

A CLOSER LOOK

Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care[✧]

Almost 80 percent of abused or neglected children will remain or return to live with their family of origin. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005.)

This issue of *A Closer Look* examines:

- Definitions of family involvement;
- Families in child welfare, yesterday and today;
- Grant communities respond to challenges in strengthening family involvement;
- Operationalizing family involvement in system change; and
- What leaders can do to support family-agency partnerships for system transformation.

Overview

Because such a large percentage of children involved with child welfare reside with their family of origin, engagement with families is essential for achieving successful outcomes. The importance of consumer engagement in system improvement has been well established in the literature (e.g., Chrislip, 2002; Jennings, 2002; Milner, 2003; Parents Anonymous, 2005; Whipple & Zalenski, 2006). As State child welfare administrators work within their agencies and with other public and private stakeholders to develop and implement Program Improvement Plans in response to Child and Family Services Reviews, family inclusion and participation promise to be vital for improving outcomes and fostering system change.

For system change to be effective and sustainable, it must be guided by a cohesive conceptual framework (Milner, 2003). The systems of care approach provides a foundation on which child welfare agency administrators can build a comprehensive change strategy. Family involvement, one of the six principles of child welfare driven systems of care, addresses a strategic partnership designed to further overall agency and system goals by:

Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care

In 2003, the Children's Bureau funded nine demonstration grants to test the efficacy of a systems of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system and to address policy, practice, and cross-system collaboration issues raised by the Child and Family Services Reviews. Specifically, this initiative is designed to promote infrastructure change and strengthen the capacity of human service agencies to support families involved in public child welfare through a set of six guiding principles:

1. Interagency collaboration;
2. Individualized strengths-based care;
3. Cultural and linguistic competence;
4. **Child, youth, and family involvement;**
5. Community-based services, and;
6. Accountability.

A Closer Look is a series of short reports that spotlight issues addressed by public child welfare agencies and their partners in implementing systems of care approaches to improve services and outcomes for children and families. These reports draw on the experiences of nine communities participating in the Children's Bureau's Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care demonstration initiative, and summarize their challenges, promising practices, and lessons learned. Each issue of *A Closer Look* provides information communities nationwide can use in planning, implementing, and evaluating effective child welfare driven systems of care, and is intended as a tool for administrators and policy-makers leading system change initiatives.

- Engaging families as partners in developing their own case plans;
- Recruiting and working with families in developing peer support services;
- Empowering families to participate in decision-making and apply their experience as service recipients to system change activities.

[✧] The National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center wishes to thank the following family leaders and agency practitioners for their contributions to the development of this resource: Cheryl Barrett, Parent Partner, Partnering4Permanency, Martinez, CA; Sharri Black, Family Involvement Coordinator, Family Centered Systems of Care, Topeka, KS; Judi Knittel, Parent Partner Coordinator, Partnering4Permanency, Martinez, CA; and Helen Spence, Systems of Care Outreach Coordinator, Dauphin County, Children and Youth, Harrisburg, PA



Components of a family-centered organization include a shift in attitudes for professional staff so the family unit is the focus of attention rather than the child or parent alone, a central objective is to strengthen the capacity of families to function independently, families are engaged in planning all aspects of the service delivery system, and families are linked to a continuum of community-based supports (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, as cited in Cohen & Canan, 2006).

Grant communities funded through the Children's Bureau have identified and addressed challenges to increasing family involvement across the child welfare system. The challenges have included readiness of child welfare staff to change, capacity of family members to partner successfully, and funding to support continuous family engagement. Some strategies for engaging families strengthened well-established child welfare practices, while others tested new approaches. The lessons learned by these communities have implications for how child welfare administrators and their agency partners can engage families as a resource for policy development and management efficiency as well as on the front line of service.

Systems of Care and Family Involvement **Defining Family Involvement**

In child welfare driven systems of care, launching and sustaining system change requires the meaningful participation of families as partners, as much as public and private child- and family-serving

agencies and other stakeholders, in the network of service providers that comprise systems of care.

Involving families as partners means that agencies and stakeholders:

- Acknowledge families as experts on their own needs;
- Ensure an active and meaningful role for family members in a variety of areas; and
- Provide diverse opportunities for family members to participate in shared decision-making.

However, communities face considerable challenges in making family-agency partnerships a reality. Unlike parents involved with many other child-serving systems, most parents involved with child welfare do not request services from or self-refer to child welfare agencies. Additional stressors accompanying the possibility of termination of parental rights strain the intended helping relationship between agency practitioners and child welfare-involved families even further (Whipple & Zalenski, 2006). Under such conditions, distrust and resistance can impede progress toward fostering family-agency partnerships.

Family Involvement in Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care: Insights from the Field

Based on the literature and the experiences of the demonstration grantees, the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center has identified three broad categories that represent the multiple realms of family involvement (case, peer, and system levels), as illustrated in Figure 1. Although family involvement can take shape differently in the case, peer, or system levels, the core values of collaboration and mutual respect guide work in each.

"Family group conferencing is our foundational practice. Seeing what people can do when you empower them—the solutions they can come up with—it is really amazing to see what people can do together."

— Agency Staff

Case-level family involvement integrates family-centered practices to promote the full engagement of parents and families throughout the development,

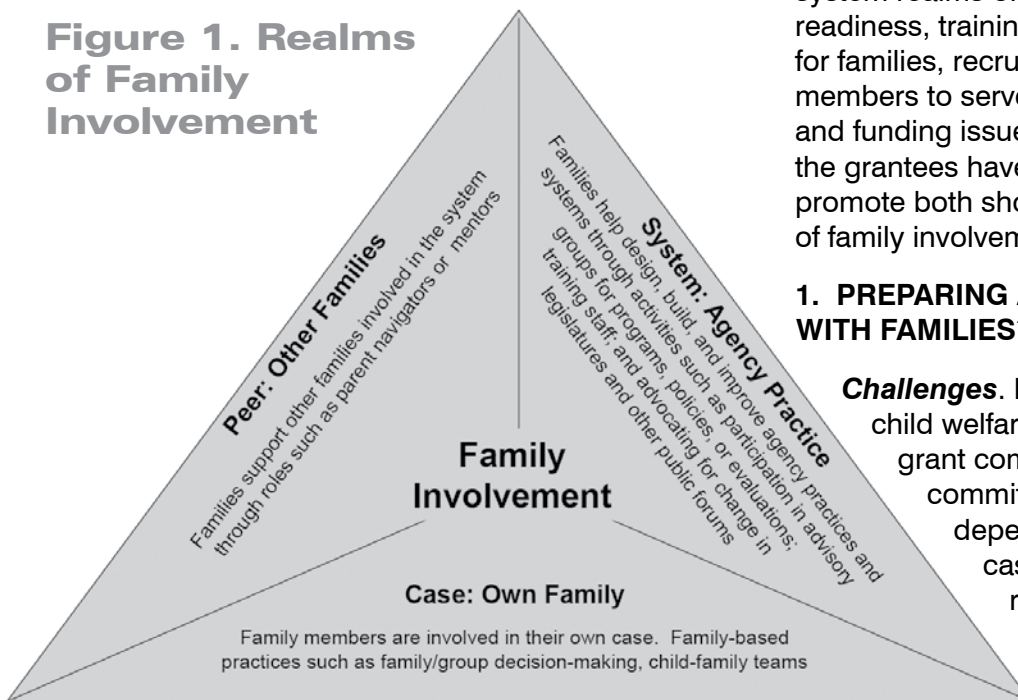
“Parents come with expertise the ‘experts’ don’t have—it can really enhance, support, and assist. That’s real partnership...”

— Family Partner

implementation, and assessment of their case plans. Families and agency practitioners work as partners to develop a shared understanding of the family’s problems and formulate solutions. Demonstration grantees use Family Group Decision Making, Team Decision Making, Child-Family Teams, and other family-centered practices to engage families in case planning activities. Preliminary feedback from the national evaluation indicates that some parents and child welfare agency staff believe these practices foster trust between families and child welfare workers.

Peer-level family involvement features implementation of a peer support model in which parents who have been involved in child welfare serve as mentors, partners, or resource guides to help other parents navigate the child welfare system and meet case

Figure 1. Realms of Family Involvement



plan goals. Through peer support, parents develop the skills necessary to have positive experiences with child welfare agencies (Cohen & Canan, 2006).

System-level family involvement often includes parent participation on statewide advisory councils or other system design or decision-making committees. Families often serve as trainers for agency staff on issues related to consumer involvement and client satisfaction, or co-train with agency staff on family engagement and inclusion. Families that have been involved with child welfare possess valuable firsthand knowledge about the agency, and often have great passion for and investment in making child welfare better for others.

Challenges and Strategies for Involving Families in Meaningful Ways

The nine grantee communities involved in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care initiative have identified four main challenges to building meaningful family-agency partnerships that transcend the case, peer, and system realms of family involvement—agency readiness, training and professional development for families, recruitment and retention of family members to serve as resources to other parents, and funding issues. To address these challenges, the grantees have implemented several strategies to promote both short-term and long-term sustainability of family involvement.

1. PREPARING AGENCIES TO PARTNER WITH FAMILIES¹

Challenges. Family members involved with child welfare agencies in systems of care grant communities reported that agency commitment to family involvement varied, depending on the caseworker. Some caseworkers provided positive reinforcement for the family and child, while others focused on their past failures. Therefore, the extent to which caseworkers

1. Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care grantees are indicated by State name. Demonstration site names are listed on page 7.

“Today, I not only work for but also am learning about a very complex child welfare system. I am now a part of the solution. I sit on various committees where my voice is of value, where there are administrators and directors that really want to know what it is that’s going to help change the face of child welfare.”

— Family Partner



implemented strengths-based practices could influence whether family members were involved in case planning and decision-making. Additionally, some family members perceived their ideas and opinions as valued by their caseworkers, while others believed they were respected only after they had proven to the agency they were capable of making good decisions for their family.

Family members were most satisfied with the agency when they perceived that their caseworker was committed to their case and the agency responded to their needs. Family members reported dissatisfaction with the agency when they received incorrect information about their case or available services, the agency had inconsistent performance standards for caseworkers, or standards for child-biological parent reunification were low.

Interviews conducted by the national evaluation team with families and agency partners revealed that large caseloads inhibited the use of family-centered practices and contributed to caseworkers being ill-prepared for family involvement. Some family members who were interviewed also felt new caseworkers did not receive adequate training to engage families *prior to* being assigned a caseload.

Even if family members were encouraged to become involved in case planning and decision-making, their involvement sometimes was limited by State

mandates or agency policies. For example, some agency staff reported that a balance between family-driven decision-making and the responsibility of the agency to ensure child safety (which is legally mandated) was difficult to maintain. When agencies were inconsistent in maintaining this balance, families were uncertain how much their input was valued.

In addition, frontline staff reported substantial challenges to establishing partnerships with family members who were unable or unwilling to collaborate with agency staff in developing case plans due to personal issues such as drug abuse, anger with the agency for removing the child, or other reasons. Staff also discussed difficulties working effectively with parents who resided in separate households.

Strategies. Demonstration initiative grantees are originating strategies to prepare parent partners and agency representatives for increased family involvement:

- Oregon is developing parent capacity to co-train, with agency personnel, agency staff, and other stakeholders, on engaging families in ways that promote safety, permanency, and child and family well-being.
- North Carolina conducted extensive training for child protection workers throughout the State on how to gain family input and engage families as partners during Child and Family Team meetings.
- New York contracted with a parent empowerment and advocacy organization that conducts training for prospective Child Protection Services workers pursuing social work degrees to prepare them to partner with families, before they are hired by child welfare agencies.
- In California, simply having family partners work daily as parent mentors within the child welfare office had unexpected positive effects. According to Cohen and

“...The same challenges to implementing a strengths-based approach apply to implementing a family-centered approach: time constraints of CPS (child protective services) workers and tension between family-centered practice and child safety.”

— Agency Supervisor

“It used to be that the caseworker would pretty much present the case, and now the caseworker does brief introductions...and leaves it up to the family to tell the board what the problems are so that they can access the appropriate services.”

— Agency Supervisor

Canan (2006, pp. 879–880), “agency staff have had to learn to modify their comments and behaviors in the workplace when Parent Partners are sitting in cubicles nearby. In addition, housing the Parent Partners in the workplace has led to an increased concern with and a sharing of the different perspectives of the difficult challenges involved in child welfare work.”

2. TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR FAMILIES

Challenges. Within child welfare driven systems of care, family partners can be peer mentors or navigators for families entering the system, co-trainers for child welfare worker orientations, or speakers at State or local legislative or committee meetings. However, as family involvement becomes an integral part of child welfare practice, a baseline knowledge of what parent partners need to fulfill a paraprofessional or system advocacy role is evolving as well (J. Knittel, personal communication, March 21, 2007).

In general, as families make the transition from system clients to partners and leaders in system change, they need to gain an understanding of the child welfare system from the agency’s perspective, become familiar with child welfare policy and legal mandates, refine public speaking skills, learn to facilitate meetings, conduct trainings, understand boundary setting for mentor relationships, and be advocates for change. Training and leadership development help family partners acquire the skills necessary for system change and establish a foundation for sustained involvement and success.

Strategies. Grantee sites have implemented several strategies to deliver training and professional development for family and parent partners:

- New York contracted with an independent parent empowerment and advocacy organization to deliver parent-led leadership training and a development program.
- California developed a comprehensive professional development program as a part of its Parent Partner program, which incorporates opportunities for cross-training with agency professionals.
- Oregon uses the shared leadership model developed by Parents Anonymous® to build leadership capacity among family partners in pilot counties.
- Colorado’s Systems of Care project created an extensive training program for parent partners that includes intensive self-assessment, child welfare orientation, and leadership development training. In addition, parent partners are encouraged to attend monthly training for child welfare caseworkers.

3. RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF FAMILY PARTNERS

Challenges. Demonstration sites reported difficulty identifying families to serve as parent mentors and offer support to other families, particularly when compensation for their time was limited. Specifically, some issues that affected recruitment and retention of family partners included:

- Families often did not want to continue interaction with the agency following case closure, particularly if they needed time to reconcile their own relationship and experience with the child welfare agency.
- Families relocated to other cities or counties and were not accessible to the child welfare agency when their cases closed.
- Some child welfare agency staff were not aware of family supports and family partner recruitment.
- Activities and events occurred at times that conflicted with family responsibilities, such as meetings during work hours.
- At times, child welfare workers did not know how to integrate the family partner into their work with families.

Strategies. Grantees in the demonstration initiative have developed a number of options for identifying, recruiting, and retaining family partners in their local systems of care:

- Kansas created a marketing strategy to inform child welfare workers about its parent partner program, with a special focus on requesting that workers identify families to participate on the Family Advisory Council.
- North Dakota varied the times and locations of activities, training, and events for family partners to make attendance more practical for families in remote areas.
- Pennsylvania created an extensive network of support among faith-based community partners and family partners in one pilot county to cultivate resources and provide ample opportunities for families to attend meetings and activities in their community.
- New York produced a training and development program for family, community, and agency partners to build trust and increase their capacity to work together.
- California works with child welfare workers to identify potential parent partners, gain support for the parent partner role, and assess parent readiness to return to the system in this new leadership position.
- Colorado's comprehensive parent partner recruitment and retention strategy includes attending agency unit meetings to discuss the program and potential parent partner referrals, providing parent partner program overviews and introductions at all agency staff meetings, and having parent partners market the program throughout the child welfare agency and the court systems.

4. FUNDING

Challenges. In many grant communities, the child welfare agency is unable to compensate family partners for the time they spend attending meetings, speaking at legislative hearings, or acting as peer mentors. Several sites have found ways to reimburse families for child care or transportation costs. However, adequate compensation for family partners (e.g., hiring them as full-time or part-time staff) remains a challenge for most sites. Many public child welfare agencies have policies that prohibit hiring individuals who have been convicted of a felony. Therefore, any parent with such a criminal record cannot be hired by the public child welfare agency. In addition, if a parent partner receives public assistance, those funds could be affected if the parent signs onto the State or county payroll. Under these circumstances, family partners often are expected to volunteer while agency partners are compensated.

Sites with longstanding family engagement and family-agency collaboration, however, have devised temporary ways to compensate families involved in the systems of care demonstration initiative.

Strategies. A number of sites are implementing strategies to tap sustainable funding streams that support family involvement:

- Colorado reimbursed parent partners with gift cards from a major national retailer at the rate of \$10 per hour.
- Kansas created a partial reimbursement policy within the State child welfare agency to cover some expenses incurred by families on the project.
- California hired full-time parent partners as independent contractors located at the county offices, and provided an hourly rate to offset expenses for part-time parent partners. The hourly rate was set at a level that avoided disruption of other public welfare benefits received by parent partners working less than full time on the project.

Implications for Administrators and Stakeholders

In response to Child and Family Services Reviews, State and local administrators and policy-makers have a tremendous opportunity to enhance family partner involvement across the case, peer, and system realms by prompting and supporting change in policy, in management, and on the front line of service. The nine communities participating in the Children's Bureau's demonstration initiative confirm the consensus of the field that processes, how children and families are served, and outcomes improve when families have an integral part in the decisions that affect them. (Dawson & Berry, 2002; Jennings, 2002; Steib, 2004).

"We can't get a parent [with a] felony hired through the county, so we put them on a contract. Problem is that keeps people in poverty. We need to look at that and the other practical issues systematically. How do we raise [parents] out of poverty to do exactly what needs to be done?"

— Agency Practitioner

“It was hard for us to work with the families at first. They didn’t understand any of the liability issues we had in the agency. It was very frustrating. But, we learned to give up some of our control and partner with the families and community. We learned we didn’t have to control everything.”

– Agency Practitioner

Partnerships between families and the agency can be the cornerstone of sustained change with sufficient backing from local and county child welfare administrators, State child welfare administrators and program managers, and Federal program and policy-makers in central and regional offices. Senior administrators can take the lead in fostering a collaborative culture within the agency that values the opinions and input of all stakeholders, including families, in child welfare driven systems of care and in removing barriers to family-agency partnership in day-to-day practice and overall system improvement activities. The Child and Family Services Reviews and Program Improvement Plan processes provide numerous opportunities to promote and model family-agency partnerships.

Involving families at multiple levels is challenging and requires agency policies that reinforce the value of family-agency partnerships, from case engagement to continuous quality improvement and accountability for outcomes. Carefully crafted policy can spark systemic changes, but those policies must be operationalized in the practices of middle management and on the front lines of service delivery.

The experiences of communities in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care demonstration initiative provide useful information to child welfare agency administrators, supervisors, families, and community stakeholders nationwide on engaging families as a resource as they develop Program Improvement Plans or launch local system change efforts. Agencies can engage families through:

- Local and statewide public child welfare policy development;
- Child welfare program evaluation and assessment;

- Continued professional development and training for staff, family, youth, and community through community-university partnerships; and
- Youth participation in interagency-community collaborative leadership initiatives.

These activities can help support the long-term system-wide reforms associated with sustaining a new culture of involvement, engagement, collaboration, and accountability in child welfare driven systems of care.

Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care Demonstration Sites

CA—Partnering4Permanency—Valerie Earley, Project Director vearley@ehsd.cccounty.us

CO—Jefferson County System of Care—Susan Franklin, Project Director SFrankli@jeffco.us

KS—Family Centered Systems of Care—Beth Evans, Project Director beth.evans@srs.ks.gov

NC—Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care—Candice Britt, Project Director candice.britt@ncmail.net

ND—Medicine Moon Initiative: Improving Tribal Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care—Deb Painte, Project Director debp@nativeinstitute.org

NV—Caring Communities Project—Tiffany Hesser, Project Director HesserTi@co.clark.nv.us

NY—The CRADLE in Bedford Stuyvesant: A Systems of Care Initiative—Nigel Nathaniel, Project Director Nigel.Nathaniel@dfa.state.ny.us

OR—Improving Permanency Outcomes Project—Patrick Melius, Project Director Patrick.J.Melius@state.or.us

PA—Locally Organized Systems of Care—Andrea Richardson, Project Director c-arichard@state.pa.us

“[The most positive experience with my agency] was when they set up a family conference to get all of my family and friends together to discuss how they could help with my situation.”

— Family Member



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