



Systems of Care Family Involvement Series

In 2003 the Federal Children’s Bureau funded nine demonstration grants, across 18 communities, to test the efficacy of a system of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. This 5-year initiative, entitled *Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care* (Systems of Care), focused on infrastructure development to strengthen the capacity of human service agencies to support families through a set of six guiding principles:

- ▶ Interagency collaboration
- ▶ Individualized, strengths-based care
- ▶ Cultural and linguistic competence
- ▶ Child, youth, and family involvement
- ▶ Community-based approaches
- ▶ Accountability

In the evaluation of the Systems of Care initiative, one of the guiding principles in particular—child, youth, and family involvement^a—was found to have a transformative effect on child welfare agencies. To better understand the strategies implemented and lessons learned, the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care (Center) conducted an indepth qualitative study entitled *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*.^b

Drawing on the study’s findings, the Center developed action briefs to support child welfare administrators and program managers as they build and strengthen their family involvement efforts. The first brief in the Systems of Care Family Involvement Series focused on capacity building at the child welfare agency level. This companion brief addresses capacity building among the other players in the partnership—the family members.

Building Family Capacity For Family Involvement in Child Welfare

The Need for Building Family Capacity for Family Involvement

Family involvement requires that child welfare agencies:

- Acknowledge families as experts on their own needs;
- Ensure active and meaningful roles for family members in a variety of areas; and
- Provide diverse opportunities for family members to participate in shared decisionmaking.¹

Family involvement requires not only that child welfare workers embrace new approaches and perspectives in working with families, but that family members adopt new perspectives and take on new roles. Under Systems of Care and other initiatives grounded in family-centered practice, child welfare workers are encouraged to make a change from traditional practices that tended to be authoritative and deficit-based, to a strengths-based approach and broader perspective that views families as partners in developing solutions. At the same time, family representatives are encouraged to adopt less adversarial viewpoints about their relationship with the child welfare agency, and to accept new responsibilities. Families no longer follow case plans designed by others for their benefit, but work in concert with caseworkers to develop and implement plans that draw on their strengths and resources. Family representatives are asked, often for the first time, for their input and insight for use in planning and policymaking. Some family members with experience in the system use their knowledge to serve as peer mentors and resource guides to families with active cases, while others tap into leadership and communication skills to act as advocates and spokespersons. For many family members, those new roles are demanding,

1 See National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2008). *A Closer Look: Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*. Available at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/familyinvolvement/index.cfm>.

a Referred to interchangeably throughout this document as “family involvement” or “family engagement.”
b Available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.



particularly given the many challenges they experience in their personal lives. Enabling them to succeed in family involvement activities requires development of trusting relationships with agency staff, as well as skill building, guidance, and ongoing support. The Systems of Care study on family involvement emphasized the importance of building family capacity for family involvement and highlighted several capacity-building steps and strategies.

Key Steps and Strategies for Engaging and Supporting Family Members

The experiences of the Systems of Care communities point to six key steps and strategies for engaging and supporting family members while implementing family involvement activities (see figure 1). While some recommendations touch on case-level involvement, the lessons learned from the Systems of Care study relate predominantly to engaging family members in peer mentoring and systems-level activities.



Family Involvement in Systems of Care

Child welfare agencies participating in the Systems of Care initiative integrated family involvement into policies and practices in multiple realms:

- At the **case level**, family teaming approaches and other family-centered practices promoted engagement of parents and family support networks in development and implementation of their case plans.
- At the **peer level**, family members who had previously been involved in the child welfare system served as mentors, partners, and resource guides to help family members currently receiving child welfare services navigate the system and meet their case plan goals.
- At the **systems level**, family representatives acted as advocates of service recipients and adopted active roles in decisionmaking bodies, provided input into the review and development of agency policies and plans, participated in training of child welfare staff, and served as spokespersons in community forums.²

² For detailed descriptions of the family involvement programs and activities implemented by Systems of Care communities, see the full report, *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative* (available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf), and the community profiles included in its appendices (available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Appendix.pdf).

Exhibit 1: Action Steps for Engaging and Supporting Family Members While Implementing Family Involvement Activities

- 1 Develop Clear Requirements for Families to Participate
- 2 Recruit Candidates and Assess Readiness
- 3 Communicate Clear Roles and Responsibilities
- 4 Provide Training and Development for Family Members
- 5 Offer Compensation and Reimbursement
- 6 Provide Routine Supervision, Feedback, and Support

Step 1: Develop Clear Requirements for Families to Participate

To ensure the success of family involvement programs, agency leaders must develop clear standards and guidelines for participation. For case planning activities, requirements typically reflect expectations for families and selected members of their support systems to participate in family teaming approaches. Requirements may specify when family team conferences or meetings will occur, for which cases, whether meetings are voluntary or mandatory, and expected participants.

For peer mentor or advocate positions, requirements should delineate agreed-upon qualifications for participation. Clear requirements are critical to prevent recidivism among family members serving in those roles. First and foremost, parents must be at stable points in their lives. Given the high rates of parental substance use disorders among families of children involved with child protective services, many grant communities included requirements that participating family members be free from substance use for a specified period. In general, child welfare staff, program staff, and family members agreed that parents should be sober and have their cases closed for 1-2 years before serving as peer mentors. Several communities conducted background checks to learn, for example,

whether participants had outstanding warrants or unresolved court issues.

Tip From the Field

Attitudes matter. Stakeholders noted that for peer support positions it is important to select family members who see their involvement in the child welfare system as a positive experience that helped improve their lives and the lives of their children. In addition, family representatives advocating at the systems level must recognize that their participation is not about their particular case, but about making the system better for future cases.

“Seventy or 80 percent of us are recovering addicts or alcoholics. I definitely say a year of sobriety [is needed] before starting as a Parent Partner...We’re addicts; we shouldn’t be trying to help other people get clean and through the court system, and bring up all those emotions when we’re just trying to get clean ourselves... Some people might relapse or get overwhelmed from that...Get your life together first and then you can help other people.”

– Parent Partner

Step 2: Recruit Candidates and Assess Readiness

Because not all former child welfare clients can serve as effective peer mentors or contributors at the systems level, agency leaders and program managers should invest time and resources to identify appropriate people to fill those positions. Most grant communities relied on referrals from case managers to identify potential family members to serve as peer mentors or members of decisionmaking bodies and committees. Some communities developed hiring processes where family members filled out readiness tools to assess their “fit” with position requirements. One community’s tool, for example, asked family representatives to complete a survey exploring their experience in the child welfare system, attitudes and comfort levels in supporting other families, and lessons learned that they could share.

Agency staff, and sometimes current Parent Partners, conducted interviews to assess candidates’ suitability for family involvement programs. In the interviews, staff discussed with candidates their perspectives on their families’ involvement with child welfare, assessed their ability to communicate and engage diverse individuals, and explored their fit with the agency’s program.

Step 3: Communicate Clear Roles and Responsibilities

It is important to make sure that the roles and responsibilities of family members are clearly delineated. For example, the role of a Parent Partner to provide families with advice, emotional support, and linkages in the community cannot be confused with the roles and legal mandates of case workers. In addition to a clear job description,³ Parent Partners will often need guidance for setting appropriate boundaries in their relationships with families. When invited to participate on a committee

³ To view sample job descriptions, see the *Systems of Care Infrastructure Toolkit: Training, Development, and Human Resources* (under the Planning Phase Tab), available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/soctoolkits/tdhr.cfm#phase=planning.



“Because families are not used to having much of a voice, not only at an individual level but at a larger policy level as well, and they are often leery of the system, it is important to build trust, engage, and work with folks before bringing them together.”

– Stakeholder

Tip From the Field

Encourage multiple family members to participate. Most family involvement programs tend to focus on birth parents. Comprehensive family involvement incorporates all family members, including fathers, siblings, foster parents, adoptive parents, and kin caregivers. Engaging numerous and varied family members to serve as peer mentors, Parent Partners, governance board members, committee members, and advocates ensures that diverse family experiences inform child welfare policy decisions. Further, it helps to guard against burnout among participating families.

or decisionmaking body, family representatives should clearly understand their roles and accompanying expectations. To facilitate success, it is helpful to provide family representatives with meeting agendas and related materials beforehand, and give them advance notice of any specific topics they will be asked to speak about. Similarly, in preparation for family group conferences or team decisionmaking activities, all family team members (e.g., birth parents, extended family, nonrelative supports, caregivers, and service providers) should be made aware of the overall meeting goals and desired outcomes, as well as their specific roles and expected tasks (e.g., identifying family strengths, suggesting solutions for identified needs).



Tip From the Field

Clearly spell out not only what family members should do, but what they should not do in their new roles. For example, see a list of Parent Partner responsibilities developed in Contra Costa, CA, see sidebar (right).

Step 4: Provide Training and Professional Development for Family Members

Family members must have access to comprehensive training opportunities that will enhance their capacity and enable them to succeed in their roles as peer mentors, advocates for system-involved families, and leaders in decisionmaking bodies. In particular, they must develop an understanding of the mandates and operation of the child welfare system, including roles and responsibilities of case managers, processes and procedures of the court system, and rights and responsibilities of families involved in the system. They should also have opportunities to develop the leadership and communication skills that will enable them to serve as equal partners with child- and family-serving staff on decisionmaking bodies, and to engage other parents effectively.

Contra Costa Parent Partner Responsibilities

What Parent Partners will do:

- Maintain confidentiality while working with the family on maintaining an open and honest relationship with their social worker.
- Model social skills in the areas of relationship building, behavior, dress, demeanor, and attitude.
- Coach families how to act appropriately (at court, in meetings, with social worker).
- Dress appropriately (especially at court, and help families obtain appropriate clothes, if necessary).
- Help parents learn how to handle conflict with an adult attitude.
- Assist with travel, training/role playing, time management.
- Help parents connect or reconnect with family, churches, appropriate friends, and other supports.
- Help parents integrate into their community.
- Work with parents in recovery.
- Help parents get a sponsor.
- Attend ice-breakers with the parent.
- Go to TDM/mediation.
- Attend Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

What Parent Partners do not do:

- Supervise visits.
- Transport.
- Take sides (parent partners remain neutral; they are advocates for case plans).
- Testify.
- Translate.
- Act as caseworkers, counselors, attorneys, or sponsors.
- Take referrals from attorneys, social workers, or well-meaning relatives; this is a voluntary program.

– *Contra Costa County, Child and Family Services, 2009*

Before family members were allowed to serve in peer- and systems-level family involvement efforts, the Systems of Care communities required them to attend training. Trainings varied in duration, with some as intensive as 60 hours. Agencies drew from existing trainings in the field (e.g., the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Building a Better Future program) and developed their own curricula. The training commonly covered the following types of issues: strengths-based service delivery, family team meetings, court processes, drug and alcohol use/abuse, confidentiality, mandated reporting, presentation and communication skills, self-care, setting boundaries, and crisis management.⁴



 **Tip From the Field**

Invite family members to attend child welfare agency training offered to case managers. The trainings can provide families with greater understanding of the child welfare system from the agency’s perspective. They also provide valuable opportunities for family members and case managers to discuss their experiences and better understand each other’s viewpoints.

Step 5: Offer Compensation and Reimbursement

Compensation and reimbursement provides family members with the financial resources that many need to serve as peer mentors or advocates. Systems of Care communities understood that as part of a child welfare service team, family members should be compensated for their services. Most grant communities provided compensation on an hourly basis, with rates ranging from \$10 to \$25. In addition to monetary compensation for their work, family members received travel mileage reimbursement. In one community, full-time Parent Partners were also

eligible for paid holidays, vacation, medical leave, and medical benefits. Agency staff and family members identified compensation as an essential element for successfully implementing family involvement programs at the peer and system levels. Nonetheless, many communities acknowledged that despite their best intentions, the compensation provided to family members, especially those working for the child welfare agency on a part-time basis, was not sufficient to financially support an individual or family.

 **Tip From the Field**

Be resourceful in considering compensation. In some grant communities, compensation was provided through gift cards so it did not hinder families’ eligibility for government benefits. Other communities encountered barriers in hiring family members as Parent Partners or other positions due to agency policies prohibiting hiring people with criminal records. To address that challenge, one community hired family members as independent contractors and later established a partnership with a nonprofit organization to serve as the fiscal agent for the program.

“Do everything you can to try to make that compensation piece available. Without it, people will continue to struggle [to be involved], because a lot of times it’s not that they don’t want to participate, it’s that they do not have the financial ability to participate.”

– Participating Family Member

⁴ For training resources and tips, see the *Systems of Care Infrastructure Toolkit: Training, Development, and Human Resources*, available at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/soctoolkits/tchr.cfm#phase=pre-planning>.

Step 6: Provide Routine Supervision, Feedback, and Support

Supervision is a critical factor that, when provided on a consistent basis, greatly enhances the sustainability of family involvement programs. Routine supervision helps family members serving as peer mentors and family advocates address the challenges associated with the work, as well as challenges they experience in their personal lives. In the Systems of Care communities, individual supervision typically occurred weekly or biweekly and group supervision took place monthly. Supervision was generally provided by the staff responsible for overseeing the family involvement programs.

In a few grant communities, family members received clinical supervision from trained therapists. Stakeholders in those communities noted that clinical supervision helped family members address issues of transference, and work on issues related to their own recovery in a safe environment with trained professionals. Stakeholders credited clinical supervision, at least in part, for the low rates at which family members reentered the child welfare system.

Staff assigned to coordinate family involvement and peer mentoring programs should develop structures and mechanisms that allow for a direct feedback loop among child welfare staff, people assigned to provide mentoring services, and system-involved families. That helps ensure that case managers, supervisors, peer mentors, and families have a vehicle for voicing concerns and providing constructive input that facilitates continuous refinement and improvement of family involvement and peer mentoring programs.

Tip From the Field

Encourage peer-to-peer support among family members.

Families serving as peer mentors sometimes developed informal support systems among themselves. In those cases, families could call on each other when they needed assistance, advice, or support.



Conclusions

Family involvement in the child welfare system requires that members take on new and challenging roles. Little has been written in the literature about how best to prepare family representatives for those new responsibilities. The Systems of Care study on family involvement begins to shed some insight and offers valuable guidance based on lessons learned from the field.

The steps and strategies for engaging and supporting family members for family involvement activities require strategic planning and deliberate implementation on the part of child welfare agencies. Strategies begin with development of clear requirements for participation, structured recruitment processes, and clear communication of roles and responsibilities. Attention also should be paid to compensation, reimbursement, and logistical issues that will promote family participation. Training and personal development are among the most significant contributors to capacity building and should be supplemented by ongoing supervision and feedback mechanisms that promote continuous learning processes. While there is no magic formula for family involvement, the steps and strategies discussed above, coupled with the recommended steps and strategies for agency capacity building,⁵ can help child welfare agencies set strong foundations for enabling meaningful and productive participation by families in child welfare activities.

⁵ See *Building Agency Capacity for Family Involvement in Child Welfare*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm

References

This publication draws primarily from:

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2010). *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau. Available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.

For More Information – Selected Online Resources on Family Involvement

Child Welfare Information Gateway

www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm

- *Family Engagement*
www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fam_engagement/index.cfm

National Center on Family Group Decision Making

www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/national-center/

- *Practice, Policy and Implementation: An International Annotated Bibliography of Family-Engagement Strategies in Child Welfare*
www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/practice-annotated-bibliography/

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement

muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/index.htm

- *CFSR Training Package. Module on Engaging Birth Parents, Family Caregivers, and Youth.*
http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/cfsr_trainingdetail.htm#stakeholders

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections

www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

- *Family Engagement: A Web-Based Practice Toolkit*
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/fewpt/index.htm

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care

www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.

- *A Closer Look: Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*, www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/familyinvolvement/
- *Action Brief: Building Agency Capacity for Family Involvement*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm
- *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*
www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.
- *Meaningful Family Involvement: Beyond the Case Plan*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.