

Evaluation of the MAPA Pilot – Families Encounter Opportunity

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Abstract

Background

The MAPA Program (Hebrew acronym for Families Encounter Opportunity) aims to incorporate the new paradigm of poverty-aware social work in local Social Service Departments (SSDs). The paradigm is based on the understanding that for people living in poverty, life is a constant struggle; for social work to be effective, practitioners must take their side and support their struggle.

The goals of the program are to impart theoretical and practical knowledge of poverty-aware social work at the SSDs in order to improve the lives of families living in poverty and coping with financial, employment and family hardships.

The program operated in 2014-17 as a pilot at 5 SSDs in Israel's south. The pilot included ongoing training and instruction for social workers and team leaders at the SSDs; the development of a social-work role for the exercise of client rights; and at some SSDs, also legal assistance. At each SSD, some 15 families were chosen for intensive work (3 to 5 families per social worker apart from their regular workload). In total, 135 families participated; the casework principles included the social workers' proximity and availability, and their real involvement in managing the clients' exercise of rights. In addition, a flexible budget was supplied to assist each family.

Study Goals

The Myers-JDC Brookdale Institute accompanied the program with an evaluation study from its inception. The study aimed to provide insights into the successes and challenges of the pilot's implementation as a basis for improvement, and to assess the extent to which the program achieved its goals.

Study Method

The study was based on questionnaires completed by the social workers on 66 of the families participating in the pilot, at the start of the intervention and again some 8 to 18 months later. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with the professionals involved in the program at the national, district, and local levels before, during, and after the pilot (in total, 33 professionals). Interviews were also held with 5 women who participated in the program.

Findings

- The program's implementation by the team leaders, who received instruction from the program staff, contributed substantially to the assimilation of its underlying concepts at the SSDs. In addition, the training offered to all staff members enhanced the program's assimilation and also impacted the practice of social workers with families not participating in the pilot.
- Changes were reported in the practices of social workers with program families: Following the program, the social workers met more frequently with the families, made home visits and personally accompanied them to various agencies to exercise their rights. Participating mothers reported a less judgmental and more helpful relationship.
- Social workers reported a loosening of boundaries with the clients, and success in developing ways to work with families previously perceived as uncooperative or as constituting a potential risk to their children.
- During data collection, a flexible budget provided assistance to 59% of the families. This included monetary assistance for a variety of purposes, including clothing, furniture and appliances, as well as services for children such as evaluations, extracurricular activities, and child-parent activities. Note that according to the information received from the program implementers, about 6 months prior to the termination of the budget, it stood at 80% take-up and at that point, it had benefited 122 families. They also reported that at the end of the program, some 98.5% of the budget had been used.
- Changes in the families: 8 to 18 months after the start of the program, social workers reported improvement in relations with the SSDs (42%), in employment (28%), in the families' financial situation (23%), in their motivation to change (22%), in housing (21%), in parenting skills and relationships with children (10%), and in parent relationships with the children's schools (10%).
- The principles of poverty-aware social work, as implemented in the Mapa Program, were received with enthusiasm and there is a good deal of interest in expanding the practices to additional families.

Conclusions

- There is room to continue disseminating the program and paradigm, particularly in light of the success in improving SSD relations with families that they had previously found it difficult to help.
- All dissemination should retain the key element of the quality of the program – the high standard of instruction and support that it offers.
- Ways to continue the practice of poverty-aware social work should be examined – including with families who do not need all the program components – as well as the assimilation of the concepts and practices by additional professionals.
- Discourse should be promoted on integrating poverty-aware social work with current initiatives in the welfare system, such as outcome measurement.
- Steps should be taken to change the policy of various government ministries in order to remove barriers blocking the families' exercise of their rights.