

Effective Methods for Involving Consumers In Planning and Decision-making

Lessons Learned from the Family Preservation and Family Support (FP/FS) Services Implementation Study

A. Background

In 1994, James Bell Associates was awarded a contract by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, to study the implementation of the Family Preservation and Family Support (FP/FS) services program. The purpose of the study is to examine how states and communities chose to implement the 1993 legislation creating the FP/FS program and the subsequent expansion of the program under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA).^[1] The major study activities were in-depth case studies of 15 states and 20 localities within these states,^[2] and an annual review of the 50 state FP/FS Five-Year Plans and Annual Progress and Services Reports.

Areas examined in the Implementation Study include planning and decision-making processes, funding allocations, program models of service delivery, collaborative arrangements and consumer involvement. The study also focused on the relationship between the child welfare agency, especially front-line staff, and the newly funded FP/FS programs. To supplement the individual case studies and the synthesis reports, a series of issue papers addressing topics of special interest are being developed. In the course of this study, states and communities faced many challenges and found innovative approaches to implementing new programs. These papers are focused on lessons learned from their experiences that are applicable to a broad range of family services implementation efforts. The focus of this particular paper is especially effective models for involving consumers in planning and decision-making.

A unique feature of the FP/FS legislation was that it allowed each state to spend up to \$1 million of its first-year FP/FS allocation on planning efforts and needs assessment without the requirement that federal funds be matched by each state. Initially, FP/FS funds were provided to child welfare agencies with the requirement that both family preservation and community-based family support services be developed. Broadly defined, these services were to enhance family functioning, and help prevent child abuse/neglect and foster care placement. At the time, FP/FS funding was unique in that it was the only federal child welfare funding stream exclusively focused on prevention. In the legislation and subsequent regulations, program definitions were kept purposely broad to provide states maximum latitude to plan and implement programs.

Under ASFA, Congress reauthorized the FP/FS program as the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program. The reauthorization added two additional program categories to be funded—time-limited family reunification, and adoption promotion and support. These program categories are consistent with the intent of ASFA to limit the time children spend in out-of-home placement, and to expedite permanency. The FP/FS Implementation Study was extended in 1999 to permit an analysis of changes in implementation in response to these new program requirements.

B. Promoting and Sustaining Consumer Involvement

At the time that the FP/FS legislation was first passed, there was a growing recognition among advocates, policymakers and researchers, on the need to re-think service delivery with respect to those served. Increasingly, there was recognition that child welfare agencies alone could not successfully address the range of factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Towards this end, several foundations in collaboration with states had begun to support efforts to broaden the role of other stakeholders, particularly at the local level, in designing and implementing new strategies for supporting the development of safe and stable families.^[3] Federal guidance for FP/FS built and expanded upon these efforts. Program Instructions specified a process of establishing needs and planning that included “the active involvement of major actors across the entire service delivery system for children and families including...parents (especially parents who have participated in family support and/or family preservation programs) and other consumers, foster parents, adoptive parents, and families with a member with a disability.”

For state and local child welfare agencies, consumer involvement posed special challenges. Often, an adversarial relationship between child welfare agencies and families arises from investigating allegations of abuse and neglect and placing children in foster care. To implement federal guidance, states had to overcome existing suspicions held by families and community leaders. Without an established consumer base, agencies had to explore ways to reach out to consumers.

Agencies in all of the study sites struggled with the concept of consumer involvement. Although none successfully involved consumers in all aspects covered by this paper—information collection, planning and service delivery—most made progress, and several succeeded in significantly advancing consumer involvement in at least one of these aspects. Sites that effectively involved consumers conveyed the impression that they genuinely valued consumer input. They sought to engage consumers and sustain their involvement in a variety of creative activities. Further, these sites addressed their failures or shortcomings by re-thinking their expectations concerning consumer involvement, and adjusting their strategies accordingly. From this process, many lessons were learned that could prove useful to others undertaking similar efforts. These lessons are discussed under the questions noted below.

In general, many of the struggles and lessons occurred during the planning stages of FP/FS implementation. Stakeholders at several sites noted that consumer involvement in service delivery efforts, especially at family support centers, was easier to achieve. Therefore, most of the questions raised below focus on planning efforts, while the final question explores extending consumer involvement beyond the planning stages:

- *Who is a consumer?*
- *What were some of the ways agencies sought consumer input?*
- *How are consumers encouraged to join the process?*
- *How can sustained involvement be achieved?*
- *How can consumers be involved beyond the planning process?*

1. Who is a Consumer?

Whether activities to involve consumers were undertaken at the state or local level, FP/FS stakeholders struggled to involve those who had not previously participated in community affairs. State and local FP/FS coordinators often understood that they needed to make greater efforts to involve families who had used or might use family preservation or support services. In one sense, many state and local officials noted there were few problems in getting consumers to participate in planning bodies. Many noted that various advocacy groups (e.g., those representing parents of disabled children or victims of domestic violence) were aware of the new FP/FS and planning requirements and contacted the child welfare agency to volunteer to participate. Consequently, some planning bodies had their consumer slots filled without making any strategic efforts to secure participation from the most vulnerable families who were not mobilized.

Clearly, parent advocates for children with special needs, presidents of local Parent Teacher Organizations and other community and civic leaders are important stakeholders. To the extent that family support programs are intended to serve a broad segment of the population, broad-based consumer involvement was crucial. However, it is important to examine the types of consumers who were often not included in the process and continue to look for ways to make consumer involvement more inclusive. With changes in the FP/FS program introduced by ASFA, more resources were devoted to families who directly interact with the child welfare system—parents with children in foster care who hope to be reunified with their children, as well as others who can address the issues of permanency such as foster parents and adoptive parents, and finally foster children and youth themselves.

Some states and localities engaged in efforts to broaden participation. Strategies include the following:

- **Expanding the number of consumers included in planning bodies.** In West Virginia, the state specified that consumers were to comprise one-third of the planning group's membership. This allowed a diverse array of consumers to participate.
- **Forming and supporting a parent group.** In Connecticut, the state sponsored a parent advisory group in order to give parents a common basis for advocacy and empowerment.
- **Using Parents Anonymous or family preservation programs to reach possible participants.** In select localities, these and other organizations contacted families who had involvement with the child welfare system.
- **Adjusting consumer participation strategies.** It is often difficult to identify and attract consumers when a group's mission is still vague. For example, in Broward County, Florida the initial planning efforts focused on targeting specific neighborhoods. Once specific neighborhoods were identified, local leaders from those neighborhoods were identified, who, in turn, could identify other local participants for recruitment.

Identifying a diverse group of consumers is only the first step. Securing and maintaining consumer involvement appeared to be the greatest challenge facing state and local agencies.

2. What were some of the ways agencies sought consumer input?

Initially, states and localities primarily focused on seeking one-time consumer input during a needs assessment process that informed the development of a five-year strategic plan. An analysis of the plans submitted to the federal government revealed that states undertook the following planning activities in order to inform this process:

- **Formal community needs assessment.** A total of 34 states undertook formal needs assessments. Of these, 22 were undertaken expressly to inform FP/FS while the remainder were related to larger human services planning efforts.
- **State information systems.** Twenty-seven states relied on data from state information systems to identify geographic areas of poverty, potential target populations and other indicators of children at risk (e.g., infant mortality, low birth weight and premature infants).
- **Focus groups.** Twenty-six states held focus groups throughout their state as a way of insuring input from consumers and providers.
- **Public hearings.** States publicized the available funding and held hearings to allow consumers, providers and advocacy groups the opportunity to identify issues and needs. A total of 26 states held such hearings, 21 devoted exclusively to FP/FS.
- **Surveys and special studies.** Twenty-four states conducted surveys of workers, private agency providers, consumers and professionals in related fields to determine service needs and available resources.

Kentucky's approach to assessing needs provides an example of a process that relied on several of these strategies. First, a committee at the state level carried out a review and critical examination of existing data and reports in order to identify the primary issues, problems and available services. Second, this effort provided the framework for the

formation of a planning committee within each of the state's 15 districts. Third, each district was required to collect data on indicators of need within their communities in order to estimate the size of various target populations. Fourth, once target groups were specified, approximately 200 focus groups were held across the state and the University of Louisville conducted a statewide survey of families to identify their critical needs. Fifth, each planning committee was required to reach consensus on the service needs of families, and to develop a five-year plan addressing at least three of the identified needs in a coordinated and comprehensive fashion.

Although states generally reported that these activities were successful in bringing new viewpoints into the process, a number of problems were noted. First, many of these activities required that consumers come to a public location in order to participate. Such activities tended to attract those who were already active in community affairs and were comfortable speaking in public forums. Noting her frustration with the lack of effective outreach efforts to seek consumer input, a member of one state's interagency planning group addressed the problem by simply visiting local public welfare and unemployment offices. "People there are waiting in line," she noted. "They have time, and are willing to talk with someone who is interested in their needs."

Second, although efforts such as one-time consumer involvement provided some short-term input they did not support the development of a cadre of consumers who actively participated alongside professionals in problem-solving activities. Some states and local jurisdictions sought more sustained participation by involving consumers in a state level-planning group. These efforts met with various degrees of success and are discussed later in this paper. For the most part, states believed that local jurisdictions were better able to recruit consumers and sustain their involvement.

Among those states that delegated planning activities to local entities, some actively supported and encouraged local efforts to involve consumers. For example, the state of Florida required each of its local districts to engage a community facilitator to organize local planning efforts and develop a five-year plan. Additionally, Florida hired a community facilitator from a migrant association to develop a plan for migrant families that addressed their mobility across districts. The state provided the community facilitators with initial training and offered monthly follow-up training and joint meetings. Involvement of consumers and community leaders was an integral part of facilitator training. Specific training topics included community mapping (assessing community resources, skills and assets), community outreach and organizing techniques. Finally, the state hired a statewide community development consultant who was available for ongoing technical assistance and site visits.

West Virginia also made use of facilitators in the state's local Family Resource Networks, or planning bodies. Each coordinator was responsible for maintaining the involvement of consumers and community representatives. Technical assistance and ongoing training was provided to coordinators and their local networks.

3. *How are consumers encouraged to join the process?*

Involving consumers in one-time needs assessment efforts was a comparatively straightforward exercise for states and localities. Those involved with these efforts stressed the importance of overcoming concrete barriers to participation as a first step. These efforts include the following:

— **Holding meetings at convenient times for participants.** Typically, this meant scheduling meetings for evenings and weekends, although some localities held working lunches.

— **Holding meetings in accessible and "neutral" locations.** Community centers, public libraries, conference centers and schools were preferred facilities. Santa Clara County in California pointedly did not use any of their own facilities to hold meetings. With respect to the child welfare agency, the director noted, "we moved off of our turf," renting a centrally located hotel ballroom. Other localities alternated meeting sites among community agencies.

- **Providing transportation.** Travel stipends or vouchers were used by many sites to encourage participation. In some localities, service provider staff or community-based organizations provided rides for consumers. This approach provided “support and encouragement” in addition to participation.
- **Providing child care.** Agencies arranged to have on-site day care for those consumers who needed to bring their children.
- **Providing food.** Agencies did not provide lavish meals, but breakfast, snacks, or spaghetti dinners helped make people feel welcome, broke down barriers among people who didn’t know each other, and fostered a more informal environment.
- **Providing stipends.** Professional staff are paid for their time and effort in planning efforts. It can be important to demonstrate that consumer input is also valued. Some sites arranged small stipends or provided gift certificates as a way of engaging consumers.

Additionally, although parent participants were appreciative of the concrete assistance they received in these areas, many noted that they found it difficult to be forward enough to contact the organizing agency and request help. Acknowledging this problem, the director of the family resource center in Dothan, Alabama commented that providing concrete assistance was not enough. He arranged to have a person responsible for contacting consumer participants in advance of each meeting to make concrete assistance available to them should they need it.

4. *How can sustained involvement be achieved?*

To some extent, most of the efforts described above were also used by those seeking to engage consumers in ongoing planning efforts. However, unlike one-time public forums that involved soliciting the opinions of large numbers of consumers, established planning bodies were comprised mostly of professionals. Typically, efforts were made to include one or two consumers in what was otherwise a professional group.

In addition to meeting consumers’ concrete needs discussed above, one additional issue emerged for those involved in ongoing planning efforts. Generally, planning meetings were held during business hours and on a monthly basis. Although the frequency and timing of these meetings were often acknowledged as barriers, a number of agencies overcame these through the following strategies: (1) alternating meetings between traditional working hours and Saturdays, thereby alternating the inconvenience for professionals and consumers; (2) scheduling meetings or conference calls during working hours but just before or after lunch, allowing parents to take an early or late lunch at their place of employment and yet not miss work; (3) piggy-backing planning meetings onto another event that members planned to attend; and (4) keeping the frequency of meetings as low as possible. One administrator in Kentucky noted that the “need for a meeting” is never automatically assumed, and is always scrutinized. She admitted that “we cancel almost more than we hold.” Other groups reduced monthly meetings to bi-monthly or even quarterly meetings as planning and program implementation progressed and the number of issues to be addressed lessened.

However, beyond these factors, consumers in ongoing planning groups noted other more subtle factors as barriers to participation. In fact, when queried, stakeholders often expressed frustration at their inability to sustain consumer involvement. They noted that they had addressed the concrete barriers facing consumers but that these efforts alone were often not sufficient.

Some stakeholders provided insights about some of the more intangible factors affecting consumer participation. These factors can be loosely described as a lack of a welcoming environment. This includes such barriers as:

- **Terms and language.** The bureaucratic processes that frequently accompanied decision-making and service delivery, along with the use of acronyms and bureaucratic language were unfamiliar to consumers. As one consumer put it, “you have to know your alphabet really well.”

- **Negative attitudes.** Some professional group members held negative attitudes toward consumers of social service programs (e.g., making negative comments about persons with substance abuse problems or those receiving public assistance).
- **Isolation/tokenism.** Professionals involved with a group often knew each other, had shared in past collaborations, and therefore had previously established collegial relationships. In comparison, consumers often felt isolated or uncertain within groups. Additionally, they sometimes perceived that they were simply token group members and received non-verbal cues that they were not expected to play a significant role in decision-making.
- **Language or culture.** Potential participants may face a language barrier or more subtle cultural barriers, such as a person's customary "wait time," or the length of time a person waits after someone else has finished speaking before beginning to speak.

Addressing these barriers requires great effort and persistence and some creative problem solving. Some of the approaches taken in select states or communities were:

- **Creating balanced representation in the planning group.** As previously noted, one-third of West Virginia's planning group were consumers. Their number and equal standing on the committee translated into genuine decision-making authority. In Kentucky, an exhaustive information collection strategy was undertaken to identify target groups, as well as to estimate their size and needs. Across the state, approximately 300 volunteers were involved with the information collection effort. In fact, one of the participants interviewed on site went on to become a planner and facilitator of these efforts.
- **Training professional members.** Cultural sensitivity training and other efforts to sensitize professionals may be needed. In Connecticut, the coordinator of a steering committee composed of professionals and consumers held a meeting with the professionals beforehand. The coordinator was fairly explicit, remarking that the professionals would "have a role to play in the group, but noted they would not be in the driver's seat." Another group coordinator commented that when preparing professionals for working in a group with consumers, it is useful to encourage them to trade in their deficit-based view of child welfare consumers for an asset-based view.
- **Asking local service providers to reach out to possible participants.** Program staff who have an established relationship with a family may be the best equipped to approach a consumer and secure participation. In Connecticut, each provider who served on the state oversight group was required to bring a consumer to meetings. The approach served to assist consumers in several ways. Recruitment was built in and the providers met consumers' transportation needs. Also, the providers were able to help prepare their consumers for meetings, explaining the goals and processes. Finally, there was the advantage that consumers did not walk into the meeting by themselves without knowing anyone. One program planner noted that of all the strategies used to foster consumer involvement, having providers invite a consumer proved to be the most effective.
- **Creating and supporting a consumer organization that then elects representatives to a planning or oversight group.** The Dothan, Alabama family resource center has two seats on the board of directors set aside for consumers. This allows the parents' advisory group, from which consumers are drawn, the ability to send any two representatives to attend a board meeting. Connecticut formed a statewide parent resource group and also invested in parent leadership training throughout the state.
- **Concretely defining the role of consumer participants.** At the first meeting of her planning group, one administrator in Kentucky asked the consumer participants to talk to five people in their neighborhoods about a specific issue and report back their findings to the group at the next meeting. This provided consumers with a key, essential task early in the group's formation, and emphasized the active role that consumers were expected to play.
- **Assigning a mentor.** Consumers may benefit from encouragement and support provided by professional members of the group. Consumers in Kentucky noted that the support received from a service provider helped them to participate in the planning process. In Broward County, Florida, the community facilitator developed a relationship with consumers and maintained ongoing contact with them. For example, when one consumer was ill and missed a number of meetings, the facilitator called her and kept her informed about what happened in her absence.

— **Developing a set of agreed upon meeting “ground rules” and discussion processes.** Having clear guidelines and rules in place from the beginning of a committee’s existence may help keep the environment productive for all members. As expressed by one facilitator in Kentucky, “there is a need to learn to accommodate divergent viewpoints without destroying the process.” As a first task, the organizers of the Connecticut steering committee—composed of both providers and consumers—derived a set of rules to govern participation. Members proposed and agreed to such rules as “be on time, stay for the full meeting and do your homework,” and “every idea is valid.” After a set of ground rules was agreed to, they were printed on the members’ table tents on the side that faced each individual member to serve as a constant reminder of the group’s ideals regarding their interaction.

— **Developing a separate time and process to air grievances.** One facilitator mentioned coping with a few participants who had “come with a specific agenda,” and were unwilling to constructively participate in any discussion not directly related to it. As a compromise, the facilitator provided a special problem solving session and “opportunity to vent” following the conclusion of the meeting. Knowing that their issues and concerns would be addressed later seemed to enable these participants to interact with the full group more constructively. Finally, the agenda for the Dothan family resource board of directors routinely builds time into the agenda for consumer input. Specifically, the representatives attending from the parents’ advisory group are asked to give a report. In this way, their participation is not reliant on personal assertiveness or their comfort in “speaking up.”

— **Utilizing bilingual facilitators.** In an effort to reach out to a number of different ethnic minority groups that had not been traditionally represented in child welfare agency planning and decision-making, in Santa Clara County agency staff took great care to hire bilingual facilitators who were respected in the communities. Additionally, planning meetings were held in a neutral, yet convenient, site that did not show favoritism to one community over another.

Most states and localities experienced difficulty in sustaining consumer involvement in ongoing planning efforts. Given the difficulties experienced by agencies, it may be important to rethink expectations concerning consumers’ involvement. Those sites that experienced some success had certain characteristics that distinguished them from less successful sites.

First, the states and localities that successfully involved consumers had leadership that genuinely valued consumer input. These leaders frequently communicated this perspective to other professionals involved. For instance, the Santa Clara child welfare agency director was blunt in his assessment of the unique opportunity the initial FP/FS planning process offered. Noting his agency was highly professionalized and centralized, he felt it was critical to actively involve the communities served in order to effect lasting change in families and communities. He stated that the FP/FS planning process marked the first time the child welfare agency had successfully encouraged consumers and followed through on their involvement. In fact, it was the first time the child welfare agency had turned over the bulk of a planning process to community members and agencies. Although he had attempted similar efforts in the past, the federal funds and guidance presented a unique opportunity on which he was able to capitalize. Other stakeholders credited his vision, leadership, advocacy and especially persistence with the agency’s success in involving consumers in a genuine manner.

Second, the interest of successful states and localities in consumer involvement was matched by sustained and repeated efforts to encourage consumer participation. A consumer in Kentucky pointed out that it is a mistake to think that one invitation to become a participant is sufficient. Consumers of services may be burdened with multiple challenges. Additionally, in order to participate, consumers often must “cross the line” that traditionally delineates consumers from professionals. It may require repeated attempts before their attention is gained.

Finally, successful states and localities did not try to simply fit consumers into a planning or oversight body designed for professionals. Instead, they rethought the ways consumers could be involved, and the supports that were needed to sustain participation. They even challenged the definition of successful involvement. They recognized that success did not

necessarily mean regular attendance at all scheduled meetings. Instead, it might mean greater involvement in selected activities. For example, the Broward County facilitator identified leaders and long-time residents in one of the targeted neighborhoods. She then invited them to participate in the implementation process, not as part of an official planning board, but to review proposals to provide services in their neighborhood. Kentucky has further expanded upon the concept of involving consumers in the proposal review process. Approximately 200 people, including consumers, were involved in a statewide two-day meeting to review FP/FS proposals. To help evaluate proposals, participants received some basic training in evaluation design.

5. *How can consumers be involved beyond the planning process?*

Many stakeholders noted that it was easier to engage consumers in the oversight and management of local programs than it was to involve them in a sustained manner during the planning process. There may be several reasons for this. The planning process tends to involve more “bureaucratic” issues—funding strategies, roles and responsibilities of various public agencies, program eligibility requirements or other factors inherently less comprehensible to consumers. Also, planning groups are often responsible for large jurisdictions. Consumers may feel more knowledgeable about—and comfortable with—an activity that focuses on their own neighborhood or community.

Therefore, it is important for states and localities to continue to consider ways to involve consumers in all aspects of FP/FS implementation. Even if previous efforts to involve consumers during the planning stages were not successful, subsequent opportunities will continue to arise.

For example, in Dothan County, Alabama, the family resource center formed a separate parent advisory group that meets twice per month. Originally started as a parent support group, the group provides consumers with a forum to give their impressions of center services and ideas on how the center’s staff could improve existing activities. As mentioned earlier, up to two members of the parent advisory group can attend the center’s board of director meetings, thereby communicating their ideas and insights.

In St. Petersburg, Florida, a family center located in a housing project developed a board of directors made up almost entirely of residents. Started as a tenant’s association, a group of concerned residents came together to create activities for the project’s youth and support services for single parents. With the assistance of a community activist who later became the center’s director, the tenant group submitted a request for funds to the county board. From there, the center steadily grew. The current six-member board meets monthly to set goals, review the center’s budget and continue to improve services. The center’s director reported that it took nearly two years to identify a core group of residents who would attend meetings and follow through with assigned tasks.

However, board membership is not the only way to involve consumers. Consumers also can be active in service delivery. A resident in one community in Florida taught sewing classes at the family center. In Santa Clara County, one consumer was eventually hired by the family center as a part-time employee. Her duties were to network with the community and conduct outreach, run a parent support group as a follow-up to family preservation and other in-home services (her own idea) and provide other support to the center director as needed.

A staff director at a family center in Pasco County noted that community residents are often suspicious of a newly established center, especially if its staff are from outside the community. He noted the importance of becoming a visible fixture to community residents and not simply hiding behind a desk. He accomplished this through doing everyday things that were viewed as helpful (e.g., cleaning the grounds outside the center, helping children cross the street to a bus stop). As a result, he noted that eventually residents began to talk with him and volunteered to help remodel, redecorate and maintain the center. Similarly, an integral component of Caring Communities sites in Kansas City and St. Louis (school-based centers) are safe passages, corner patrols and bus greeters. Center staff make a point of getting out in the mornings

and afternoons to insure that children have safe passages to and from schools and that staff are available to greet students who arrive by bus and minimize the chances of conflict. The goals are to identify and avert problems before they escalate, establish a useful, productive and visible presence in the community, and help students arrive at school ready to learn.

Finally, while neighborhood centers were the service delivery settings that most frequently engaged consumers in service delivery, some jurisdictions encouraged consumer involvement by awarding mini-grants for small projects of benefit to the community. For example, in Broward County, Florida, the community mini-grant program was designed to encourage non-traditional providers to become involved in family support. The program, administered internally by the child welfare agency, provides grants of up to \$500 to reimburse providers for such expenses as parenting education supplies, transportation, child care, respite care, conferences, workshops and food or clothing banks. Successful applicants must have non-profit status. Santa Clara, California established a very similar program that is administered by a non-profit agency separate from the county child welfare agency.

C. Summary

Several lessons were learned both from the struggles faced by state and local stakeholders and their accomplishments. To summarize, other states and localities might consider the following in their efforts to facilitate consumer involvement.

1. **Identify professional leaders who want and value consumer involvement.** Their leadership can set a tone of commitment to involving consumers and help sustain efforts over time.
2. **Involve community leaders who can help inform and support efforts to engage members of their community.** Sites reached out both to those involved with formalized networks such as Parent/Teacher Organizations or Urban League neighborhood associations, as well as those known more informally within their community (e.g., long-time residents, community elders). They also sought to involve those at local gathering places such as community centers, restaurants and stores.
3. **Broaden the array of consumers who are involved.** Planning bodies should not simply include consumers who seek to participate or those who are recognizable as leaders, but should also reach out to those not traditionally included in planning and monitoring efforts. This should include those who have received child welfare services.
4. **Train both professionals and consumers in needed skills.** Sites provided professionals with training in identifying and eliminating cultural barriers and negative stereotypes, facilitation skills and orientation in asset-based approaches. Consumers received training in leadership and public speaking skills.
5. **Avoid tokenism.** Methods include forming a consumer group that elects its own representatives to a planning or governing body; and/or including several consumers in a group rather than just one or two.
6. **Provide concrete support for participating.** Support in the form of transportation, child care and/or stipends for consumers should be provided.
7. **Select meeting times and locations that are accessible and convenient to consumers.** In order to accommodate consumers, meetings can be held during evenings and weekends, or working lunches can be arranged. Sites preferred meeting in community centers, schools and public libraries because these locations were familiar to consumers, non-stigmatizing and generally accessible by public transportation.
8. **Provide a welcoming environment.** Consumers can sense when they are merely tokens and when their opinions are valued. Group facilitators should work to insure that the environment is welcoming in a number of ways. Sites invited more than just one-or-two consumers, matched them with mentors and insured that meeting agendas explicitly defined time for consumers to provide input.
9. **Define essential group roles for consumers.** In order to emphasize the active role consumers are to play in a group, tasks such as collecting information from their community, networking with other community

members or reviewing proposals from service providers should be assigned to them early in the group's formation.

10. **Establish ground rules for meetings.** Ground rules might ensure that all participants have the opportunity to speak and be listened to, or that all acronyms and bureaucratic language be explained. All participants should be involved in establishing and agreeing to these rules.

11. **Expand the concept of sustained involvement.** Sustained involvement should not be defined as a perfect attendance record. Allow people to cycle in and out of the group depending on their life circumstances and interests. Look for other roles or discrete activities that don't require frequent or ongoing attendance. Assign a group member to keep in touch with those that don't attend a meeting so that they can easily re-enter the group.

12. **Communicate frequently.** Contact meeting participants beforehand to remind them of the meeting time and location, and ask if they require assistance in order to attend. Provide informational packets to keep them informed about what is planned for discussion.

13. **Continue to look for new ways to include consumers.** Sites learned that even if consumer involvement in initial planning was not completely successful, subsequent activities that could benefit from consumer involvement—such as running support groups—arose at other stages of the planning or program implementation process.

In conclusion, this paper provides insights into the lessons learned by sites as they struggled with the difficult concept of involving consumers. As reflected in the study sites, it is probably not possible for an agency to undertake all of these. Given the scope and context of individual initiatives, some of these will be easier to carry out than others. However, those activities and processes that are achievable can serve as a basis for undertaking those that are more challenging and complex. The ideas presented in this paper should be used to stimulate and challenge stakeholders to develop their own strategies and approaches to involving consumers.

[1] Two companion outcomes studies also carried out under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services are studying the impact of family support and family preservation programs.

[2] The states participating in the Implementation Study are: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Oregon, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.

[3] For instance, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's initiative, Community Partnerships for Protecting Children, targets select communities across the country for building community involvement in child welfare service delivery, including the investigation of abuse/neglect, and family involvement in case plan development. Foundation initiatives undertaken by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and others focused on community building through service collaboration and the development of preventive programs.