Interagency Collaboration
Moving the Needle on Supportive Housing & Child Welfare

Coordination to Collaboration

Collaboration builds upon a base of communication and coordination in a way that furthers shared goals and mutual respect for other system's expertise, followed by formal protocols and policies that allow agencies to play to their strengths while complementing and supporting the work done by another agency.

Recently, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services'(HHS) Administration for Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) launched the multi-site *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System* (the demonstration) – a $25 million dollar federal demonstration based on *Keeping Families Together*, a pilot program in New York City for child welfare-involved families experiencing homelessness. The demonstration required a new level of collaboration across agencies and systems to produce the integrated service structures that are central to the demonstration's purpose and necessary to connect multi-system involved families to the services they need.

This level of integration can take many forms, some of which were realized in the demonstration such as co-locating and cross-training staff, developing interdisciplinary teams whose members are able to marshal the resources of their departments, and creating system liaisons to help coordinate services and service plans.

Effective Collaboration-What does it Take?

The demonstration illustrates that collaboration requires convening and engaging essential partners to develop shared values, vision, goals, mutual trust, and a commitment from all parties to navigate barriers posed by funding limitations and existing rules and regulations. To build this kind of partnership, responsible parties need to align practices where possible to provide consistency for families, share training and professional development opportunities in relevant areas, co-locate staff to encourage mutual support and resources at the front-line level, share data, and negotiate flexibility and priorities.

Essential Partners & Systems: The key partners needed to create supportive housing for high need families include child welfare, housing entities, non-profit social service providers, and additional systems and community partners that provide linkages to health, behavioral health, schools, public assistance, early care and education, legal services, and domestic violence, among others.

Step 1: Get in the same room!

Depending on where a community is along the stages of integration, initial conversations about formalizing partnerships to serve high-need, child welfare-involved families could take many forms. Once parties do get together, they learn quickly about each other's resources, shared challenges, and complementary expertise. Preliminary discussions also offer opportunities for agencies and systems to demonstrate how their assets and needs overlap with the self-interest of other entities.

Collaboration takes time and a dedicated person or lead agency to coordinate the moving parts that foster collaborative planning and consensus building. This is where partners need to be honest about what they can contribute so as to avoid overpromising and damaging a relationship. Cultivating champions at the agency leadership level can help. Another option is partnering with philanthropy to support ongoing mobilization efforts that push the project ahead.

Why Collaborate?

Supportive Housing Helps Child Welfare Involved Families

- Supportive housing can help families keep children safe.
- As a family preservation strategy, supportive housing can help to stabilize the family's circumstances and enhance child safety by offering housing and supportive services before child protective services believes it is necessary to remove the children.
- Offering supportive housing to families shortly after their children have been removed can pave the way for accelerated reunification while still keeping a child welfare case open and expecting parents to complete court-ordered services.

Step 2: Clarify roles

Families facing severe housing instability and involvement with the child protection system have complex needs, requiring wide ranging information-sharing among multiple professionals from different practices and backgrounds. In the demonstration, sites learned to develop system level partnership arrangements that clarified the roles and responsibilities of multiple case managers and promoted a team approach to serving the family in housing. This level of specificity was particularly important to child welfare partners who face very specific legislated and administrative requirements.

The demonstration sites established these collaborations through Memorandum of Agreements (MOA), which allowed child welfare agencies to enter into arrangements with other service providers by outlining reciprocal responsibilities and by sometimes including shared performance measures and reporting and monitoring requirements. In working through the specifics of an MOA, partners were able to ground themselves in the joint commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families and to engage in direct and open dialogue about what may be real or presumed differences in philosophies, language, mandates, and time frames. In this sense, an MOA provided the foundation for collaborative structures that facilitate joint problem solving and decision-making and moderate the impact of existing rules and regulations, such as an Advisory Board or other project governance committee.

While an MOA helped formalize agreements at the onset of their program, the demonstration sites still needed to clarify roles and responsibilities on an ongoing basis in order to resolve inefficiencies or conflicting opinions about the same families. Advisory boards or other project governance structures have helped the sites resolve ongoing implementation issues as well as sustainability decisions.

Step 3: Align practices to meet families' needs

In order for the demonstration sites to integrate services in a way that made sense to families, they also had to develop partnerships that built upon common ground and employed many of the same practices and techniques, while also allowing for flexibility in partners' roles and responsibilities as families' needs changed. For example, the sites struggled with whether to employ single agency service plans, integrated service plans, or coordinated service plans. They recognized that integrated service plans may be less feasible given the specific mandates from child welfare but also recognized the need to develop reinforcing plans among multiple providers that were coherent and lessened family confusion.

Step 4: Cross train & collocate staff

Creating opportunities to cross train and co-locate staff will allow players from different systems to appreciate each other's roles and responsibilities, foster mutual understanding of rules and regulations, align practices, and build knowledge and skills across all levels of the partnership. Perhaps more importantly, it enhances a

community's ability to connect a family to the services it needs, especially when those resources span across multiple service systems.

Jurisdictions can place liaison staff from the homeless system in child welfare offices or child welfare can place liaison staff in the homeless system agency. These mutual arrangements can support real-time information sharing and nimble responses while continuing to support partnership relationship building. The Memphis demonstration site is a good example of co-locating staff to further partnership. In Memphis, the Continuum of Care agency has co-located a staff member in the Department of Children's Services (DCS) to assist with identifying and responding to families with a housing need. DCS has co-located a child welfare case manager with the supportive housing case managers in the supportive housing complex. This DCS case manager acts as a safety consultant to the supportive housing case managers and facilitates Child and Family Team meetings.

What role can child welfare play in supportive housing?

While a child welfare case is open, the supportive housing case manager can and should be involved with the family, working to connect them to services more quickly and communicating regularly with the child welfare worker about the family's progress. That said, while a family is involved with child welfare – they are ultimately responsible for the child's well-being and have primary responsibilities for case coordination and monitoring.

In Memphis, Tennessee, the Department of Children's Services (DCS) designated a child welfare liaison to be co-located alongside the housing provider's case management team. Such a liaison can serve many important roles that enhance that project:

- Work with the implementation team to help identify appropriate families using data
- Coordinate and participate in cross-training activities
- Serve as an in-house expert on housing within the child welfare agency to help caseworkers understand what housing resources are available and what families might be eligible for
- Broker relationships between child welfare and other service staff by ensuring essential partners are brought in to conference cases when necessary
- Ensure that the project is meeting the goals of the child welfare agency
- Trouble shoot policy issues within the child welfare agency to ensure coordinated service plans and good communication across agencies, non-profits and the community at large
- Have access and influence over the education and training of agency leadership, and access to key agency resources and staff

For more information on aligning practice in a family-centered manner, refer to "A Practice Framework for Delivering Services to Families in Supportive Housing."

Step 5: Share data

An effective partnership shares data in order to: identify families, better serve families, track family outcomes, and assess how well systems are performing in serving families and meeting outcomes. While collaboration is possible without sharing data, it is limited. Sharing case-level data improves services for families while also moving the system in the right direction. Data sharing, however, is often challenged by genuine concern for family confidentiality. While a variety of regulations are in place to protect individual privacy, they all allow for the exchange of data for certain purposes, including continuous quality improvement. The ability to use data for continuous quality improvement should be built into the collaboration from the onset. Partnerships must develop data sharing agreements that define data components and develop protocols for information sharing and obtaining informed consent from family members.

Summary

As the federal *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System* has evolved and matured, the programs have experienced first-hand how interagency collaboration can have lasting effects on the families being served, child welfare practice, and the broader community. Creating an integrated solution to stabilize families in the demonstration required staff from different agencies working together on a case-by-case basis on the front-lines as well as at the agency leadership, administrative, and executive levels. This collaborative infrastructure was conceptualized in the planning phase through organizational commitments, such as MOAs; however, the roles of these groups were refined throughout the implementation process and institutionalized in sites' policy and procedural manuals. These experiences illustrate how collaborations between housing and child welfare are critical not only for securing housing and support services for the families that need them most, but also for the resource commitments needed to adopt some of the new, innovative practices developed for the demonstration into standard agency practice.