

Catalyst for Kids

Priority ~ Increase the array of effective, timely, and culturally competent services.

Why this is important

Achieving timely permanence for children in foster care requires a timely assessment of the strengths and needs of families as well as a service-delivery system that provides services that are “on time” and effective in addressing the concerns that brought the children into care. Assessments of services provided and the outcomes achieved identified several shortcomings. The federal Child and Family Services Review concluded that Washington State, like many others, must enhance its service delivery to vulnerable children.

Several factors influence this priority. The federal Child and Family Services Review found that services were not consistently accessible throughout the state or individualized to meet the cultural language and services needs of families and children. In some areas, available services are underutilized. There is a scarcity of information about the effectiveness of specific services in achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

Two broad-based issues further contribute to the complexity of this issue:

Disproportionality ~ Disproportionality in this context refers to the fact that children of color, especially African American and Native American children, are significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system. In King County, a cross-system coalition of child welfare stakeholders commissioned a study to identify the extent of, and contributing factors related to, disproportionality in King County’s child welfare system. Researchers found disproportional representation among all children of color, with the situation most flagrant with Native American and African American children. They further found that this disproportionality increases the longer these children remain in care. At the time of the study (2003), African American and Native American children together made up:

- 8% of the child population in King County.
- 25% of the children involved in referrals accepted for investigation.
- 33% of all children removed from their homes and placed in care.
- 50% of the children still in out-of-home care four years after placement.

Cross-Systems Collaboration ~ Public and private sector stakeholders increasingly recognize the importance of collaboration and communication if children and families are to benefit from effective and timely service. There is a growing appreciation that child protection and well-being are not solely the responsibility of one or two agencies, but are instead a shared responsibility of many agencies, individual service providers and community institutions.

Challenges to collaboration are considerable, and include differences in organizational culture, focus, practices standards, and approach.

Desired Results

- Improved mental health outcomes for children.
- Culturally appropriate services available throughout the state.
- Cross-systems communications and collaborations that enhance service delivery.
- Consistent availability and access to needed services throughout the state.
- Increased use of evidence-based practices and other services known to be effective as appropriate to the needs of the children and families involved.
- Elimination of racially disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes of children of color in the child welfare system.

Response Highlights - Throughout the state diverse stakeholders are responding to these needs. Examples include:

Disproportionality - In King County, a broad-based cross-systems initiative is addressing disproportionality on a countywide scale. Under the leadership of the Region 4 Children's Administration, the King County Superior Court, and Casey Family Programs, the King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality is piloting and evaluating interventions to reduce disproportionality and further identify obstacles and solutions to this reduction. These are:

- *Champions for Permanence* - Students from the University of Washington Child Welfare Training and Advancement Program partner with regional child welfare staff to help identify permanency options for Native American and African American children and youth who have been in foster care for over two years and for whom no permanency plan has been developed.
- *Benchmark Hearings* - King County Superior Court stakeholders (judges, attorneys, court staff, etc.) reform court systems in order to increase judicial oversight and ensure that permanency planning hearings lead to permanency for children and youth who have been in foster care for at least two years. In the pilot year, referrals to the Benchmark Hearings will be received from the Champions for Permanence project.
- *Breakthrough Series Collaborative* - A child welfare quality improvement methodology being tested by Casey Family Programs, in which the Region 4 Office of Indian Child Welfare is testing a series of small changes that team members believe will reduce the disproportionate representation and disparate child welfare outcomes of the children and youth they serve.

Participation in Undoing Racism training by all Coalition stakeholders builds a common understanding of factors contributing to disproportionality and attitudes and approaches required for its elimination.

Cross-Systems Collaboration ~ Collaborative efforts to improve services to children are gaining momentum throughout the state. Examples include:

- *The WISH Family Journal* - A web-based client data management system piloted in Whatcom County. The Journal provides each of a given child's service providers with access to a common set of client information. The project will be piloted with up to 100 families during 2006, and the end product will be replicable statewide as a community-based client data manage system.
- *Collaboration Protocols* - In response to legislative mandate, the Children's Administration and community partners are near completion on their recommended policies and protocols concerning collaborative decision making, including contracting, referrals, and resource allocations.
- *Performance-based Contracting* - To increase the alignment between the expectations of the Children's Administration and its contracted providers, the Children's Administration is instituting Performance-based Contracting. Contracts are based on the attainment of specific outcomes, or desired changes in children, parents, and families, (e.g., decreased isolation, increased use of non-punitive discipline, etc.) instead of on those services that are provided to achieve those outcomes.
- *The King County System Integration Initiative* - A reform to impact youth and families who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Goals are increased cooperation, coordination and integration at the administrative and service delivery levels and greater multi-system coordination and integration to improve outcomes for King County children.
- *Children's Advocacy Centers* - In Pierce County as well as other Washington State counties, this nationally acclaimed service design co-locates legal, law enforcement and child-serving agencies to coordinate services and improve community responses to child abuse and neglect.

Action Needed in 2006

- Support the Children's Administration efforts to improve mental health outcomes for children.
- Maintain and expand upon evidence-based practices and promising practices underway throughout the state.