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**The Children's Bureau
Quality Improvement Centers,
2001-2007**

Final Report

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, the Children’s Bureau implemented a pilot initiative to examine the feasibility of a new “decentralized” model of demonstration project funding—the Quality Improvement Center (QIC). The primary objectives of this model were: (1) to promote development of evidence-based knowledge about effective child welfare practices in the areas of child protective services and adoption, and (2) to ensure dissemination of this information in a manner that informs and alters practice at the direct service level. This executive summary addresses the background of the QIC model, key findings from the evaluation, and recommendation for future efforts.

Evaluation of the Quality Improvement Centers was completed through a contract awarded in the Fall of 2001 by the Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to James Bell Associates (JBA), of Arlington, VA.

A. Background on the QIC initiative

1. Children’s Bureau discretionary grant process and impetus for the QIC initiative

The Children’s Bureau of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) is the agency within the federal government responsible for promoting the delivery of child welfare services that strengthen families and ensure children’s safety, permanency, and well being. Among its many activities and initiatives, the Children’s Bureau supports the development of evidence-based knowledge about effective child welfare practices and policies through demonstration grants funded under the Adoption Opportunities Program and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act.

The Children’s Bureau’s demonstration grants award process involves allocating grant funds directly from the federal government to state and county public child welfare systems, universities, or private non-profit child and family services agencies and organizations. The Children’s Bureau determines the priority areas to be funded, prepares a Request for Applications (RFA), assembles a team of experts in the field to review and score applications, selects the grantees to be funded, and monitors the operations of the grants throughout the funding period.

Although this demonstration grant funding process has been effective in addressing areas of concern within the child welfare field, in fiscal year (FY) 2000, the Children’s Bureau began to consider ways the process could be altered to require less staff time at the federal level and to achieve greater gains



in evidence-based knowledge about effective practices. The approach that emerged from this consideration involved decentralizing the demonstration grant process. This approach was based on the following assumptions:

- Child welfare practitioners, policy makers, and advocates at the local level are in a better position to understand the knowledge gaps in their communities relevant to effective child welfare practices.
- Local-level grantors will have greater opportunities than the federal government to provide oversight and technical assistance to grantees on an intensive and ongoing basis, particularly in the area of program evaluation.
- Grantors at local levels will have greater potential than the federal government to develop lasting networks for professional linkages, knowledge development, and the dissemination of findings in a manner that will promote the research-to-practice translation at the local level.

2. Implementation of the QIC model: Phase I and II

Under the new model, the Children's Bureau provided funding (through a cooperative agreement) to local organizations or agencies to establish a QIC. The first two years of the QIC initiative incorporated two general operational phases. Phase 1, the planning phase, began at the onset of FY 2001 and encompassed most of the first year of funding. At the beginning of this phase, the Children's Bureau entered into cooperative agreements with five QICs, one in the area of adoption and four in the area of child protective services. During this phase, each QIC was required to:

- Convene a regional advisory group;
- Conduct a needs assessment and literature review;
- Identify the research topic for the research and demonstration projects; and
- Prepare an implementation plan that included a rigorous design for evaluation.

As specified in the QIC cooperative agreements, continuation funding was not automatic and was subject to federal approval. Phase 1 ended in July 2002, when the Children's Bureau reviewed the final implementation plans developed by the QICs and decided whether these plans met the requirements to move forward into Phase 2 (the implementation phase). The Children's Bureau awarded continuation funding to four of the five original QICs, described below. (One QIC did not meet the requirement regarding a rigorous research design). Each of these QICs, in turn, awarded grant funds to three or four organizations or agencies to address their particular area of focus. In their capacity as grantors, the QICs were required to conduct the following activities during Phase II:



- Serve as a fiscal entity to administer and manage the federal grant, monitor subgrantee activities, and implement a reporting system;
- Provide on-going support, guidance, and technical assistance to the subgrantees to assist them with project implementation, data collection, and evaluation;
- Develop an information-sharing network by fostering communication and collaboration at the local and regional level;
- Conduct rigorous local and cross-site evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the theory-based models implemented by the subgrantees and produce detailed procedures to guide replication or testing in other settings; and
- Disseminate research findings.

THE FOUR REGIONAL QICS

The **QIC on Adoption (QICA)** was operated by the United Methodist Family Services of Virginia, and the identified region was the Commonwealth of Virginia. The focus of the QICA was to evaluate the impact on the adoption of foster children using a “success-model” of service delivery that features: (1) the use of public-private partnerships; (2) adoption staff specialization; and (3) use of evidence-based practices in assessments and pre- and post-placement services and support for adoptive families. QICA awarded grants to three projects.

The **Frontline Connections QIC (FCQIC)** was funded in the area of child protective services (CPS) and operated by the Northwest Institute for Children and Families at the University of Washington, School of Social Work. The identified “region” comprised three States—Washington, Oregon, and Alaska. The FCQIC’s focus was to evaluate promising culturally appropriate interventions designed to increase the capacity of the system to engage parents, kin, and communities of Native American or African American families involved with CPS due to child neglect. FCQIC awarded grants to three projects.

The **Rocky Mountain QIC (RMQIC)** was funded in the area of CPS and operated by American Humane in Colorado. The identified “region” incorporated four states—Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, and Wyoming—and Tribes located within or near these states. The focus of this QIC was to evaluate programs or practice methods implementing specialized services designed to strengthen families that struggle with both child maltreatment and substance abuse issues. RMQIC awarded grants to four projects.

The **Southern Regional QIC (SRQIC)** was operated by the Training Resource Center of the University of Kentucky, College of Social Work, and was funded in the area of CPS. The identified “region” included 10 States—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The SRQIC’s focus was to evaluate programs designed to enhance child welfare supervisors’ abilities to provide guidance to frontline staff on conducting clinical assessments of families and using assessment data to develop case plans and target service interventions. SRQIC awarded grants to four projects.



B. Evaluation of the QIC initiative

At the time of QIC funding, the Children’s Bureau contracted with JBA to evaluate the initiative. The evaluation was designed to: (1) document the QIC implementation process across sites; (2) determine the overall success of the QIC initiative in meeting the objectives of the Children’s Bureau; (3) identify facilitating factors, challenges encountered, and lessons learned to inform policy and practice relevant to future QIC efforts. ¹

C. Implementation of the QIC Model: Key Findings

The four QICs—QIC on Adoption, Frontline Connection, Rocky Mountain, and Southern Regional QIC on Child Protective Services—successfully met the majority of the requirements set forth by the Children’s Bureau: establishing a regional advisory group; conducting a needs assessment; providing technical assistance; fostering collaboration; and disseminating research findings.

With respect to the knowledge development aspects of the model, some of the QICs were less successful in conducting the literature review regarding the proposed topic and conducting rigorous local and cross-site evaluations of the projects funded, for a variety of conceptual and methodological reasons.

The QICs experienced varying degrees of success in fulfilling the grants management and evaluation function of the model. This involved awarding grants, monitoring subgrantee activity, and reporting. Although all of the QICs capably fulfilled the monitoring and reporting functions, there were procedural and communication issues that hindered the timely notification or disbursement of grants funds from the lead agency to the subgrantee. Key findings pertaining to the required elements of the QIC model follow.

¹ Information for the evaluation was collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with the QIC and subgrantee staff at critical project phases (i.e., planning, subgrantee implementation, project close-out, grant termination); annual site visits with each QIC that coincided with key project activities, such as quarterly or annual meetings or QIC-sponsored events (with members of the Advisory Group in attendance); a site visit to each of the 14 subgrantee to meet with project staff and stakeholders and observe program activities; participation in annual meetings that included representatives of the four QICs and Children’s Bureau staff; and attendance at QIC-sponsored dissemination activities or conferences where the QICs and subgrantees made presentations about project findings. In addition, JBA conducted ongoing reviews of documents produced by the QICs and subgrantees, including the original Request for Applications and Implementation Plans developed during the first phase of the initiative; Semiannual Reports submitted to the Children’s Bureau by the QICs from 2001 through 2007; Final Reports submitted in 2007; and products developed by each QIC and its subgrantees.



REQUIRED ELEMENTS OF THE QIC MODEL: KEY FINDINGS

Role of the Advisory Group over time

Phase I: All of the QICs established an Advisory Group during Phase I. They were influential in creating community investment for the QIC at the outset of the initiative and instrumental to conducting the needs assessment and identifying the research topic.

Phase II: Advisory Groups' role and degree of involvement varied significantly across the QICs, ranging from no involvement to sustained engagement with implementation, evaluation, or dissemination activities.

Identification of knowledge gaps in the region

Needs assessment: Each QIC conducted a comprehensive needs assessment, with the assistance of the Advisory Group. The needs assessment process successfully engaged a variety of stakeholders in all levels of the child welfare system and gained their support. It made regional stakeholders aware of the QIC and its role, and established interest in applying for the subgrants.

Literature review: Although all of the QICs conducted a literature review of existing research on the selected topic, most were too broad in scope and did not focus specifically on knowledge gaps identified in the needs assessments.

Grants management, monitoring, and reporting

Fiscal procedures: All of the QICs implemented a monthly invoicing and reimbursement process that required the creation of new procedures with the lead agency's financial management system. In some cases, monthly reimbursement was established to compensate for the limited cash flow of small community-based organizations or tribes.

Lead agency: The organizational structure of the lead agency impacted the efficiency of the subgranting process:

- Serving as a subgranting entity within an independent non-profit organizations enabled one QIC to coordinate grants management activities efficiently with its respective internal fiscal office. Another QIC experienced some internal communication and procedural difficulties.
- Serving as a subgranting entity within a university system required two of the QICs to coordinate their grants management duties with multiple layers of institutional bureaucracy in ways that added complexity and introduced a number of implementation challenges.

Access to internal supports: Institutional supports such as direct access to key decision makers and administrative or fiscal support facilitated the grants management process.

Level of effort: Grants management activities required greater effort than anticipated, especially regarding the amount of technical assistance (TA) provided to subgrantees.

Challenges: Key challenges encountered by the QICs in managing the grants included: working within layers of bureaucracy; less than timely submission of invoices from the subgrantees; and lack of clarity regarding use of carryover funds from one fiscal year to another.

Facilitators: QIC and subgrantee factors that enabled grants management were:

- Establishment of clear policies and procedures by the QIC;
- Clear lines of communication and effective coordination within the QIC's



organization and among subgrantee subcontracting partners;

- Timely submission of financial documents, budgets or invoices by the subgrantee;
- Accurate accounting of expenses in bills and invoices submitted by subgrantees;
- Troubleshooting with a fiscal specialist; and
- Ongoing oversight and TA by the QIC.

Monitoring: All of the QICs implemented similar monitoring practices, using annual site visits, group teleconferences (usually monthly), frequent calls or email communication to provide oversight of subgrantee activities. Monitoring by the QICs revealed areas where TA was needed. Subgrantees were required to submit reports to the QIC on a monthly, quarterly, or semiannual basis.

Technical assistance to the subgrantees

Approach: Technical assistance—with an emphasis on capacity building and learning—was provided by the QICs in a responsive and supportive manner that enabled the subgrantees to readily seek assistance when needed.

Frequency over life of grant: Clearly defined parameters regarding the mode and frequency of TA were not specified in advance by the Children’s Bureau. Neither the QICs nor the federal staff anticipated the extent to which they would deliver ongoing TA and the amount of time and energy it would take to respond.

Common concerns across QICs:

- The QICs were challenged to respond to persistent demands to meet a variety of subgrantee needs (i.e., administrative and fiscal matters; project staffing; evaluation; dissemination; sustainability; and partnerships/ collaboration).

- The subgrantees’ need for TA remained constant over the life of the project.
- The QICs adapted the mode and frequency of their support at each stage as different technical issues emerged during the start-up period, early implementation phase, ongoing evaluation, and dissemination stage.

Capacity: Subgrantees with strong organizational capacity did not require as much TA over the life of the project, whereas subgrantees with less-developed organizational capacity tended to need more assistance.

TA approaches: Two distinctive delivery approaches emerged, reflecting different orientations to developing knowledge and enhancing capacity:

- Emphasis on developing relationships and building or strengthening the subgrantees’ individual capacity to provide services, conduct an evaluation, and disseminate information with their primary stakeholders in a culturally responsive manner; and
- Emphasis on the ‘knowledge development’ aspects of the QIC initiative, with structured technical assistance to facilitate knowledge generation. This approach also entailed promoting progress for the group of subgrantees as a whole and emphasizing common implementation, evaluation, and dissemination tasks or activities.

TA delivery modes: Multiple methods were used to provide TA assistance, including individual telephone calls, email exchanges, meetings, and site visits for face-to-face consultation. Only one QIC developed and implemented a system that tracked the type and frequency of TA provided over the life of the project. Use of electronic resources such as a threaded list serv and discussion board to provide TA were underutilized, although email was used extensively.

Fostering communication and collaboration

Local collaboration: All of the subgrantees implemented a research and demonstration (R&D) project based on joint-collaboration and service linkages. Two QICS had made specific provisions in the RFA to this end. Institutional partners varied, given the focus topic and the service model tested:

- Local department of social services and private adoption provider (QICA);
- Tribe, native village, or community-based organization and child welfare agency (FCQIC);
- Lead agency (child welfare, court, tribal organization, or community-based organization), a referral-making agency, and service providers (RMQIC); and
- State child welfare agency, university school of social work, and community partner (SRQIC).

Facilitators: Factors that facilitated implementation and evaluation of the collaborative R&D projects were:

- Having a history of collaboration in the community;
- Having a prior relationship with the public child welfare agency;
- Leadership ability of the QIC; and
- Availability of TA to support collaboration building.

Barriers: Factors that hindered local collaboration:

- Under-developed relationships hindered project implementation during the start-up period, particularly to obtain timely referrals from the public child welfare agency. This required direct intervention by the QIC to strengthen inter-agency coordination.

- Changes in leadership or administration at the public child welfare agency resulted in a weakening of stakeholder support over time. This resulted in the need to re-solicit ‘buy-in’ for the R&D projects over time.

Need for TA: A number of subgrantees faced challenges in communicating and/or collaborating with their respective project partners and required varying degrees of technical assistance from the QIC to address their concerns, although subgrantees with pre-existing relationships faced less challenges and did not require as much TA from the QIC.

Comparability across subgrantees: Implementation of common multi-site approaches or interventions with regard to the QIC’s focus topic fostered greater communication and collaboration among subgrantees. Conversely, greater diversity in the service models and target populations with respect to the QIC’s focus topic appears to have limited the degree of cohesion that was achieved across other subgrantees.

Role of evaluators: Lead and local evaluators facilitated communication and capacity-building. They played a key intermediary role between the QIC and the subgrantees or between partners.

Evaluation of the research and demonstration projects

Rigor: Two QICs fully met the Children’s Bureau’s requirements to conduct rigorous evaluation and implemented a methodologically sound approach. However, for two of the QICs, their efforts met with mixed results due to the heterogeneity of the subgrantees’ projects, limited internal capacity for evaluation (among some subgrantees), and methodological challenges of varying degrees.

Use of logic models: All of the QICs developed a cross-site logic model to articulate a theory of change and the intended outcomes of their respective interventions. However, for two of the QICs, the lack of comparability across the subgrantee interventions made it problematic to utilize the logic model to inform the cross-site evaluation.

Process evaluation: All of the QICs conducted cross-site process evaluations using mixed-method approaches and examined the extent to which each subgrantee implemented its service model in the identified timeframe. Identification of barriers enabled the QIC to intervene and provide formative TA for program implementation, collaboration with partners, or evaluation.

Outcome evaluation:

- Comparable R&D projects enabled the development of common measures and a collective approach for the cross-site outcome evaluation for two QICs.
- Diversity of subgrantee projects (i.e., activities, target populations, settings) precluded the opportunity for two other QICs to conceptualize and implement an evaluation that incorporated common measures across sites, although the subgrantees shared similar goals.

TA: The QICs provided TA during the RFA period and post-award to support evaluation activities.

Methodological challenges: All of the QICs encountered challenges in conducting the evaluation. Among the common concerns were the following:

- Sample sizes were significantly smaller than anticipated due to low referral rates, non-participation, and attrition;
- Concerns with the quality, accessibility, or timely receipt of administrative data from the public child welfare agency;
- Lack of documentation regarding project activities (e.g., research assessments conducted, services provided, numbers served) among some tribal subgrantees prevented the collection of needed data; and
- Cross-cultural or contextual barriers hindered implementation and evaluation activities.

Materials developed: The subgrantees produced detailed procedures or materials to

support further testing of their models or to guide replication in other settings. Two tribal subgrantees did not produce written materials; rather they shared information orally about the projects' activities and results, in keeping with cultural preferences and traditions.

Disseminate research findings

TA: All of the QICs provided TA to subgrantees to develop and implement dissemination strategies and products. Subgrantee staff—ranging from practitioners to university professors—varied significantly with respect to their previous exposure to and expertise with dissemination methods and venues.

Productivity: The four QICs and 14 subgrantees were highly productive and resourceful in developing a variety of products to meet the information needs of practitioners, academics, or policy makers. Dissemination products reflected diverse approaches to sharing knowledge in different cultural, professional, and policy-oriented contexts.

Regional dissemination event: All of the QICs organized and convened at least one major dissemination event in their region that was tailored to key stakeholders in the adoption or child protection practice communities.

Subgrantee collaboration: QICs' ability to foster collaboration across the subgrantees facilitated the accomplishment of certain dissemination activities (e.g., joint presentations at conferences, journal publications).

Challenge: QICs had limited time and resources available to either complete scheduled dissemination activities or to fulfill a broader array of dissemination activities. All QICs requested and received a no-cost extension from the Children's Bureau—ranging from 6 months to one year—to allow for completion of various activities, including preparation of the final report and products or to take part in scheduled presentations.



D. Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to strengthen the Children's Bureau's ongoing development of the regional QIC model:

1. The QIC as an alternative to discretionary grants award and monitoring process

Although none of the QICs had served as a grantmaking entity prior to the initiative, the majority of them served capably in awarding and administering grant funds, and monitoring the subgrantees' performance for the duration of the project. Challenges experienced by the QICs that could be addressed in future efforts concern the clarity of guidance issued by the Children's Bureau to the QIC, and between the QIC to the subgrantee. To this end, the following recommendations are suggested:

Guidance: The QICs would benefit from more detailed guidance and ongoing technical assistance from the Children's Bureau regarding grants management procedures for developing annual budgets, use of carry-over funds, and re-application.

Request for application and grant award:

- The QICs should implement a two-stage submission process, such that interested applicants submit a "letter of intent" which will be reviewed by the QIC and are then invited to submit a grant application.
- Prospective grantees should specify the processes used for billing and invoicing, both internally and with prospective partners.
- As part of the application review process, and as feasible given the scope of the region, the QICs should conduct pre-award site visits to assess capacity.

QIC monitoring procedures: In cooperation with the Children's Bureau, the QICs should establish a structured protocol or strategy to monitor subgrantee performance, along with the identification of strengths and needs that would enable the development of a technical assistance plan.

2. Use of the QIC model to provide technical assistance to discretionary grantees

The QICs ability to provide technical assistance to the subgrantees emerged as a clear strength in their implementation of the QIC model as all of the QICs were highly responsive, accessible, and effective in providing support to meet a variety of grants management, programmatic, evaluation and dissemination needs and to build or enhance subgrantee capacity. However, this was the most demanding aspect of the QICs role as a grantor, and staff expended considerably more time and resources than they had anticipated in meeting various needs. Given that the frequency and type of technical assistance



delivered was quite open-ended, it would reduce the burden on the QICs if certain parameters were established. The following recommendations are suggested:

Documentation and tracking of technical assistance requested and delivered: The QICs should establish systematic procedures in order to document the frequency and type of technical assistance provided to the subgrantees.

Development of a technical assistance plan: The QICs should negotiate a technical assistance plan with the subgrantee at the outset of the project that identifies strengths and concerns in order to alleviate the need for *ad hoc* technical assistance and to promote greater subgrantee accountability.

Use of performance benchmarks: The QICs should establish benchmarks regarding subgrantee performance on key implementation activities so that progress can be assessed and the feasibility of meeting grant expectations can be reassessed on an annual basis.

Resource allocation

- ***Limits on technical assistance:*** Parameters should be established regarding the amount of technical assistance that the QIC personnel can reasonably allocate to a subgrantee (e.g., budgeting a number of days each fiscal year) to reduce the burden placed on the QIC.
- ***Staffing:*** The QICs should use a portion of the grant funds to staff a project coordinator position that would be responsible for day-to-day grant operations and would provide technical assistance on administrative and fiscal issues, as well as monitor requests for and outcomes of technical assistance.

3. Use of the QIC model as a resource to foster local and regional collaboration

Implementation of the QIC model fulfilled its potential to promote and foster collaboration at a number of levels. First, this was realized through each QIC’s negotiation of the cooperative agreement with the Federal Project Officer, along with their mutual communication over the life of the project. Second, active participation of the Advisory Groups in key tasks—needs assessment, evaluation, or dissemination activities—facilitated collaboration between a network of child welfare administrators, practitioners, and researchers. Third, at the community level, the QICs promoted collaborations as each subgrantee implemented a research and demonstration project based on service linkages. However, the degree of “connectedness” varied, given that some subgrantees had prior relationships to build upon, whereas others did not. Finally, each QIC made a concerted effort to create an inclusive environment among its subgrantees and encouraged communication and collaboration, although the degree to which this was achieved varied. The following recommendations are suggested:



Assessing collaboration: The QICs should be encouraged to more fully explore the history of coordination or collaboration among proposed subgrantee partners before making a grant award. Untested collaborations tended to require the direct intervention of the QIC to resolve issues related to inter-agency coordination and the division of labor between staff. It would be helpful to obtain a baseline measure of local collaboration with regard to the environment in which a project is implemented, the characteristics of its partners, the process and structure of inter-agency relationships, communication patterns and flows, a sense of shared purpose, and available resources.²

Application of implementation framework: Examination of collaboration barriers experienced by the QICs underscores the value of applying the six-stage framework used to guide the implementation of evidence-based programs to research and demonstration projects.³ In this framework, implementation is viewed as a process that occurs in discrete stages over time: (1) exploration and adoption; (2) program installation; (3) initial implementation; (4) full operation; (5) innovation; and (6) sustainability. This framework could be applied to Phase II of the QIC model for the development of performance milestones and technical assistance plans for subgrantees.

4. Use of the QIC model as a resource to promote rigorous evaluation of research and demonstration projects

Utilization of the QIC model as a vehicle to promote greater rigor in program evaluation and to advance the development of evidence based knowledge was not entirely successful. This is the outcome of two different paradigms that emerged across the QICS with respect to knowledge development (versus service delivery), capacity-building, and the technical rigor of the evaluations conducted. It also stems from the inherent challenges posed in conducting longitudinal evaluation in the complex, changing environment of public child welfare.⁴ This observation warrants consideration of more grounded expectations of evaluation rigor, with respect to design, data collection and analysis techniques, and likely synthesis of findings. The following recommendations are suggested:

Review of evaluation plans prior to Phase II funding: The Children's Bureau should use the initial review of the QIC research designs to require any needed changes in the evaluation plan prior to award of continuation funding.

Expectations: the Children's Bureau should be more precise about whether knowledge development is the key outcome of the grant and stress the importance of the cross-site evaluation and synthesis of findings to the overall effort.

² Mattessich, P. N., Murray-Close, M., & Monsey, B. R. (2004). *Collaboration: What makes it work* (2nd ed.). Minnesota: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

³ Fixsen, D.L., Naoom, S.F., Blasé, K., Friedman, R.M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*. Tampa, FL: National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).

⁴ Brooks, D. & Wind, L.H. (2002). Challenges implementing and evaluating child welfare demonstration projects. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24, nos. 6/7, 379-383.



External evaluators: There should be an external evaluator on board at the time of grant award and one who is not responsible for directing the QIC or a subgrantee project. As part of a project management team, the external evaluator plays a substantial role in setting the tone, style, and pace of organizational learning.

Comparability: The Children's Bureau and the QICs should be more prescriptive about the level of comparability that is needed across the research and demonstration projects as this impacts the selection of cross-site measures, assessment procedures, the potential to pool data, and synthesize findings. The Children's Bureau should provide technical assistance if the QIC establishes a broader topical and conceptual framework.

Methodological issues:

- Require the use of logic models to guide program specification and measurable outcomes at the subgrantee and QIC level.
- Require the use of comparison groups for one-group and time-series designs to strengthen internal validity. Provide technical guidance on valid methods of constructing such groups (i.e., matching on selected characteristics, using administrative data for a similar population).
- Accept that sample sizes will be small and provide guidance on a reasonable size that will allow for sufficient statistical power.
- Encourage use of easily-administered measures that are matched to the outcomes of interest.

5. Use of the QIC model to promote the dissemination of grantee research findings

Use of the QIC model fulfilled its potential for the dissemination of research findings. The QICs and subgrantees were highly productive and very resourceful in developing a variety of products that reflect diverse approaches to sharing knowledge. They participated in dissemination activities at the local, regional, and national level, reaching a wide audience of community members, practitioners, academics, and policy makers. The following recommendations are suggested:

Peer-review of findings: Given the emphasis placed on rigorous evaluation of innovative models and generating knowledge, a peer-review process should be established to review findings prior to dissemination. This would balance early planning for dissemination with a reassessment of findings and the identification of appropriate audiences before launching final dissemination activities.

- **Federal role in dissemination:** The Children's Bureau could build upon its efforts to coordinate dissemination activities on behalf of the QICs with the Child Welfare Information Gateway.⁵ Further involvement might include sharing technical guidance to support use of electronic media or brokering access to other national resources.

⁵ The Federal Project Officer shared information with the Gateway about the QICs and invited representatives to the annual QIC meetings. The Gateway featured six articles on the QICs in the Children's Bureau Express during the course of the initiative.



E. Conclusions

The QIC initiative represented an innovative approach for the Children’s Bureau. The QICs functioned as a resource for community-based collaborations to foster innovation in the areas of adoption and child protective services. By providing the QICs with the authority to determine topics and funding areas (in conjunction with a regional advisory group), make funding decisions, and award and monitor grants, the Children’s Bureau sought to ensure that the local community would play a key role throughout the grant process. The authority provided to the QICs also underscored the expectation of the federal staff that the QICs would manage their subgrantees with a fair degree of independence from the Children’s Bureau, while respecting the mutual engagement of the cooperative agreements.

Evaluation findings indicate that the Children’s Bureaus’ Quality Improvement Center model is a promising vehicle for devolving discretionary grants management functions to a regional intermediary organization that assists a cohort of subgrantees to implement and evaluate research and demonstration projects that address a common field-initiated topic. Future iterations of the regional QIC model should focus on improving technical guidance regarding grants management procedures; the strength of inter-agency collaboration across subgrantees projects; and the comparability and rigor of the cross-site evaluation, in an effort to develop knowledge that will be valuable to the field of child welfare.