

FAMILY SUPPORT AND SYSTEMS REFORM:

WHAT IS THE PROMISE AND

HOW CAN WE DELIVER ON IT?

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Across the country, a broad array of new programs and services are being developed to serve families and children, based upon new principles of "effective practice" -- community based, family centered, strength based, flexible, preventive, and comprehensive. These programs and services take many forms -- home visiting services for families of newborns, parent education programs, drop-in and family resource centers, school-linked services, youth activity programs, and comprehensive community centers. They are financed through a variety of public and private sources, often as a result of community collaborative planning activities.

In its long-range plan, a national organization serving and representing many of these efforts -- the Family Resource Coalition (FRC) -- describes this proliferation of new services and supports to families as a budding national movement. FRC envisions this family support movement as "a public and private revolution: building a completely new societal response to children and youth and their families, based on the beliefs, attitudes, and practices which have emerged from the family support movement." FRC's vision for the movement includes:

a plentiful supply of comprehensive, high quality supports for children, youth, and families in their own communities, reflective of families' self-determined needs and wants, provided through a number of public and private delivery systems,

all institutions that serve children and families (schools, human services, health and mental health providers) adopting a family supportive approach to their work,

accountable to the people they serve for the outcomes they produce, and all levels of government making family and youth needs, including economic security, adequate housing, and the viability and safety of every community a priority in funding, and in the development of policies and programs.¹

Doug Nelson, Director of one of the country's largest and most aggressive philanthropies seeking to leverage change in the way public systems respond to family needs -- the Annie E. Casey Foundation -- sets a similar challenge for developing systems of "effective practice":

We somehow have to deconstruct, decategorize and decentralize the enormous resources and the legitimate authority lodged in current systems and then reconfigure, reauthorize, and rebuild them on a community scale in accordance with effective service principles. ... The toughest thing in this system reform challenge may be finding a practical and sustainable way to do the community level capacity building, the skill building, the institution building, the creation of resource management capacity, the governance capacity, and the accumulation of legitimacy that is necessary to convert a set of categorical, top down systems into an integrated bottom-up one.²

The Role of Family Support

Mr. Nelson goes on to describe the key role that family support must play in achieving his goal. First, family support programs and centers can serve as a locus -- a physical and programmatic magnet -- for the services and supports needed to enable children and families to succeed. Second, they can become vehicles for the long term relocation and reform of all public investments in at-risk families and their children. Family centers offer the potential for serving as the "institutional bedrock for the social revitalization of those communities whose kids are today at inexcusable risk."

¹ Family Resource Coalition Long Range Plan, January 1995 draft adopted at January 31 Board meeting. Page 1.

² Nelson, Doug. Speech given at Pennsylvania's Family Center Institute (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: November 1, 1994).

These are lofty goals, and immense challenges, for the family support movement. They certainly are not the first thing on the mind of the director of a parent-child resource center, operating in a church basement and wondering how she will meet payroll and expenses over the next six months. Instead, she probably is dreaming simply of someday sending her parent coordinator to a training program, finding additional funding to implement a new community project her volunteers have identified, and getting some health expertise on staff. If she is lucky, she has established some links to other programs and directors around her state trying to do the same things. This nascent network is not yet a "movement" in the political sense that will be needed to fulfill either FRC's or the Casey Foundation's vision for family support.

How Do We Get There From Here?

Current discussions of systems reform increasingly describe the need for profound, interconnected changes in governance, financing, accountability (outcomes), and service delivery at the neighborhood, community, state, and federal level.

Family support -- both as program and as philosophy -- plays a primary role in reforming service delivery. To succeed with families and children that current systems fail, we must change the way we respond to those families at the frontline. Further, we must describe in much greater *operational* detail how we change that response.

We must get "beyond the buzzwords" -- *community based, family centered, strength based, flexible, preventive, and comprehensive* -- to describe how we can construct systems that produce such effective practice.³ To achieve the vision set forth

³ See; Kinney, Jill, Kathy Strand, Marge Hagerup, and Charles Bruner, *Beyond the Buzzwords: Key Principles in Effective Frontline Practice* (Falls Church, MD: National Center for Service Integration: 1994) for one effort to provide a clinical and

by FRC and the Casey Foundation, we also need to describe how these service delivery systems can build community capacity and help respond to collective community needs for safe and decent housing, employment opportunity, and social capital development.⁴

Table One outlines some of the critical questions that the family support

philosophical basis that such principles produce results and a first cut at a set of indicators to determine if they are being employed in practice. The appendix offers a number of different formulations of these principles, across different professional domains, indicating the rapidly increasing use of the rhetoric of family support (although not necessarily its practice) over the last decade.

⁴ The term "social capital" has been used to refer to the level of civic engagement within a community, including such things as voter turnout and newspaper readership, church attendance, and membership in organizations as diverse as Kiwanis, choral societies, and bowling leagues. See: Putnam, Robert, "Bowling Alone, America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (January, 1995), p. 65-78; and Coleman, James, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 Supplement (1988), p. S95-S120. The importance of this social capital to successful child and youth development through both professional and voluntary service systems has been described using several terms -- as "primary services" by Chapin Hall, as elements of "positive youth development" by Karen Pittman and the Academy for Educational Development, as "protective factors" by Catalano and Hawkins and others, and as "core concepts" by Public/Private Ventures. One role of family support services is to create the climate where these positive, civic engagements among families, youth, and children emerge and develop to meet community need. See: Richman, Harold, Joan Wynn, and Joan Costello. *Children's Services in Metropolitan Chicago: Directions for the Future* (Chicago: The Chapin Hall Center for Children: 1991); Pittman, Karen. *A Youth-Centered View of Community Supports* (Washington, DC: Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Academy for Educational Development: 1994); Developmental Research and Programs, Inc. *Communities That Care* (Seattle, WA); and Public/Private Ventures. *Community Change for Youth Development (CCYD): A Concept Paper* (Philadelphia: 1993). A further conceptual perspective can be found in: Whiting, Basil. *Reweaving the Tattered Web: Socializing and Enculturating our Children* (Kansas City: Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation: 1993).

movement must answer and address. This represents a knowledge-building and knowledge-conveying enterprise that is essential to carrying the movement forward. Answers to these questions are needed for two reasons. First, from an implementation perspective, we cannot develop effective services with any reliability or confidence without answering these questions. Second, from a policy perspective, we cannot secure needed resources unless we can argue convincingly that we know how to design and implement effective services.

Getting the Answers -- the Need for Field-Based Research

Developing answers to the questions in Table One will require extensive, practical, field-based research. Many of these questions speak more to what could be tomorrow, rather than to what is today. Only the most sophisticated, "cutting edge" community family support efforts have begun to address some of the questions.

Through working with and carefully examining these efforts, however, we can gain insights into what works and what doesn't. We can convey this information to other community efforts addressing the same challenges. We must learn as we conduct this field work, being as flexible and solution-oriented in our research as family support programs and services are with the families they serve.

While the director of the parent-child resource center may not be an immediate beneficiary of this work, she eventually will need such answers if she is to influence, in a significant way, her community's overall response to the children and families her center serves. If this field work is not conducted and the results shared, family support is likely to be defined minimally and marginally -- with token funding and more symbolic than substantive support.⁵

⁵ There is a desperate need for a clear, operational definition of the core components of effective practice in this work, or

If this seems too daunting a challenge and the expectations FRC and the Casey Foundation place on the family support movement too ambitious, we must ask ourselves if there truly is another way. If FRC and the Casey Foundation are correct in describing the need for a "revolutionary," "radical," shift in the manner public and private systems respond to families -- and if family support services and principles must play a leading role in showing the way -- we must make a concerted effort to develop answers. The research undertaken on family support must provide practical guidance to the field -- initially proximate answers and best guesses -- on how to answer the tough, but fundamental, operational questions found in Table One.

policy and implementation almost certainly will result in diffuse, weak, and largely ineffective practice at the frontline. The tendency toward model drift and dilution of intervention in policy design and implementation are clear. Perhaps the best example of a conscious (and largely successful) strategy to combat this tendency was the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's promotion of a clear and focussed family preservation service model. Alternatively, the last decade of expansions of "prenatal care" and "pre-school programs" for poor families at the state level largely have not focussed upon the quality of the service provided. As a result, while there is substantially increased funding for medical care for pregnant women and more child care slots for low-income children, the crucially needed developmental components in each often have been missing. The resulting programs bear little relation to the flagship models that policy makers referenced in making claims to program effectiveness.

TABLE ONE

Column One -- Issue Description

Quality assurance in frontline practice and organizational structures which can manage complex and diverse family needs.

The relationship between worker and family is the core of family support.

This relationship is built on mutual respect and trust but also on providing guidance and support.

Family support services must be able to recruit, select, train, supervise, and support workers who can establish this relationship and provide appropriate support and guidance.

Family support services must be consumer driven and able to respond holistically to complex and diverse family needs. Frontline workers cannot be expected to possess all the specialized skills needed, but the organization within which they work must be configured to facilitate access to needed expertise and resources.

Column Two -- Critical Operational Questions

Frontline worker quality

- * What recruitment and hiring practices, including interviewing techniques, are most effective in hiring frontline workers with the orientation, aptitude, and skills needed to work effectively with families?
- * How much can paraprofessional, "community workers" can be employed to do

this work? What additional supervision, training, and staff support is needed for these workers?

- * How can services identify potential workers from within the neighborhoods served? How can this recruitment be managed to avoid unrealistic expectations within the community?

Organizational structures and strategies

- * What ongoing monitoring and supervision, training, and staff development, is needed to continually improve quality and to make promotion, corrective action, and termination decisions?
- * What "tables of organization" and "lines of authority" work best?
- * How much can frontline worker teams be blended to capitalize on diverse expertise and professional backgrounds?
- * How much access should frontline workers have to other resource brokers who work more continuously with other community service providers?

Other issues

- * How much can "volunteers" provide services and supports within a family support system, and what are the limitations and concerns in using "volunteers?"
- * How can family support services which use a curriculum base (e.g. parenting education, child abuse prevention, health care and nutrition of newborns) assure that their efforts respond holistically and beyond the curricular focus?
- * How can family support services reach out to and serve young men, fathers, and significant others? What are the strengths and limitations of family support in addressing such issues as substance abuse and domestic violence?

Column One -- Issue Description

Outreach to socially isolated, vulnerable, and disenfranchised families.

One of the goals of family support is to succeed with families and children current systems fail. To succeed, family support services first need to reach and engage those families, who often are socially isolated, distrustful of formal support systems, and angry (repressed or expressed) about their treatment by society.

Column Two -- Critical Operational Questions

- * What techniques and tools are most successful in engaging "hard to reach" families? In doing home visits? In sponsoring community events and soliciting community comment?
- * How can services determine when activities cross the line from being "creative and persistent" in engaging families to being "intrusive?"
- * What roles can "community workers" play in this process and what roles should be played by others?

Column One -- Issue Description

Community-building strategies within family support.

Family support can have both an individual and a collective impact, serving individual families and their needs and addressing and advocating for neighborhood and community needs. This requires that family support centers support collective, community activities.

While family support services may begin with leadership and staffing from outside the neighborhood and community, the long-term goal may be to become a truly resident-directed and administered service system.

Column Two -- Critical Operational Questions

- * How can family support services develop strong Boards that are representative of the neighborhoods and communities they serve? How can these Boards effectively represent neighborhood interests within the larger community?
- * What mobilization activities can family support services undertake to meet community needs? How can services help residents succeed in "first step" efforts (neighborhood watches and community policing; recreational programs for youth; parenting support groups) to address identified neighborhood needs?
- * What strategies can family support services undertake to increase the level of social capital in their communities?
- * How can family support services convert from being neighborhood-based to being neighborhood-designed and administered? What capacity needs to be developed in this process? What strategies do directors need to take to provide

for such transitions to resident ownership?

Column One -- Issue Description

Role of family support in fostering economic opportunity.

Ultimately, families and neighborhoods require economic opportunity to succeed.

Family support services are most effective if they can help provide legitimate paths to economic well-being for families and neighborhoods currently outside the economic mainstream.

Column Two -- Critical Operational Questions

- * What connections and collaborative activities can be established between family support programs and grassroots community economic development efforts? What are effective ways to link family support with community development corporations, entrepreneurship and micro-enterprise development activities, and other organizational efforts supporting community economic development?
- * How can family support services be strategic employers and provide employment and career development opportunities for neighborhood residents? To what extent can family support programs establish career ladders for their programs and links to other public service employment?
- * How can family support services help create "work readiness" among individuals currently without that work readiness? How can these services provide a bridge to employers and employment?
- * As family support centers represent geographic points for new activity, how can these centers serve as "incubators" for entrepreneurs to develop new services and economic activity?