



MEMORANDUM

TO: Melissa Vongsy, Minnesota DHS
FROM: Francinia Henry, Doug Smith
SUBJECT: SDM[®] SNA Policy Review
DATE: April 2, 2024

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For over 15 years, Evident Change has partnered with adult protection agencies nationwide and overseas to implement the Structured Decision Making[®] (SDM) system, which includes a series of evaluation- and evidence-based assessment tools. These tools are used at key points in adult protection casework to support staff in making consistent, accurate, and equitable decisions throughout their work with adults.

The SDM system also allows an organization to better understand its data, manage limited resources, and direct its resources to those who are most in need. Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) currently uses three SDM assessments for adult protective services (APS): intake assessment, safety assessment, and strengths and needs assessment (SNA).

In October 2022, DHS reengaged in a long-standing partnership with Evident Change to update the intake assessment. That project is ongoing and includes collaborative activities to better align the assessment with goals for intake-related policy and practice derived from a recent evaluation and an Evident Change discovery activity. The effort to update the SNA arose from ongoing work on the intake assessment and is part of additional activities to improve Minnesota's SDM assessments, focusing on deepening practice skills related to serving adults who are vulnerable.

The updated SNA will integrate structural updates that Evident Change has made to the assessment in the past decade as well as DHS's desire to incorporate the adult's voice into the assessment and ultimately create a corresponding service plan to complement it.

The SNA update project begins with a baseline policy review and workflow mapping exercise, resulting in recommendations for DHS policy. This allows for the implementation of best practices in assessment design and practice to the benefit of the adults who are vulnerable in Minnesota.

SCOPE OF POLICY REVIEW

Clear, articulate, consistent, and well-written agency policies and procedures are essential to ensure fidelity of practice approach and expectations. At their best, policies operationalize legal statutes and communicate organizational values, desired practice outcomes, and shared practice and procedural guidance for working with adults who are vulnerable. Written policies can create a common understanding of required and desired practices, thereby building consistency, clarity, and transparency across the organization and with adults and other APS partners. Evident Change reviewed Minnesota's current SNA, practice, and associated policy to arrive at recommend assessment revisions, workflow changes, and improved practice strategies.

POLICY REVIEW PROCESS AND POLICIES REVIEWED

Evident Change reviewed Minnesota state statutes and DHS policy and procedures documents and conducted a workflow mapping exercise with DHS to understand how the SNA is currently used in practice.

The following policies were reviewed.

- MN Statute 626.5572 Definitions
- MN Statute 626.5571 Multidisciplinary Adult Protection Team
- MN Statute 626.557 Reporting of Maltreatment of Vulnerable Adults
- MN Statute 256.01 Commissioner of Human Services; Powers, Duties
- MN Statute Chapter 402A Essential Human Services; County Delivery
- MN Adult Protection SDM and Standardized Tools Manual
- MN Adult Protection Policy Manual

OVERALL THEMES OF POLICY REVIEW

Minnesota policy reflects a strong emphasis on adult-centered, culturally-appropriate approaches and practice. Minnesota APS's vision statement, mission statement, and core principles put adults and their respective cultures at the center of the agency's work. The vision statement says, "Minnesota's Adult Protective Services exists so that all adults who are vulnerable to abuse, neglect, or exploitation are supported to live in safety and dignity, consistent with their own culture, values, and goals, and so people concerned about them have resources for support." One of APS's core principles states, "Choice and values are balanced with safety." Both statements have a strong focus on the agency of the adult, along with the adult's ability to have culturally appropriate and sensitive services and intervention. These are core tenets that underpin Minnesota APS.

One of the goals of the Minnesota APS program states, "Adults who are vulnerable to maltreatment and referred to APS experience person-centered, culturally appropriate, and trauma-informed assessment, services, and supports to reduce risk and recover from maltreatment." The Ethical Principles of Adult Protection section in the Adult Protection Policy Manual also reiterates these themes. Minnesota APS has stated that these ideals must be included in the SNA update project.

Minnesota's SNA policy and practice, as interpreted from policy and understood from the workflow mapping exercise, do not directly align with Evident Change's intended use of the SDM system for APS. Within Minnesota's policy regarding the use of the SDM safety assessment and the SNA, agencies are instructed to use the SNA to help inform safety plans.

For example, the following excerpt from the Adult Protection Policy Manual reads:

The SDM® strengths and needs assessment/reassessment (SNA) identifies critical client and primary support person (PSP) service needs and helps guide safety planning and interventions offered and provided to the adult who is vulnerable and primary support person. The initial assessment is completed at the first face-to-face contact with the adult who is vulnerable. The SNA is completed at this time to inform service referrals during the remainder of the assessment and to establish a baseline for measuring the impact of those services. An optional closing assessment may be completed just prior to case closure (i.e., no more than one week prior to closing the case) for cases opened more than 30 days or when more than one face-to-face was completed with the client to determine which needs initially identified have been addressed.

Other mentions of the SNA appear in the portions referencing safety planning as well: “Safety planning for the adult who is vulnerable is based on the results of the safety assessment, including identification of specific current danger factors and available interventions. Safety planning is also guided by priorities identified in the SNA.”

Evident Change’s SDM system for APS specifies that the safety assessment is the sole assessment that informs a safety plan. Safety plans are temporary, short-term plans solely focused on mitigating the imminent danger an adult is currently experiencing. The SNA informs a different decision point—specifically, a comprehensive review of adult characteristics to identify priority needs and adult strengths to inform the creation of a comprehensive service plan.

This distinction between imminent danger (which is the focus of the safety assessment) and underlying needs (which is the focus of the SNA) allows consideration of danger separately from longer-term needs that an adult might have. An adult’s underlying needs certainly can be contributing factors to dangers, since the dangers an adult typically faces are the manifestation of an acute instance of an underlying need. Also, safety plans often can be rolled into service plans, where dangers can guide the kinds of underlying needs that the worker and adult identify as present. However, keeping these concepts separate ensures appropriate focus on danger while giving time and space, outside of acute danger situations, to consider how best to address longer-term underlying needs.

Minnesota currently lacks a dedicated service plan outside of a safety plan. Since the SNA is built with the intention of informing a service plan, this is another area that Evident Change wanted to highlight in this review. Lastly, the current structure of the SNA is one that Evident Change has updated over the intervening years since it was implemented in Minnesota.

Other areas of note from policy include the timeframes for SNA completion, the timeframe required for assessment, and the timeframe noted for APS. Currently, the SNA is completed at the first face-to-face contact with the adult, with optional reassessments for cases open longer than 30 days or when more than one face-to-face visit occurs. Next, the timeframe for assessment is 60 days, with extensions possible. Lastly, the timeframe for APS can go beyond 60 days. These timeframes are important because the purpose of the SNA is to inform a service plan. These different timeframes allow for Evident Change and Minnesota to consider the best time to complete the SNA to ensure its optimal use.

CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Evident Change recommends disentangling the SNA from the safety assessment and safety plan. By ensuring the safety assessment is the sole source of information for safety plans, Minnesota can be confident that safety plans are always focused only on mitigating imminent danger of serious harm, which is the intention of the safety assessment and safety plan.

By having the SNA focus solely on the underlying needs of the adult, attention can be given to needs outside of dangerous situations that require safety plans. This would allow service plans to be made with time, space, and intention outside the context of safety plans. Additionally, this opens up the consideration of needs and strengths to cases with an outcome of “safe” on the safety assessment, as adults with this outcome likely also have needs that they could choose to address with facilitation from APS.

Next, Evident Change recommends creating a specific service plan to complement the SNA. This recommendation is already in progress; it is a part of the current contract. This dedicated service plan will be created outside of a safety plan for all adults, specifically looking at underlying needs and inherent strengths. The service plan can include actions and goals that the adult and the worker agree would improve the adult’s life, maintain safety, promote autonomy, and support adults in the community. It also could incorporate the adult’s voice, preferences, and desires for what they would like from working with APS.

Similarly, Evident Change recommends specific structural updates to the SNA to align it with the current structure Evident Change uses for the assessment. This includes removing the specific item weights (numbers associated with item selections) and moving to a standard convention for identifying needs and potential strengths in each domain and creating an SNA that focuses on the adult with one domain related to a potential support person. Additionally, Minnesota APS has identified a desire to incorporate the adult’s voice into the SNA. Evident Change looks forward to working with Minnesota to accomplish this.

Finally, Evident Change recommends that Minnesota consider when the SNA is completed during the assessment phase and whether adjusting the policy on completion could provide more utility for workers using the assessment to inform a service plan rather than a potential safety plan. Even providing a small buffer of time between completion of the safety assessment and the SNA allows workers to consider safety first, then move to what underlying needs are present, what strengths can be leveraged, and what plan is most appropriate to achieve the goals for any given adult and for APS. Evident Change looks forward to discussing these possibilities and more with Minnesota APS.

CONCLUSION

This review and analysis focused on SNA policy and practice. Review and revision of key program policies and procedures are essential components of a strong implementation of the new SNA and practices, and they allow Minnesota to reflect on the best way to make decisions to achieve the best outcomes for adults who are vulnerable.

As part of this comprehensive SNA update, DHS can further strengthen the links between the SNA, the safety assessment, the safety plan, and practice with adults to support equitable, effective, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed decision making and planning.