

Child Welfare Council 2015-16 Annual Report: Proposal to include a section on collaboration

PROPOSAL

The California Child Welfare Council is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year. Because of its overarching mandate to advise, monitor and report on interagency collaboration among the many disciplines and organizations that need to work together to achieve positive outcomes for children and families served by the child welfare system, it has been suggested that the Council's 2015-16 Annual Report include an analysis of our collaboration efforts to date, including successes and challenges; a review of research that can inform the Council's work going forward; and a proposed process for taking more planned approach to promoting collaborations in the delivery of services that will improve outcomes of families and children in the child welfare system.

It is proposed that a small number of volunteers work with staff to write a section in the 2016-16 Annual Report that assesses past collaboration efforts and outlines a process for determining future efforts, which will be subject to consideration and approval by the Council.

BACKGROUND

Welfare and Institutions Code Section 16540 requires the Child Welfare Council to issue advisory reports that include recommendations addressing the following aspects of interagency coordination and collaboration:

- a. Ensuring that all state child welfare, foster care and judicial funding and services for children, youth, and families is, to the greatest extent possible, coordinated to eliminate fragmentation and duplication of services provided to children or families who would benefit from integrated multiagency services.
- b. Increasing the quality, appropriateness, and effectiveness of program services and judicial processes delivered to children, youth, and families who would benefit from integrated multiagency services to achieve better outcomes for these children, youth, and families.
- c. Promoting consistent program and judicial excellence across counties to the greatest extent possible while recognizing the demographic, geographic, and financial differences among the counties.
- d. Increasing collaboration and coordination between county agencies, state agencies, federal agencies, and the courts.
- e. Ensuring that all state Title IV-E plans, program improvement plans, and court improvement plans demonstrate effective collaboration between public agencies and the courts.

Several examples of the Council's experiences with collaboration:

- Establishment of the CSEC Action Team comprised of county, state and private sector representatives from social services, behavioral health, courts, advocacy, and provider agencies.
- Sponsorship of the Education Toolkit, working with the California School Boards Association and local school districts on a "partial credits" model policy, followed by an advocacy organization taking the lead on developing guidance for schools and child welfare agencies.
- Participation on the Psychotropic Medications Quality Improvement Project led by the state Pharmacology Division.
- Partnership with California First 5 to include information on needs of young children in foster care on its website as a resource to foster parents; subsequently, the U.C. Davis Resource Center for Family-Focused Practice held a summit where counties could send a multi-disciplinary team

to develop collaborative responses to serve foster children under the age of five with possible developmental disabilities who had been exposed to maltreatment

- Coordination with behavioral health, workforce development, corrections, and housing to promote timely reunification of parents with their children who had been placed in foster care.
- Partnership with the California Youth Connection and Foster Parent Association to explore ways to promote healthy sexual development of youth in foster care, followed by participation on a state led work group to develop regulations for foster parents and child welfare workers.
- Longstanding, ongoing efforts by advocacy groups, providers, county child welfare agencies, and the state behavioral health agency to come to agreement on a solution that ensures foster children placed out of their county of jurisdiction have access to needed mental health services.

In reflecting on the Council's experiences with collaboration, some Council members have asked whether the current approach could be improved. While efforts to date are noteworthy, they are not the product of a deliberate agenda based on what is known about what makes for successful collaborations across the service areas that comprise the child welfare system. Moreover, we may benefit from a collective learning exercise that teaches us about collaborative processes that work. Simply put, by reviewing and revising our process, could we improve the way we carry out the Council's purpose to monitor, report and advise decision-makers?

RESEARCH

In their article, "Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed *and* Challenging," John Bryson, Barbara C. Crosby, and Melissa Middleton Stone conclude, "Theoretical and empirical work on collaboration has proliferated in the last decade ... Research indicates how complicated and challenging collaboration can be, even though it may be needed now more than ever." The authors provide a "summary of areas in which scholarship offers reasonably settled conclusions and extensive list of recommendations for further research ... that takes a dynamic, multi-level systems view and makes use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, especially using longitudinal comparative case studies."¹

Drawing from studies, the authors present the following elements of collaborative frameworks:

- **General antecedent conditions** – Recent research confirms that the institutional environment is especially important for partnerships focused on public policy or problem solving because it includes broad systems of relationships across jurisdictional areas that can directly affect collaborative purpose, structure, and outcomes. In particular requirements for mandated or strongly encouraged collaborations that specify collaboration membership, decision-makers, and accountability members have increased. Also, there is growing recognition that involving business, nonprofit, and community partners can spread risk and provide more effective remedies.
- **Initial conditions and drivers** – Studies show that involvement of committed, boundary-spanning leaders, known as sponsors or champions; a common definition of the problem; and formal agreements are needed for successful collaborations. Building on existing relationships and networks and offering incentives to collaborate are key drivers.

¹ Bryson, John, Crosby, Barbara C., and Stone, Melissa Middleton. 2015. Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed *and* Challenging. Public Administration Review, Vol. 75, Iss. 5, pp. 647-663.

- **Collaborative processes** – Trust and commitment and a shared understanding of the problem promote collaboration. Communication, mostly face-to-face, creates collaborations as “higher order systems,” distinct from individual member organizations.
- **Collaboration structures** – Scholars now recognize that collaborations have often overlaid – rather than replaced – existing hierarchical arrangements, and thus attention to the structural components has increased. The ambiguity and complexity inherent in collaborations makes them especially dynamic, with a “tangled web” of goals, uncertain membership, and overlapping collaborations.
- **Endemic Conflicts and Tensions** – Tensions can involve power or status imbalances; inclusivity versus efficiency; loyalties to home organizations versus the collaborative; and differing views about strategies and logistics. Building legitimacy, leadership and trust, along with managing conflict, become complex for multisector collaborations because of competing institutional logistics of the members.
- **Accountability and outcomes** – Collaborations should be assessed in four broad categories: public value; immediate, intermediate and long-term effects; resilience and reassessments; and complex accountability, including tangible and intangible outcomes.

The authors conclude that organizations in a collaboration are trying to accomplish something they could not achieve by themselves and see such arrangements as a necessary approach to dealing with complex public problems. For those putting collaborations into practice, the challenge is how to understand the process and its moving parts enough to actually produce desired results and minimize failure.

CONCLUSION

The Child Welfare Council has demonstrated potential as a structure for achieving the types of collaborations envisioned in the statute for the purpose of coordinating services for children and families in the child welfare system. The proposal to evaluate progress to date and establish a structure to be more strategic in future efforts would build on lessons learned and benefit from research on what works.