

Building and Sustaining Collaborative Community Relationships



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

“Families come from the community and it is the community’s job to support families.”—*Child welfare state manager interviewed for the former National Resource Center for In-Home Services Nationwide Assessment on Collaboration.*

Who Are Community-Based Providers?

Community-based providers, for purposes of this publication, are independent child welfare stakeholders in a community operating within a well-defined service area and capacity that do not fall under the child welfare service system.

Some community service providers to partner with might include:

- ▶ Contracted providers for other State interagency programs: mental health, public health, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and workforce development
- ▶ Specialized programs focused on substance abuse, at-risk youth interventions, sports and activities, therapeutic services, life skills services, and other service areas
- ▶ Volunteer resources and/or advocacy centers
- ▶ Local churches or charitable organizations that provide counseling or other family-based therapeutic resources, life skills, parenting skills, or domestic violence resources

Defining Collaborative Child Welfare Community Relationships

Building collaborative relationships with community providers goes beyond making referrals for children and families and requesting progress updates from service providers. It requires effectively engaging in partnerships that develop a shared understanding and common goals toward serving families' needs. Some key elements to successful collaboration include:



The Value Of Effective Collaboration

Effective collaboration between child welfare agencies and community providers can lead to organizational and systems benefits as well as better family outcomes, including:

- ▶ More knowledge of and access to available services for children and families
- ▶ More timely responses to needs based on environmental changes in the community which can impact families
- ▶ A more integrated approach to services that meet individualized needs
- ▶ Less duplication of services and more efficiency in the use of resources, which can lead to a reduction in financial and staff burden on individual agencies and providers
- ▶ Increased ability to share information and track families across agencies and providers
- ▶ An increase in families' success and progress toward child welfare goals
- ▶ A decrease in safety and risk factors in home
- ▶ A decrease in the number of children entering into foster care and expedited reunification of children and families
- ▶ Better coordination between service providers dealing with co-occurring issues

Communities provide support networks for families, shape child welfare strategies, and are vital to a thriving in-home service array and delivery for children and families in the child welfare system.

The Federal Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program enables child welfare agencies to develop and operate coordinated programs of community-based family support services, family preservation services, time-limited family reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services. Child welfare agencies are responsible for developing relationships within the community to support families served by the child welfare system.

Systems Of Care Approach: A Framework For Community Partnerships

Stemming from concerns that adequate in-home services were not available to children and that child welfare service providers were not working together, the systems of care approach evolved over the past 20 years as a framework of flexible strategies, supported by Federal initiatives, designed to address gaps in child welfare service array and delivery systems (Stroul, 1996). Current systems of care initiatives aim to improve outcomes by building capacity through several principles, including interagency collaboration and community-based approaches.

A cross-site evaluation of communities that implemented interagency collaboration and community-based approaches, under the systems of care framework, found that community providers believed their collaborative efforts effectively promoted positive changes and outcomes, agencies experienced increases in community support, and services to children in care nearly tripled (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010b.).

*The following guidance and tips should be adapted to fit individualized agency needs, gaps, goals, and other relevant factors (such as grant parameters). This guidance includes key steps and strategies informed by the systems of care approach.

Foundational Steps for Collaboration

- ▶ **Identify potential partners.** Community partners should include individuals and organizations that can make meaningful and ongoing contributions and bring a diverse set of voices.
- ▶ **Develop a shared vision.** Be familiar with your provider partners' organizational mission statements and understand what they can realistically bring to the collaboration. Understanding this up front will help you develop a shared vision and minimize conflict later. A provider's mission should include commitment to child welfare needs in order to effectively collaborate with child welfare agencies. The more congruence between the provider's and agency's mission statements, the better chance there is for a sustainable collaboration.
- ▶ **Develop shared goals.** Be aware that specific objectives might differ between agencies and providers. Parties to a partnership most likely have a specific objective or contractual mandates that will guide their input on the collaboration's goals. Trust is built when the collaborative group can factor specific objectives into a common goal. Some strategies to guide the development of your shared goals include:
 - Create a formal needs assessment to identify common goals, potential barriers, and appropriate strategies.
 - Design co-training opportunities to build trust and foster understanding of each other's work.
 - Help staff understand the provider partners' specific service goals so that they can ensure their clients' specific needs will be addressed. Staff should be able to identify how the provider's services best support their clients; the frequency, intensity, and duration of the service; and how the provider measures progress.
- ▶ **Establish a collaborative infrastructure.** Establish an ongoing infrastructure based on the goals and responsibilities of the collaboration contract. Some aspects of infrastructure may include:
 - Governance structure that establishes strategic activities, tasks, and functions of the collaboration
 - A strategic plan with a shared mission statement, shared goals, defined responsibilities, and a detailed action plan. An action plan should:
 - ✓ Describe specific steps required to achieve the mission and goals of the partnership
 - ✓ Identify gaps and agreed-upon strategies to address them
 - ✓ Include roles and responsibilities of all members and all staffing levels
 - ✓ Include a budget and resources
 - ✓ Be clear and precise—vague statements and omitted details can lead to confusion or conflict when executing the plan
 - Working groups and committees to foster ongoing assessment
 - Communication channels that promote information sharing and feedback opportunities
 - Financial arrangements and responsibilities, including an effective billing process
 - Ancillary services, such as transportation and interpreter service, to ensure effective delivery of services

- ▶ **Nurture and grow the relationship.** To sustain a healthy collaboration, it is important to build and nurture the relationship at every level. Some ways to continue to strengthen this relation is to facilitate retreats to mark progress or to provide cross-training opportunities. Collaboration leadership can also institutionalize the partnership by establishing policy mechanisms, such as a memorandum of understanding or an action plan, around collaboration expectations, conflict resolution, responsibilities, goals, and achievements. Leadership should continue to outline expectations and emphasize the importance of treating all partners with respect.
- ▶ **Communicate.** Communication is vital to effective relationships and requires shared expectations about the frequency and methods of contact as well as ample opportunity to engage through open communication channels. When establishing communication channels and expectations, consider the following:
 - Hold internal staff meetings to deal with program level issues and cross-staff meetings to address client based concerns.
 - Use common language and clarify professional jargon.
 - Encourage and expect transparency about challenges and capacity.
 - Encourage verbal communication to accompany written documentation when possible in order to facilitate clear and open exchanges of information

Guidance for Assessing and Evaluating New and Existing Collaborations

The time and energy spent planning and evaluating new and existing collaborations will directly impact the effectiveness and longevity of your collaborative partnerships. It is also important to look to existing partners to help build new relationships. As you assess strengths and challenges in your existing collaborations and in the potential for new ones, consider the following:

- ▶ What are some of the unresolved challenges you have with your existing or potential provider partners?
- ▶ What gaps exist in your service array that could benefit from new collaborations?
- ▶ What strengths do you bring to the table, and what do your provider partners bring?
- ▶ Are there external factors, such as political environment, other existing collaborations, or certain community dynamics, that can help or hinder your collaboration?
- ▶ Have you set aside time for implementation planning? Some factors to consider when thinking about implementation include:
 - The referral processes and caseloads of your agency and your provider partners
 - Transportation and location options, including whether your partnership will be colocated
 - Funding mechanisms
 - Timelines and expectations of your agency and your provider partners
- ▶ What knowledge, skills, and abilities do staff have related to relationship building? Do staff have capacity, training, time, and resources available for effective collaboration? Some competencies child welfare professionals might exhibit in effective collaboration may include:
 - Communicates service strategies effectively to provider partners
 - Writes effective joint service goals in family team meetings
 - Demonstrates respect for differing provider perspectives and acknowledges legitimacy of partnership concerns by collaborating providers
 - Observes interagency protocols for decision-making and conflict resolution
 - Rebuilds collaboration after necessary confrontation and/or other action
 - Maintains focus on process and avoids power struggles and triangulation
 - Keeps commitments
 - Maintains contact with provider network
 - Is known in the community for consistent, respectful treatment of clients and collaterals

- ▶ What tools do you have to help orient staff toward more collaborative work with providers?
 - Develop an action plan for staff that includes steps toward building and maintaining strong partnerships.
 - Provide opportunities for staff to present at or participate in interagency and community events or training.
 - Provide collaboration training for staff that addresses relationship-building elements, such as communication, networking, negotiating, and conflict resolution.
 - Provide staff with a list of potential partners and contact information in your community.
 - Encourage staff to engage proactively, frequently, and effectively with provider partners through an incentives system.

Common Challenges With Collaboration	Possible Strategies
<p>An ongoing funding stream and allocation of resources in the partnership</p>	<p>Explore and analyze funding sources on an ongoing basis throughout the partnership. Consider utilizing braided or blended funding mechanisms to minimize conflict between partners.</p> <p>Braided funding: Partners share common funds but maintain separate requirements. Funding requirements for each partner are clearly defined and do not change.</p> <p>Blended funding: Partners pool individual funding and maintain flexible options for its use.</p>
<p>Competing interests in funding and client resources: Child welfare agencies and providers with separate funding streams may experience tension when one partner becomes the contractor. These tensions can strain the partners' ability to maintain contract compliance, level of funding requirements, and service limits.</p>	<p>Understand your provider partners' priorities and capacity and set clear, shared expectations from the beginning.</p> <p>Maintain frequent and open communication.</p>
<p>Philosophical differences in organizational approaches and methods (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010)</p>	<p>Understand your provider partners' priorities and set clear, shared expectations from the beginning.</p> <p>Focus on shared goals, vision, and mutual benefits of the collaboration.</p> <p>Maintain frequent and open communication.</p>
<p>Differing operating procedures and capacity to serve children and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010)</p>	<p>Focus on shared goals, vision, and mutual benefits of the collaboration.</p> <p>Maintain frequent and open communication.</p> <p>Develop a strategic plan around each partners' needs and capacities.</p>

Additional Resources

- ▶ Additional ideas on community stakeholders to partner with may be found in Appendix H of *Community Partnerships: Improving the Response to Child Maltreatment*, located at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/partners/>.
- ▶ For another useful checklist for collaboration planning, see Appendix G of *Community Partnerships: Improving the Response to Child Maltreatment*, located at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/partners/>.
- ▶ For some examples of successful collaboration efforts between child welfare agencies and community partners engaged in child abuse and neglect prevention, see FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention, Connecting for Meaningful Collaborations Online Training, found at <https://friendsnrcelearning.remotelerner.net/course/index.php?categoryid=8>.

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