

Building A Family-Centered Community Collaboration*

For decades our Ohio county public child welfare agencies have worked to engage parents; foster and adoptive parents and other service professionals to keep children safe and families stable. In the past ten years we have come to understand that if we are to successfully carryout our mission and mandates then we must transform our previous approach toward child welfare. In Ohio, we are attempting to do just that by creating Community Collaborations that, while promising, are painstaking. While painstaking, child welfare practices that are proactive; integrated; partnership-oriented and empowering are evolving throughout the state.

Through rigorous family-centered, neighborhood-based efforts, including the integration of the *Family Stability Service model*, we are learning that, to be successful we must create supports that **prevent** child maltreatment or its reoccurrence; create, support, and fund a range of informal and formal services that work together to **share responsibility**; and above all, take the time and energy necessary to work with families and community stakeholders to create **individualized responses** to families' strengths and needs.

Community Collaboration efforts are complex and time consuming but the rewards are equal to the commitment that comes from working through, and sometimes around a variety of issues. Some of the challenges agencies face include separately managed funds and inflexible programs or unbending eligibility requirements; differences among professional cultures including definitions; the deceptively difficult process of blending informal and formal services and territorial issues.

While these "barriers" may exist, there are actions that can be taken to build healthy, functioning and successful Community Collaborations. We have learned from our work and through the work of other states that successful Community Collaborations requires:

- ♥ **Accessibility.** Public child welfare agencies and other community services must be reasonably available when families need them. The use of Community Centers and other such relationships extend an agency's efforts to serve.
- ♥ **Dismantling** the US-THEM philosophy between families and service systems and between public and private human service agencies.
- ♥ **Creating** and supporting opportunities for children and families to grow in healthy and constructive ways.
- ♥ **Strengthening** local resources and the everyday ways people care successfully for each other.
- ♥ Using **Teamwork** to model a way of working and problem solving with the community.

* Much of this article was written based on articles in the bi-annual publication: Best Practice, Next Practice: Family-Centered Child Welfare, Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Vol. 1, Number 2, Fall 2000. 1

- ♥ **Encouraging Participation** of all child and family service providers and neighborhood residents in widening the circle of accountability to achieve the goals of safety, permanency and well-being.

- ♥ **Respecting the Diversity** of individuals, families and neighborhoods. Culture affects what people see, what they believe and what they do. Respect is the necessary starting point for understanding and action.

Building child welfare Community Collaborations requires hard work and thoughtful strategy. Can we dare to dismantle traditional approaches that reap only partial success? Can we instead skill-build and integrate new ways of service that involve neighborhoods and all community stakeholder groups that touch the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors? For those of us who can and are entire communities are learning to come together to own child safety, permanency and well-being in ways forgotten but not lost.

For more information on how to get started in developing Community Collaborations please contact Stacey Saunders or Angela Sausser-Short at PCSAO. ▀

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