

Joyce N.
Thomas, RN,
MPH

A united community can produce powerful changes. Even the complex issues of safety and protection of children can be creatively addressed by a strong community network of concerned and committed providers and residents. Building on the strengths, determination, and caring concern for the families in each neighborhood, a community can overcome many obstacles, even a failed child protective service system. A number of states and communities are pushing to reach this new direction in child protection. In 1994, the question of how to reconceptualize child protective services and how CPS should best fit in the larger system of child welfare was the motivation for convening the Executive Session on New Paradigms for Child Protective Services at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The trend toward seeking fundamental changes in child welfare service delivery and the linkage of public CPS and community-based organizations has become increasingly common, yet with such widespread reforms come both opportunities and risks.

Struggling for Clarity

As a community provider and a member of the Harvard working group, I collaborated with 25-30 other senior practitioners, academics, politicians, federal employees, and community providers to propose substantive changes within child protective services. First and foremost was the need to define the vision, then to systematically examine the core elements of the CPS system. As we assessed the current CPS structure, we continually asked ourselves, "Who are these children and families, how do they get into the system, and how can they best get what they need?"

Most CPS agencies struggle with the problem of insufficient staff overburdened with excessive caseloads and the pressures associated with decision making, case investigation and management, and dealing with complex family situations. In recent years, CPS has been caught between increasing demands for services, inadequate budgets, criticism about the quality of services, and the tragedy of child fatalities. Other problems include inadequately trained workers, resistance from families, pressure to investigate and prosecute cases, dealing with "turf" issues, fear of liability, confidentiality issues, poor outcome measures, lack of accountability, and a negative community perception of the agencies due to unrealistic expectations. The erosion of confidence in the public system's ability to meet family needs, the pressure toward privatization of government services, recognition of states' rights, and romanticized images of civic responsibilities have pushed the system into a new direction. Given these new realities, a key question is "what is our vision, and how do we get there?"

Community Partnerships: A Vision for Shared Responsibilities

Rather than the public child protective service agency having all the burden and responsibility for child protection, parents, public and private agencies and community providers should share the basic responsibilities for child protection. As expressed by the Executive Forum, "The heart of the improved system is a community partnership for child protection." These partnerships are emerging in various cities and counties throughout the country. Even in the District of Columbia, where public child protection remains under General Receivership, citywide collaboratives are emerging, demonstrating the capabilities of community partnerships for meeting the needs of high-risk children and families. The capacity to manage, a positive agenda, and a realistic understanding of what it takes to survive are essential tools. Well organized community structures include representation from residents, schools, civic associations, businesses, churches, synagogues, mosques, youth serving agencies, police, courts, as well as public and private agencies.

Strategies for Change

A paradigm shift, in which some of the families now served by CPS can be adequately served by the community partners, is the core of the vision. This means changing the process of intake and follow-up services for lower-risk cases, and setting up a community governance structure for accountability of child protection. Reform starts with the CPS system and the community deciding that change is needed. Dealing with statutory responsibilities, achieving a balance for accountability and capacity-building, and determining the reasonable steps to follow can be tricky. Change is not easy, and there is no recipe or cookbook that will guarantee the outcome. Using the force of laws to mandate community participation is not the answer. We have come to the realization that the CPS agency alone cannot successfully protect children, and therefore the leadership of CPS must reach out to the public for help. There must be a strong message from the top and a willingness to reach consensus on the directions for change. The net should be cast wide in order to be fully inclusive for partnership building. Parents are an essential element of the partnership, along with community providers in the areas of substance abuse treatment, domestic violence, mental health, educators, and all who are required to keep children safe.

The partnership should be designed to create a variety of responses to meet the different needs of families. For example, we still need to insure high quality, accurate investigation of the more severe cases of child maltreatment, in which coercive intervention is essential. On the other hand, volunteer services may be used when there is no immediate risk. To achieve this flexibility of response, there must be a comprehensive community-based support system in place. Informal resources, such as friends, family, or neighbors who are trusted by the families, can provide a vital resource to the partnership. Internal policy changes within CPS are needed to create an atmosphere

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for sharing responsibility with the community. Case management protocols, guidelines for systems intervention, procedures for handling emergencies, and public agency supervision will strengthen the relationship of all parties

Community Efforts to Ensure Safety

In the wake of growing concerns about safety and well being of children, the community must be prepared to take on these new responsibilities. The importance of collectively improving community services to abused children is further substantiated by the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, and the reauthorization of the Title IV-B, Subpart 2, as Promoting Safe and Stable Families (formerly known as the Family Preservation and Support Service Act). These efforts encourage linkages between public child welfare and community-based services. However, only a small increase in funding is available for these very prescriptive programs, and the politics of resource allocation need critical analysis. This is a challenge to many jurisdictions, as CPS and community partners engage in constructive dialogue about how to achieve this vision. The above referenced legislation has created a new urgency for time sensitive, quality investigations and development of case plans for needy families. The prognosis is uncertain and we must be careful that families of color are not further punished by culturally inadequate intervention strategies.

To better protect children, community groups must be trained to understand the bigger picture of child welfare, the role of public systems in that picture, and the potentially fatal consequences of child maltreatment. CPS must recognize the assets of caring residents, local customs, and cultural identification with families. For partnerships to work there must be an unraveling of the numbness that may exist, and a mutual desire to get in touch with the healing forces within. In this period of reforms, our search for new solutions and new models of services must be approached with caution, because the basic needs of families remain the same. A shift in orientation to support front-line practice must remain a priority, whether that worker is a public agency social worker, a community advocate, or caring resident. Practice must be grounded in research, community wisdom, and culturally acceptable strategies.

Conclusion

Community partnerships, which have a shared vision of improved safety and protection of children, offer new energy to the field of child protection. The traditional stakeholders in child welfare (law enforcement, courts, public child protection, hospitals, etc) should not feel threatened, but should be at the table for dialogue and community wide planning efforts. Listening to the concerns and needs of all parties is the most effective tool of the partnership, and this should not be undermined by the skeptics. On the other hand, an overly idealistic view of the process can be dangerous to families. During this period of transition, the range of emotions may include pride of being involved, fear of the unknown, the excitement of accomplishing difficult tasks, and hope for a brighter outcome. Exploring promising practices and using new technology should inspire us to do more, yet we have to keep our eye on the prize of healthy families and safe children in caring communities. This process takes time, and can be frustrating if we remain rigid in our perspectives. As a community provider, I can see how far we have come, but I am ever mindful of how far we have to go.

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