

Getting Started: Lessons From The Field

THE LEADER'S ROLE

Prior to reviewing, planning for, and developing a plan for integration of family-centered, neighborhood-based services, there are critical areas that need to be considered in order for the reform effort to be successful.

Reforming the local PCSA for integration of a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to child welfare is a long-term process, which requires adapting current practice. It requires the commitment and long-term vision of the local child welfare leader. We should think of the process as similar to that of running a marathon rather than a sprint, or as an evolution rather than a revolution (although, to some, it can feel like a revolution).

Transforming the system to one that is family-centered and neighborhood-based begins with a leader that understands the importance of enhancing child welfare services for improved quality of life outcomes for children and their families (within the context of their communities) and concludes with a plan for implementation.

The Role of the Leader

The active involvement of the agency director, in the initial rollout and throughout the implementation effort, is especially critical given the internal and external resistance to change. The leader establishes a vision and helps all to understand the value and worth of changing practice. The leader also establishes and directs the planning committee, consisting of administrative and direct service staff, intra-agency partners, and external stakeholders.

The responsibilities of leadership in this phase fall into four broad categories.

1. Maintaining Control while Building a Team:

In the initial startup effort, leaders must maintain primary responsibility for planning efforts while building a team to both develop the "workable solutions" and to become champions of reform. The presence of champions in the agency and in the community helps to ensure the sustainability of the reform effort after local (politically appointed) leaders move on. To identify potential champions, leaders must ask staff for help in understanding the community and in identifying its formal and informal leaders. Both staff and community leaders should be brought in very early in the process to share ownership in decision making.

2. Establishing Key Relationship

Establishing relationships with legislators, commissioners and the judiciary early in the process helps to garner support for budget needs, changes in legislation, etc. that will be necessary in the later phases of the work. Having key political leaders participate in planning and implementation processes has been suggested by professionals who are doing this work across the nation. It is also necessary to develop a mechanism by which key political leaders can be kept informed of the implementation effort.

3. Developing a Sustainable Structure

Leaders must develop a structure that can endure change in agency leadership, for example, an agency's executive director or members on a community board. If the structure is in place and the members and leaders have been properly prepared and engaged, the community board can be instrumental in staving off attempts to dismantle this work under new political leadership.

4. Tailoring the Plan

The leader's involvement in the initial planning effort assists the team in understanding the constraints of the organizational structure and in shaping the plan.

Selling the Initiative To Staff

Resistance from staff can and should be anticipated. *In fact, research has shown that the group most resistant to embracing this approach and transforming the system to integrate this approach is child welfare staff.* Time and time again, throughout the nation, it has been demonstrated that ill-preparing our staff to "come on board" with the change effort has proven disastrous. It is **ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL TO SPEND THE NECESSARY TIME TO PREPARE STAFF PRIOR TO TAKING THE CONCEPTS AND APPROACH OF FCNB TO THE COMMUNITY.** Implementations, misinterpretations, and rumors can be avoided if ample time is taken with staff to lay a firm foundation and agency leaders play a strong role.

1. Have a Plan

The leader should begin with an analysis of the organizational culture and should use this analysis to develop a plan for presenting the family-centered,

neighborhood-based services approach to staff. *Sometimes middle management was identified as the group most resistant to change. This can be addressed by engaging this group in a discussion of community work during weekly meetings.*

2. Orientation and Training

A solid first step is to familiarize all staff members with this work; how it responds to and addresses agency goals, and the ways in which children and families will be served more effectively. The leader should explain that this is hard but joy-filled work that may take many years to show positive outcomes. The director should emphasize that this approach will take all hands working together from the security guards and maintenance staff through and including the director's office.

Staff needs to understand how this work relates to what they do, why it is mission critical and the difference it will make in the lives of the children and families they serve. Staff needs to be prepared to do the work by being given the tools they need and an opportunity to develop the skills to proceed successfully. Training must be customized for different staffing levels and groups. For example, social workers need support in understanding their role in the community work and the advantages, such as less driving because of geographically assigned caseloads.

3. Preparing Supervisors in Assisting Staff in Making the Translation from Philosophy to Clinically Based Service Delivery

Supervisors must be prepared to support their staff in the field vis-à-vis individual cases. To prepare supervisors for their role as teacher, corrector, and coach, supervisors need opportunities to apply family-centered, neighborhood-based practice to live cases. FCNB clinically focused training models how supervisors should ask questions, brainstorm FCNB creative solutions and support staff when they approach families, providers and neighborhoods.

4. Post Reminders

The leader should reinforce the change in ways that are visible to staff. For example, create a Good News Board that is updated weekly with data, information, and success stories of how implementation is going. Post the Mission and the Values of this approach to service delivery throughout the agency as reminders to keep this approach to service delivery in the forefront of everyone's minds.

5. Use Champions

Staff that is passionate about this work can be used to influence other staff. Champions of this approach can be assigned to critical units to provide support. However, some staff will remain resistant to the change in practice. Agency leaders should use turnover to their advantage by hiring staff that are supportive of community work.

Working with Stakeholders (Formal and Informal Leaders)

When getting started, a primary task involves identifying and approaching the stakeholders whom are critical to the implementation process. Stakeholders for a Family-Centered, Neighborhood-Based Services approach include, but are not limited to:

1. Staff;
2. Foster Caregivers;
3. Intra-agency partners, public and private providers;
4. Courts;
5. Community Organizations;
6. Spiritual Community;
7. Legislature;
8. Media;
9. The public.

Initial contact with these groups, how they are approached and how this effort is explained, is instrumental in recruiting champions throughout the community and in moving forward with the planning effort.

External stakeholders link the agency's work to its environment at multiple levels. Similar to the approach used with staff, presentations and training must be tailored to the particular audience for the message to be received effectively. For example, the agency can, prior to presentations, identify and prepare answers to potential issues that may arise from specific stakeholder groups. An equally important step is to identify which groups are critical to the process; these should be approached first. For example, in some sites, without the initial buy-in of the legislature, this approach to service delivery may never have gotten off the ground. Finally, external stakeholders will continue to raise questions about child protection, "bad" communities, and the use of public funds for clients. The agency must anticipate these concerns and be prepared to address them.

1. *Develop Support*

A family-centered, neighborhood-based services approach to child welfare requires a broad base of support from external stakeholders. Given time

constraints, the agency should prioritize external stakeholder groups with prominent community organizations, legislators and the courts leading the list. A wide variety of agencies will need to be approached to address the continuum of service issues. The support of sympathetic stakeholders, including agencies already doing the work, should be sought first.

2. Share the Planning

Include external stakeholders in early planning to increase support of the transformation process.

3. Publicize

Strategic work with legislators and the media is critical to the sustainability of this work. Targeted members of the media and the legislature should be invited to community meetings. If the agency has a public relations office, it should develop a campaign to publicize the implementation effort. If not, the agency should brainstorm strategies for reaching as many citizens with the FCNB message as possible. Invite various groups in to identify strategies for doing so. Agencies need to model this approach in all aspects of its work.

4. Build Intra-Agency Support

Develop a coordinating committee for children, involving the partner agencies such as education, mental health and juvenile justice. This committee can build support for this approach at the state and county level and can facilitate planning at the community level. If a local Council exists, gather the data and conduct a presentation and orientation, soliciting Council support in collaborating and moving this approach forward.

Pilot Vs. Initiative

This approach to service delivery is a series of interlocking strategies (community development, foster parent recruitment and retention, team decision-making and self-evaluation) that must be implemented throughout the agency to achieve system-wide reform. For this reason, the separation of this approach into a pilot project is discouraged as evidenced by the states and counties throughout the nation that have worked to transform their child welfare systems. For those who approached the effort as a pilot, resistance ran high by other sectors of the system when full integration was forged.

1. Communication From Leadership

Shortly after the decision is made to integrate this approach into the fabric of the agency's service delivery system, the leader must begin a series of conversations with agency staff and external stakeholders. The purpose of these conversations is threefold:

- a. Explain the principles and strategies of this service delivery approach;
- b. Link this approach with a philosophy of best practice and other agency initiatives;
- c. Reinforce the message that a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to service delivery is a system-wide reform effort.

2. Rollout

A phased rollout of FCNB must be planned early in the process. Some activities, such as recruitment and training of foster parents, can be implemented early in the rollout; other activities may need to begin as small projects. For example, geographic assignment of cases may begin in one region of the county and rollout from there. Targeting one neighborhood at a time is also common when beginning the transformation process depending on the amount of staff and financial resources available.

3. Recognize Accomplishments

Celebrating accomplishments, milestones and small successes helps to build support for this work amongst staff. The agency should weave celebration and "success-getting" into the fabric of the organizational culture. There are many ways to do this. Publishing success stories in the agency newsletter; recognizing staff and foster parents at annual banquets and at monthly staff meetings; having carry-ins to celebrate successful problem solving or policy implementation, etc.

4. Sustainability

The work of incorporating a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach to service delivery into the culture of the organization as evidenced through the policies, practices, training, and quality assurance reviews of the agency must be part of the planning process. A cross-section of agency staff can be recruited to review policies and practice; the same group can amend or revise existing review mechanisms. To be truly family-centered, consider utilizing families (current and/or past) and foster parents in reviewing programs, new policies and procedures, and in crafting strategies to being more responsive to their needs

Race, Culture and Power

The influence of race, culture and power in the implementation of a neighborhood-based approach to service delivery must be acknowledged and addressed in the planning and implementation effort. The discrepancy between the race of those in charge and the race of the children in care is an issue with internal and external stakeholders. Internal resistance to neighborhood-based work exposes middle-class bias and a lack of cultural competence in many agencies. Some will identify that they need to be helped to regain their faith in the goodness of human nature before they can develop faith in the community. At a macro level, if the agency offers prescriptive advice to neighborhoods, the agency will be met with resentment from stakeholders who will ask: "who owns this work, the agency or the residents of the community?"

Given the depth of feelings associated with these issues and their complexity, it is perhaps no surprise that race, culture and power continues to influence most discussions about family-centered, neighborhood-based work. Working through these issues depends on the agency's willingness to respect a community's existing culture, to engage in open discussion about culture related, and to "practice what they preach."

1. *Change Old Beliefs*

Communities cannot be developed by the agency, but the agency can support families and communities by building on the existing strengths of both. The real issue is whether the agency supports the right of families and communities to be at the table and is willing to share its power and resources.

2. *Be Honest about Limits*

The most sincere expression of inclusion is to invite community participation in decision-making regarding the removal of children. Given legal mandates for child protection, however, community members must be informed that the agency makes the final decision regarding placement.

3. *Select a Valid Messenger*

Minority representation in agency leadership helps in community work but is not the solution in and of itself. When approaching the community; the agency needs to select a "messenger" whom the community will perceive as valid. It is often best to recruit a community advocate to fill this role.

4. *Build on Existing Resources*

A first step in collaborative work is to identify community resources that can support the reform effort. Building on established resources lends credibility to the effort and establishes the community, not the agency, as the foundation of the reform effort. When Settlement Houses or Community Centers exist, the work should be rooted in these establishments. Some agencies will broaden

their definition of community or neighborhood (or expand their geographic boundaries slightly) to encompass existing resources.