

A CLOSER LOOK

Interagency Collaboration ✧

“You bring powerful people to the table and they will push the system to change.”

—Don Crary (Walsh, 1999, p. 5)

OVERVIEW

Serving children involved in the child welfare system calls for services and support from a variety of human service and community organizations, which is often a challenging aspect of child welfare casework. Interagency collaboration, a core principle in systems of care, focuses on bringing together and engaging critical stakeholders, such as juvenile justice, mental health, education, law enforcement, and Tribal authorities, in a coordinated and integrated effort to serve children whose needs cross multiple systems.

This issue of *A Closer Look* considers the challenges and strategies associated with building and sustaining interagency collaboration in a child welfare driven system of care. The report draws on current research in the field as well as the knowledge and experiences of nine grant communities currently in the fifth year of a 5-year demonstration grant.



Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care

In 2003, the Children’s Bureau funded nine demonstration grants to test the efficacy of a system 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 approach is designed to improve the capacity of human service agencies to strengthen and 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 the children and families they serve. These reports draw on the experiences of 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. The reports provide information communities nationwide can use in planning, implementing, and evaluating effective child welfare driven systems of care.



Defining Interagency Collaboration

Interagency collaboration in systems of care is “the process of agencies and families joining together for the purpose of interdependent problem solving that focuses on improving services to children and families” (Hodges, Nesman, & Hernandez, 1999, p.8). A more general definition is offered by Linden (2002, p. 7), who states, “collaboration occurs when people from different organizations, produce something through joint effort, resources, and decision making, and share ownership of the final product or service.” This collaboration can occur on multiple levels, from frontline collaboration among caseworkers, families, mental health providers, teachers, and others, to collaborative relationships between policy-makers and administrators responsible for addressing organizational mandates, financing, and management. In addition to State and local organizations, interagency collaboration can involve public, private, and/or faith-based sectors as partners. As all agencies invested in serving youth and families are partners, participants may include parents and family advocacy groups, among others. (Robinson, Rosenberg, Teel, & Steinback-Tracy, 2003). In current child welfare practice, the child and family plan, or case plan, defines the services and supports needed by the child and family. An examination of these plans (Knitzer, Cauthen, & Kisker, 1999) reveals gaps created by lack of funding, differing mandates, differing organizational cultures, and lack of effective communication. Collectively, these problems point to the need for systemic change.

Interagency Collaboration in a Child Welfare Driven System of Care

For decades, many working in child welfare policy and practice have recognized that the children and families served by the child welfare system have needs that are linked to their home, community, and school environments. In addition, children and families often have emotional, health, and legal needs (Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002). No single agency has ever had the legislative authority, mandate, staff, or financial resources to meet all the needs of children and families within these environments. Caseworkers have always sought to connect children and families with services of other government and community-based providers. However, the siloed structures of agencies, each with its unique State and Federal mandates, categorical funding, and discrete and sometimes overlapping array of services, have presented some challenges.

Child welfare administrations have been involved in systems of care development since the mid-1980s, primarily by supporting the work of mental health systems addressing the needs of children with serious mental health disorders. Beginning in 2000, however, the Federal government implemented the Child and Family Services Reviews, which are results-oriented,





comprehensive reviews designed to assist States with continuous quality improvement of outcomes for the children, youth, and families in care. The first round of reviews pointed out the significant need for systemic change and increased interagency collaboration to ensure permanency, safety, and well-being. While the reviews are guided by a set of core values, there is considerable overlap between the Child and Family Services Reviews values and systems of care principles (Pires, 2007), making systems of care a potentially useful approach in the development and implementation of Program Improvement Plans.

Essential Elements of Interagency Collaboration

To achieve strong interagency collaboration, communities should develop mechanisms that engage stakeholders and support their involvement in all aspects of the design, implementation, evaluation, and change of the service delivery system. While interagency collaboration suggests a focus only on public agencies, family members and community-based organizations also should be included. In addition, effective interagency collaboration should be based on a shared vision, hold common goals, and be of mutual benefit for collaborative stakeholders.

To build and maintain interagency collaboration, a number of structures and functions are useful, including:

- **Governance structures** that focus on visioning, strategic planning, policy and practice changes, monitoring, and financing. While each community shapes its system of care differently, a governance or organizational structure must emerge to address these issues and clarify the roles of authority, responsibility, and mutual accountability. Agreeing on core values, common goals, and strategic plans allows partners to develop a common language, appreciate the knowledge and experience of others, assume the best intentions, and respect diverse perspectives (De Carolis, Southern, & Blake, 2007).
- **Management structures** that promote interagency collaboration at administrative and frontline levels both within and between organizations. At these levels, strategic plans are implemented, training and cross-training are coordinated, and interagency protocols for information sharing and case coordination are established.
- **Monitoring and evaluation processes** that ensure partners receive regular and relevant information regarding the impact of their efforts. This allows collaboration participants at governance, management, and practice levels to assess their effectiveness and adjust their plans based on outcomes.
- **Communication** that creates an open and credible process and identifies and addresses challenges to implementing collaborative processes. When collaborations develop clear and regular



channels of communication at all levels, partners can exchange information, perceptions, and feedback, and work as a cohesive team (De Carolis et al., 2007).

Challenges and Strategies in Developing Effective Collaboration

While interagency collaboration can produce tremendous benefits for children, families, and communities (Hodges et al., 1999), efforts to establish partnerships can encounter obstacles (Robinson et al., 2003). The experiences of the nine grant communities involved in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care initiative provide useful information for administrators and stakeholders about the challenges and strategies associated with implementing the principle of interagency collaboration.

In working to build interagency collaboratives as critical elements of systems change, grantee communities identified and addressed three significant challenges: limited resources, significant time requirements, and staff turnover.

1. Limited Resources of Systems of Care Partners

Challenges

Grantees were unanimous in pointing to a lack of resources and **constraints on time** and funding as impediments to interagency activities. Nationwide, State and local agencies face limited human service



budgets, in some instances compounded by State budget deficits. In many cases, funding is siloed and restricted to particular services. Regardless of individual perspectives on the benefits of working together, limited resources increased the challenges at all levels for building interagency collaboration.

Strategies

While grantees faced challenges defining, prioritizing, and addressing the needs of children and families served, they **mitigated the effects of limited resources by sharing an overall vision, mission, and objectives. Through this unifying approach, grantees identify common populations, respond to needs of the populations, and adopt policies that can be carried out through interagency collaboration.** By targeting overlapping populations, grant communities are better able to identify duplicative or conflicting approaches to meeting service needs. Additionally, the collaborative process allows for braided funding to support practices geared toward serving common populations.

- In New York City, a small group conducted systematic outreach to encourage other partner agencies to participate in systems of care activities. One-to-one conversations with key agency personnel helped build trust, encouraged communication, and clarified the benefits of collaboration to the partners.
- In Colorado, the State legislature passed House Bill 1451, which strongly recommends that all human service agencies create memorandums