarding the availability and accessibility of services in rural areas, skills associated with engaging families in case planning when they may be located in remote areas and identifying and using more “natural” support systems to assist families and protect children. Thus, Child Welfare Training grants on rural child welfare services will not only support the goals of the HHS Rural Initiative, but will also assist rural communities in meeting needs being identified by Child and Family Service Reviews.

The Children’s Bureau proposes to fund efforts to develop, implement, field-test, and evaluate competency-based training curricula designed to assist rural States/communities in broadening

the service array, managing barriers to effective services, working effectively with rural populations, improving access to quality child welfare services, strengthening rural families, including strengthening the role of fathers, and partnering with State, local and tribal governments to improve child welfare services in rural communities.