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Assessing Promising Approaches in Child Welfare: Strategies for State Legislators

States across the country currently are reforming their child welfare systems to better ensure that children are safe and growing up in permanent homes that can ensure their well-being. Through the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) and other child welfare reform efforts, state child welfare agencies are assessing their current policies and practices and deciding how to most effectively make needed improvements. (See the box on the next page for more information on the CFSRs.)

Increasingly, state legislators are playing a role in those CFSR-related program improvement efforts. They are meeting with state child welfare agency administrators to discuss the review process and holding hearings on review outcomes and next steps. At the heart of these discussions of child welfare practice is the concept of promising approaches, also called best practice or evidence-based practice.

A Focus on Promising Approaches

Essentially, all child welfare reform is about implementing policies and practices that are proven to work in helping children and families engaged in child welfare services. State legislators often are called upon to help guide these reform efforts by appropriating resources or by enacting legislation promoting the use of a specific approach or model.

Yet any meaningful reform requires more than a simple solution and certainly cannot be done through a quick fix. State child welfare systems are multi-tiered organizations intervening in myriad ways in the often complex lives of children and families. Efforts to make improvements in these systems therefore demand thoughtful, multidimensional approaches, not simply the addition of another model program.

Making the Promising Approaches Concept Work

Despite their efforts to craft meaningful and long-term reform strategies, state legislators and child welfare administrators often are pressured to address problems in the child welfare system quickly. This happens, for example, when there is a tragedy involving a child under the care of the child welfare system.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
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Administration on Children, Youth and Families
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Child and Family Services Reviews at a Glance

- Congressionally authorized review of state child welfare systems.
- The first round of onsite reviews was conducted from 2000 to 2004; administered by the Central and Regional Offices of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The second round of reviews will begin in 2007.
- States conduct their own **Statewide Assessment** with support from the federal government.
- Federal and state teams conduct an **onsite review** of three sites in the state; the teams examine outcomes for a sample of children and families served by the state child welfare agency.
- States prepare a **Program Improvement Plan** to develop or enhance policies, training and practice identified as needing improvement.
- Federal penalties apply if states do not make the required improvements.

Child Welfare Outcomes Assessed by the Reviews

- **Safety:** Children are protected from abuse and neglect and are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- **Permanency:** Children have permanency and stability in their living situations and continuity in their family relationships and connections.
- **Child and family well-being:** Families are better able to provide for their children's needs, and children are provided services that meet their educational, physical health and mental health needs.

How Performance Is Assessed Through the Reviews

- State child welfare data are compared with national standards.
- Qualitative information on state performance is collected through reviews of actual case records and interviews with children, families and others.
- State performance is evaluated with regard to how well critical components of the child welfare system function ("systemic factors," such as the agency's responsiveness to the community and the training of child welfare staff).

More information about the reviews is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/index.htm#cfsr>.

In these situations, the rush to judgment, of the agency, individual agency staff and community leaders, can result in new policies or practices that, while well intended, will not create the type of change necessary to serve children and families effectively. Most state legislators and child welfare administrators, however, use such circumstances to examine current practice through program reviews and data analysis and to promote thoughtful solutions to existing challenges.

In addition, new models or approaches emerge routinely at the state or national level, often in areas in which funding was available to conduct research or to evaluate a practice. There is understandable interest in any approach that seems to be working well or in research suggesting that a specific practice deserves replication. While these new models may have merit, they are only of real value when considered in the context of a child welfare agency's overall policies and practices.

Today, because state child welfare agencies are making improvements through the CFSRs' structured program improvement process and other reform strategies, the addition of a model or best practice will be most successful when done in consultation with the state child welfare agency staff managing those processes.

The Role of State Legislators in the Promising Approaches Process

State legislators with responsibility for child welfare system oversight, and who often are on the front lines when the community demands change in child welfare systems, are positioned to play a unique role in ensuring an effective approach to identifying and implementing new child welfare practices. They can do so through the following actions:

- Learning more about the CFSRs and their state's program improvement process and how it links to other state reform efforts;
- Recognizing the need to avoid dramatic child welfare policy shifts when the community is reacting to a singular situation. Any tragedy involving a child is horrific and should be addressed, but the development of sound policy requires a broad analysis of state child welfare practice;
- Holding child welfare agency administrators accountable for, and supporting, the establishment of a continuous quality improvement approach to child welfare system management. (This should include setting goals and action steps, measuring and analyzing the results of those actions and making adjustments in policies and practices, as needed. All of these steps are components of the recommended CFSR program improvement process.);
- Helping their constituents understand that child welfare reform activities need to be conducted in a comprehensive and ongoing manner, and setting reasonable expectations for the outcomes of those changes/improvements; and

- Examining closely, in consultation with key state child welfare agency staff, any promising approaches that are proposed for legislative consideration or state implementation by asking the following:
 1. How does this approach fit into the program improvement framework developed by the child welfare agency after their most recent CFSR or other child welfare reform efforts?
 2. Does the approach promote child safety, child permanency and child and family well-being, the areas identified by the CFSR as critical to successful interventions with families? If so, how?
 3. How was the approach identified as “best” or “promising” (for example, through research, expert identification of practice or the promotion of an approach by a policymaker or project leader)?
 4. What specifically do the research findings or expert analysis show about why the approach leads to positive outcomes for the child welfare agency and children and their families? (To establish whether the approach causes or is simply correlated with the improved outcomes.)
 5. Will implementing this approach support or complicate (for example, siphoning off resources or staff time) the child welfare agency’s efforts to make improvements identified by the CFSR as necessary to protect children and promote their safety, permanency and well-being?

Communicating About Promising Approaches

Developing effective strategies for communicating with the broader community about the legislative role in child welfare reform may in fact be one of the most critical roles for state legislators. They are uniquely positioned to honor the community’s emotional response to stories about child welfare system failures. But they also are able to help the public understand that the best response to a crisis is continuing support for the strategically planned improvements being made by the state child welfare agency through the CFSRs or other child welfare reform efforts.

State legislators can contribute to creating a reform environment that is stable and therefore well executed and measurable. Over time, this type of child welfare improvement process can yield the results needed: a child welfare agency that is supported by its community in keeping children safe, promoting children’s permanency and making the well-being of children and families a priority.

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