

GETTING STARTED ON COMMUNITY CHILD PROTECTION

HOW STATE AND LOCAL LEADERS CAN HELP COMMUNITIES SAFEGUARD CHILDREN MORE EFFECTIVELY

Introduction

One of the key questions that people ask when they become interested in community child protection is "How can individuals or organizations committed to ensuring children's safety begin to implement this approach?" Behind this question is a recognition that community child protection represents a significant change from traditional Child Protective Services policy and practice. It requires the active participation of those already working to protect children, as well as the involvement of many new partners.

This paper suggests ways for a range of state and community leaders, from legislators and judges, to leaders of faith institutions, CPS administrators, child advocates, parent leaders and neighborhood service providers, to begin the reform process. Because it is too early in the development of community child protection to specify a "best" way for communities to proceed, or one blueprint for implementation, the paper instead offers alternative starting points for beginning this work, depending on who current champions for the approach may be within a community.

As individual leaders test different strategies for embarking on reform, their efforts should deepen our collective knowledge about how best to begin developing a community system for protecting children.

This paper provides two types of information that should be helpful for state and community leaders considering a community child protection approach.

- **First**, it outlines the core elements of community child protection as these are being tested in the states and communities that are furthest along with implementation. This definition and explanation of community child protection should provide state and community leaders with a goal to aim for and a more concrete image of what they are attempting to create.
- **Second**, recognizing that the promoters of reform will be different in each community, the paper outlines potential first steps that might be taken by select state and local leaders to begin moving toward a neighborhood-based system.

"Every day, religious leaders across the country search for new ways to combat the violence threatening our families and neighborhoods. Community child protection helps us in this task by offering concrete roles for individuals of every faith to play in protecting children from abuse, neglect and in strengthening their families. It represents an important avenue through which we can carry out our overarching mission: to promote peace and compassion within our communities"

Pastor John E. Guns, St. Paul Missionary, Baptist Church, Jacksonville, FL

What Is Community Child Protection?

Community child protection is an approach to safeguarding children and supporting families that is based on the premise that many people, agencies, and organizations in a community can - and should - contribute to children's safety. A community child protection system mobilizes all of these partners to:

1. Prevent child abuse and neglect before it occurs (through the provision of a wide range of family services and supports)
2. Respond quickly and effectively to instances of child abuse and neglect in a way that ensures children's safety;
3. Reduce the re-occurrence of child maltreatment, through effective family interventions.

What Does A System of Community Child Protection Include?

In the places where community child protection is most developed, the following policies, programs, and practices seem to be the most critical to ensuring the type of community response that can both ensure children's safety and support parents as they care for their children. Thus, at this point in the development of community child protection, these can be considered core components of this approach.

Few systems will develop all of these components simultaneously. They are more likely to be implemented incrementally. However, when fully developed, a system of community child protection will include all of them.

The first component is a network of people, agencies and organizations that can identify risk of child maltreatment before it occurs, respond to issues of child safety promptly and dependably, and provide a full range of services and supports. Key characteristics of such a network include:

- Network participants include parents, schools, community organizations, public and private social service agencies, the domestic violence system, the health and mental health care systems, substance abuse prevention and treatment service agencies, child care providers, the courts, faith institutions and others, depending on each community's resources;
- The services provided through the network are neighborhood-based whenever possible. As a result, the services are accessible to families close to where they live; the services adapt quickly to neighborhood needs; and the members of the network know each others' capacities well enough to often interact as part of a neighborhood team;
- The network's services are guided by a common philosophy that is built on respect for families and recognition of family strengths, and a practice model that incorporates these values and provides for a strong family role in service decisions;
- Among the network's services is a "neighborhood place" for families. This is a place that houses many family supports (often including CPS staff, as well as other community agencies) and where families feel welcome and comfortable;

- The network promotes and expands informal supports for families - the type of help provided from one neighbor to another, and by family members, friends, faith communities, community associations, and the variety of natural sources of help that exist in all neighborhoods;
- Network activities extend beyond direct services. They include recreation and social activities that bring families together and reduce family isolation; community activities that celebrate community strengths and resources; informal discussion groups among parents; community education about the issues surrounding child discipline; community-awareness building about child maltreatment; and advocacy for improved supports for families;
- Network activities are guided by a process of community decision-making that involves parents and residents in prominent decision-making roles.

The second component of community child protection is a change in the policies and practices of the Child Protective Services (CPS) agency so that CPS becomes a partner in the neighborhood network and an even more effective agency to ensure child safety. Specific changes can include:

- Implementing a differential approach to responding to allegations of child abuse and neglect. This allows the CPS agency to respond with the tools of CPS investigation to the most severe allegations of maltreatment, and to use the tools of family assessment and family support with lesser risk cases;
- Outstationing CPS staff (investigation staff as well as continuing service staff) in neighborhoods, where staff get to know neighborhood resources and residents;
- Assigning families in the agency's caseload geographically, so that one CPS worker or a team of workers consistently serves the families in the same geographic area;
- Adjusting the CPS agency workload so that CPS staff assigned to neighborhoods can meet their service responsibilities to families and also participate in preventive approaches and other community activities;
- Serving as a "safety consultant" to others in the neighborhood network, by providing ongoing opportunities for CPS staff to share their expertise with parents, residents, community organizations, and public and private agencies that are partners in the network.
- Over time, this approach creates a culture change in the CPS agency that centers on a sense of shared responsibility for the safety of children. While the CPS agency retains its legal responsibilities for child protection, the implementation of those responsibilities is done in collaboration with its community partners.

"In most places, CPS agencies still bear almost sole responsibility and accountability for protecting children and supporting their families. That's a daunting task. But in a system of community child protection, CPS no longer stands alone. By working in partnership with other public agencies, community-based organizations and neighborhood residents, we have a wealth of resources to call upon to help us respond to the complex needs of families. And, as we join with domestic violence staff, mental health providers, family support workers and others, CPS is no longer the only expert responsible for child safety. Instead, each CPS worker becomes part of a team of experts committed to keeping children safe and better equipped to meet that challenge. Director; Wm. Waldman, American Public Human Services Assoc.

The third component of community child protection involves new roles for community members and community organizations so that parents, other residents, neighborhood leaders, and neighborhood organizations get involved in preventing and addressing the problem of child abuse and neglect, and pursue goals of family support.

While some of these roles have been touched on in the description of the neighborhood network, the possible new roles include:

- Parents can help identify community resources and priorities, through door-to-door canvassing of residents;
- Parents can serve as sources of support for one another, both through the informal arrangements between individuals as well as through more organized activities in the "neighborhood place" and other community settings;
- Residents can organize community recreational events that draw attention to the needs of neighborhood parents, decrease family isolation, and help to build new neighborhood resources;
- Residents can guide the delivery of neighborhood services through their role on the decision-making body of the neighborhood network; and
- Residents can advocate, often in partnership with public and private agencies, for the additional resources needed by parents in their neighborhood.

This aspect of community child protection takes the longest to develop. Its presence is key however, to ensure that the ownership and responsibility for assuring children's safety is genuinely expanded beyond the CPS agency and now resides with a "community partnership" that includes parents and community residents themselves.

The fourth component is a process for agreeing on a course of action with families, where child abuse or neglect is thought to have occurred or is a possibility, that provides intensive attention to a child's safety, involves a full assessment of family needs, and is guided insofar as possible by family input and decisions. While community child protection involves a whole host of changes, it revolves around "getting it right" at the level where it counts most: in the interaction with individual families. In most communities and in most CPS agencies, this means giving new attention to the practice model that is used when staff-whether from the CPS agency or other network members-engage with families, assess needs, and plan with families what supports, services, or other activities will be most effective in protecting children and advancing the family's own goals.

Many types of service interventions and practice approaches may be able to fulfill this goal. The important point, now demonstrated amply by communities' own experiences, is that the practice model be driven by the principles of intensity and comprehensiveness of response, a keen appreciation of the safety needs of all children, and a commitment to having the family's needs and family members steer the course of action.

How Can State and Community Leaders Start Implementing the New Approach?

The first step for state and community leaders seeking to move toward community child protection is the recognition that they and their constituencies desire a stronger, more effective approach to keeping children safe. This is the common platform on which all approaches to community child protection are built.

The impetus for change can—and is likely to—come from different sources in different communities. In some cases, the CPS agency implements reforms in response to class action litigation, or following a tragedy such as the death of a child.

In other instances, the CPS agency itself is the promoter of change, recognizing the limits of its own ability to ensure children's safety without the help of community agencies and residents. This has been the case in states like Missouri and Florida, which have demonstrated how CPS leaders who decide to pursue this approach can generate momentum for reform.

Alternatively, the advocacy for this type of change can come from sources outside of the CPS agency. Leadership can come from the state level, as when a state legislature requests change.

Or, it can be from the community level, where a mayor, a leading community-based organization, a child and family advocacy group, or a group of concerned parents can press for new directions. Regardless of the source, community child protection can not proceed without the strong participation of the CPS agency.

This is not a change process that can be imposed from outside. The CPS agency's expertise, resources, and legal mandate are so important that they must be full, enthusiastic partners in the initial implementation of this approach.

The next step toward community child protection involves deciding "where to start." This will depend in significant part on where a community's strengths lie, particularly who within that community is prepared to champion the reform.

The remainder of this section describes possible activities that could be carried out by select state and community leaders to begin implementing a community-based approach. While leadership can certainly come from many places, those recognized here represent particularly likely initiators of change.

Similarly, the activities suggested here are all starting points for reform that are currently being tested in jurisdictions working to install community systems of child protection. While the suggestions represent no more than "initial steps," they illustrate that a community-based approach can begin with manageable activities well within the reach of CPS and other state and community leaders.

Potential starting points for several key partners are described below.

Child welfare administrators can institute a number of organizational changes that demonstrate their commitment to the new direction. Activities might include:

- Assigning CPS staff to specific geographic areas, and deploying workers into neighborhood settings. In some places that have taken these steps, workers are based in schools, day care or family support centers. By reorganizing staff in this way, workers become familiar with individual neighborhoods and resources, and develop ongoing relationships with families and residents. With enhanced training and management support, staff begin to assume both protective and preventive roles.
- Helping to organize a neighborhood network. As neighborhood-based CPS staff get to know local needs and available supports, they can play a leading role in identifying, engaging and convening key resources and providers. This activity includes reaching out to parent and resident leaders to develop neighbor-to-neighbor supports, social, recreational, and other community-building activities.
- Improving the agency's management information systems and assisting partner organizations to enhance data collection and analysis capabilities. These actions enable CPS and community members, on an ongoing basis, to determine key needs, map resources to meet those needs, evaluate new program strategies, and measure progress toward improved outcomes for children and families.
- Implementing family team meetings. Many agencies seeking to improve practice and secure better services for families have started with this change. The practice is a strong symbol of CPS' commitment to involving parents, neighborhood providers, extended family, and other resources in making decisions about how best to protect a child and support his family.

Family court judges can help to promote community child protection by encouraging new partnerships among CPS agencies, courts and individual communities. Specific roles they can play include:

- Convening CPS workers, attorneys, parents and community leaders to begin a dialogue about moving toward a community-based system.
- Encouraging CPS and other agencies to explore alternatives to formal court involvement. By supporting workers in their efforts to assist lesser risk families outside the court system, judges provide important "cover" that enables CPS staff to look first to neighborhood resources.
- Introducing new programs that divert appropriate families to community resources. Judges are experimenting with community-based mediation, family group conferences, and other proceedings that involve formal service providers and informal supports in safety and permanency planning. In appropriate cases, families have been able to end court involvement and receive support from neighborhood-based providers and residents.
- Implementing policies that move the court toward a system of "one judge, one family." By integrating child welfare, juvenile justice and domestic violence proceedings, courts can preserve resources, avoid issuing court orders that conflict, and improve outcomes for children and families involved in multiple court cases.

“Juvenile and family court judges are required to make critical decisions about children's and families' futures every day. However, protection of children is not the exclusive province of the CPS agency or the courts. The whole community must take ownership for child safety. Before any judge orders that a child be taken from his home, returned to a parent, or placed in any other setting, it is our obligation to ensure that we have as much information as possible about that child, his family, and his or her community. Community child protection accomplishes this goal by bringing everyone with an interest in a child to the same table. In this information-sharing environment, judges are able to render difficult decisions with greater confidence and hope.” Family Court Judge; Hon. Richard FitzGerald, Jefferson Family Court, Louisville, Kentucky

Domestic violence program staff can help implement community child protection by working closely with local CPS agencies to develop an integrated response in cases involving both domestic violence and child maltreatment. Initial steps often include:

- Providing training to CPS, family preservation and family support workers to help them identify and respond more effectively to domestic violence.
- Attending CPS-sponsored training and shadow CPS staff to improve their understanding of child maltreatment issues.
- Participating in joint case conferencing with CPS staff to ensure that child safety and domestic violence issues are addressed.
- Becoming members of neighborhood-based teams by placing domestic violence workers in community settings. In places where implementation efforts are furthest along, domestic violence advocates have joined CPS, family support, health, mental health and other agency workers in neighborhood places, where they help to conduct family assessments, and assist in developing courses of action.
- Establishing a forum for ongoing dialogue with child welfare administrators. This activity allows domestic violence programs to have input in developing or revising child protection policies affecting battered women, and enables both groups to craft joint response protocols and other practice tools.

“Due to both real and perceived differences in focus and approach, domestic violence programs and CPS agencies have historically kept their distance from one another. This has resulted in fragmented responses to women and children. In places using a collaborative community-based approach, CPS workers and domestic violence advocates understand the link between domestic abuse and child maltreatment. They recognize that supporting battered women often offers the best chance possible of safeguarding their children, and providing them with stable and permanent homes. In these places, the domestic violence community and CPS view each other in a new and very different light: as partners prepared and able to secure better services and safety for battered women and their children.”

Domestic Violence Expert Susan Schechter, University of Iowa

State legislators can use the legislative process and their leadership positions to launch and expand reform efforts at the state and local level. Some of the steps that lawmakers might take include:

- Proposing enactment of a differential response system within CPS to allegations of child abuse and neglect, thus enabling CPS to better tailor its service response to families. As part of this activity, legislators might explore other states' efforts in this area, such as those of Missouri, Iowa and Florida, or begin working with the CPS agency to consider implementation issues inherent in adopting a more flexible approach.
- Establishing and funding a "*Quality Service Review*" process to ensure ongoing evaluation of CPS practice, and provide explicit feedback to the agency.
- Authorizing pilot programs across the state that promote community child protection policies and practices. Pilots might include mandating local CPS agencies to test a multiple response approach, or helping ; expand availability of neighborhood-based services for families by establishing "neighborhood places."
- Advocating for sufficient appropriation of funds to support and evaluate reform initiatives.

"We have spent the last 20 years working really hard trying to keep kids safe from abuse and neglect. We have sent CPS workers out on ever-increasing reports of child abuse and neglect. We have begun more and more programs to help families with problems do a better job of caring for their children. Despite all of these efforts, child abuse and neglect continue to increase. Government officials and service providers alone can't keep kids safe and strengthen families. They need the help of community residents to reach out to families and children, and to help identify what works - and what doesn't --in serving families." Elaine Szymoniak, Iowa State Senator

Faith community leaders and their congregations can tap into the talents and resources present within their Institutions to develop services and supports essential to safeguarding children and strengthening their families. Initial activities might include the following:

- Establishing formal programs to support parents and children, including Parents Anonymous, substance abuse support groups, and after-school programs.
- Offering space within the congregation facility for a "neighborhood place" or welcome center for families. This space could house public and private agency workers serving neighborhood families, or could function as a family support center, offering respite child care, or emergency food and shelter.
- Recruiting individuals from the congregation or community to serve as foster or adoptive parents, or as mentors to children or families who might benefit from one-on-one support.
- Convening community celebrations, and organizing other social and recreational activities that help to engage isolated families and link them to neighborhood supports.

Parent leaders are essential partners in community child protection, involved both in the day-to-day protection of children and in planning for and implementing reform efforts. Some of the roles being assumed by parent leaders include:

- Mobilizing other parents to develop and carry out child protection and family support activities. Parent leaders are invaluable in this process, as they are uniquely capable of identifying likely advocates for change, from individuals active in neighborhood PTAs and tenant organizations, to parents who may have had prior involvement with CPS.
- Establishing and leading Parents Anonymous or similar parent support groups.
- Creating "safe houses" for children and adults who are at risk of child abuse or domestic violence.
- Providing information to parents and other residents about neighborhood resources available to assist troubled families.
- Serving on local decision-making bodies charged with planning for and implementing reform strategies.

"When I first got involved with the community partnership I was amazed that there were so many different people sitting around the table with a common purpose -to keep children safe and help families meet their needs. This work has connected me with my neighbors, and I really like that. We get to know each other through social events and begin to build relationships. Then, if I notice a family is having trouble in any way, I feel comfortable stepping in to offer help. Community child protection has trickled down to my kids who talk to their friends about parenting, building support networks, and connecting to neighborhood resources." Parent Leader, Sue Smith, Family Resource Center, St. Louis, Missouri

Child advocates are also well positioned to promote a community child protection approach because of their experience working with diverse constituencies to achieve change. Initial steps might include:

- Drawing heightened attention to the issue of child safety at the state and community levels. This work could include issuing reports on how children are faring in neighborhoods across the state, convening town meetings to discuss safety data and service needs, and launching public education campaigns about child abuse and neglect and preventive steps that might be explored.
- Reaching out to local media to expand coverage of child protection issues and reform strategies being tested to safeguard children and support families.
- Working with residents, parents and other community leaders to advocate with state legislators for changes in child protection policy and practice.
- Spearheading community efforts to monitor and "self-evaluate" the impact of reform efforts on local families. Activities might include helping to collect and analyze data produced by CPS and other partner agencies, and developing neighborhood report cards and other dissemination tools.

There are probably many other first steps that state and community leaders can take - and that is the point that is illustrated here. The important understanding is that the implementation of this new approach can begin simply and can grow naturally from capacities and resources already present in most communities. It need not be approached initially as comprehensive reform. Chances are that

all of these steps, in themselves, will produce benefits for the safety of children. When combined with the many other parts of a community child protection approach, they become even more valuable.

“Child advocates are an important partner in community child protection. Advocates have extensive experience in developing and evaluating policy initiatives, and have working relationships with parents, community leaders, residents, educators, service providers, local media and others. The advocate's responsibilities include identifying gaps in services needed to keep children safe, raising the visibility of children's issues, and advocating for system changes necessary to promote a child safety agenda. The relationship between child advocates and those responsible for providing services is not always an easy one, since this "watch-dog" role can create a level of tension. Nevertheless, it is vitally important for advocates and those within the system to work together, sharing concerns and information, to pursue better outcomes for children and families.” Heitzi Epstein, Child advocate, National Association of Child Advocates

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