



Safety, Fairness, & Stability For Youth and Families—

Recommendations to Strengthen Federal Agency Support of Family Engagement Efforts

In recent years there has been an increased focus on effective family engagement as a way to achieve improved outcomes for youth and families that come in contact with the juvenile justice, child welfare, behavioral health and education systems. Historically, these systems have not fully engaged families, in part, because families have been viewed more as a problem contributing to the challenges facing their children, rather than as part of the solution. Further complicating this situation is the fact that child welfare and juvenile justice systems often act as, or are perceived to be, coercive institutions with a historical foundation of separating children from parents who are viewed as inadequate or immoral, substituting the state as the parent (Pennell, Shapiro, Spigner 2011).

Enhancing the level of family engagement in the work of these systems requires them to involve youths and their families in more significant and meaningful ways (Pennell, Shapiro, Spigner 2011). To better understand the policy and practice implications of moving in this direction, it is helpful to define family engagement. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *family* is a “group of individuals with common ancestry, regarded as deriving from a common stock, that are united by certain convictions or a common affiliation” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). For work within systems this definition is expanded to include kin as identified by the family. To *engage* is to “offer, bind, bring together or interlock” (Merriam-Webster, 2011). This definition provides additional clarity to the commonly used terms and helps shape the context of the conversation. To bring the concept of family engagement into our daily practice and allow it to impact our systems, agencies and organizations must respectfully embrace families as partners in their work. Unfortunately, such practices have not been the norm, and, while efforts to do so have been promising, there is much work to be done by the federal government and others to support a transformation in the work undertaken by tribes, states and local agencies.

To this end, the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR)¹ at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute at Georgetown University commissioned a paper titled “Safety, Fairness, Stability: Repositioning Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare to Engage Families and Communities.”² The paper addresses the history of family and community engagement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, as well as in the behavioral health and education systems. It further explores the concept of family engagement as it relates to safety, fairness, and stability for families involved with these systems and includes recommendations for systems improvement.

¹ For more information on the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, please visit our website at <http://cjr.georgetown.edu>.

² Paper was authored by Dr. Joan Pennell, Carol Shapiro, and Dr. Carol Spigner. It can be found at <http://cjr.georgetown.edu> Merriam-Webster. (2011). *Merriam.webster.com*. Retrieved September 20, 2011 from <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/family>; <http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/engage>.

The symposium³ at which this paper was released highlighted family engagement efforts currently underway in communities across the country. The charge issued from the paper and symposium was for professionals working in these systems to continue improving their efforts around family engagement at the policy and practice levels.

The symposium and publication of the paper heightened the awareness of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Department of Education (DOE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and the U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) with regard to family engagement. These agencies concluded that there needed to be a collaborative approach between the agencies in addressing this issue. As a result, a meeting was facilitated by CJJR on September 8th and 9th, 2011, that brought together federal agency representatives, community and professional organizations, parents, and alumni of the systems to create a set of recommendations for improving collaboration in how federal agencies support family engagement policies and practices at the federal, tribal, state and local levels. The recommendations revolved around the following three areas of focus:

- I. Creating and embedding family-focused and strength-based policies and practices within each agency to institutionalize the active and meaningful involvement of family members in their youth’s care;*
- II. Building a systemic infrastructure that formally includes families in the development and implementation of agency/system policies and practices; and*
- III. Supporting families to become more effective external advocates and assisting them in having their voice heard in improving policies and practices involving the engagement of families.*

CURRENT FEDERAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

The efforts to enhance family engagement are being built upon a strong platform of ongoing work by these federal agencies. They are summarized below, by agency.

The Children’s Bureau provides comprehensive support to states, tribes, communities, and child welfare professionals through its Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Network. The network supports a variety of centers to address matters related to Permanency and Family Connections, In-Home Services, Youth Development, Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care grants, Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, and Improving Child Welfare Outcomes by Involving Non-Resident Fathers. The Children’s Bureau provides matching funds to states, tribes, and communities to operate all aspects of the child welfare system and supports innovative research and program development through discretionary grants. The Children’s Bureau has infused into the work of the T&TA Network and its discretionary grants the importance of family engagement and the value of family voice in practice development and service delivery.

³Co-sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, Children’s Bureau; the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; and the U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention

The Department of Education understands the importance of engaging families in an effort to achieve academic success for youth. In September 2011, as a highlight to their recent family engagement efforts, DOE issued a newsletter titled "Engaging Families: Supporting Students from Cradle to Career." A major highlight in the newsletter was an announcement that DOE will conduct four parent forums and summits during the fall of 2011 as a way of engaging families within the context of their community. The newsletter further highlighted that DOE has identified five regional Family Engagement Specialists to work with state and local education agencies to empower parents with information, training and education needed to be full partners in the academic progress of their children. DOE is also focusing on integrating their efforts across the agency with the Office of Parental Options and Information and will be implementing more initiatives in the area of family engagement.

The Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention recognizes the importance of having the perspectives of young people and their family members inform programs and policies. This principle is incorporated into the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, which created OJJDP and established a framework to support and guide the nation's juvenile justice systems and delinquency prevention work. OJJDP continues to engage families in a variety of capacities, such as funding mentoring and peer support organizations, requiring grantees to include youth and family members on their advisory boards, supporting the creation of a Youth Network, and facilitating listening sessions to provide families an opportunity to give input to specific initiatives and obtain general information. The increased attention to this issue by OJJDP elevates its importance for states, tribes, and local agencies and helps give shape to the standard toward which to work.

The Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration has been a trailblazer in the area of family engagement through its System of Care (SOC) work. The SOC guiding principles enforce that families of youth with mental health challenges should be active participants in all aspects of the planning and delivery of services, in addition to being involved in developing system policy.⁴ SAMHSA has various initiatives underway that further support engagement of families and communities in the area of improving mental health outcomes. They include the Child Mental Health Initiative, System of Care Expansion Grant, Statewide Family Network, Youth MOVE (Motivating Others through Voices of Experience), Healthy Transitions Initiative Grantee Program, Project LAUNCH, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Safe School/Healthy Students, Suicide Prevention, Circles of Care, and the Technical Assistance Partnership.

⁴ Taken from Activities Supporting Family Driven and Youth-Guided Systems of Care—Center for Mental Health Services—Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Brief September 2011.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL AGENCIES⁵

As captured above, over the past decade, the federal agencies have increased their level of activity in the area of family engagement. This has resulted in a ripple effect and is slowly changing the level of attention given to the issue at the tribal, state and local levels. However, this work has primarily been implemented within the silos of each agency, with little cross-systems collaboration. Given that research has confirmed that many families intersect with multiple agencies across disciplines, it is incumbent upon the agencies to work together to ensure that all systems our children and families encounter operate in a family focused, strength based manner. Since each agency is committed to family engagement and has its own repertoire of family engagement efforts, by coming together, it is anticipated that the agencies will strengthen each other's work in this area. An additional benefit of this type of collaboration is that families will experience more consistency across agencies at the tribal, state and local levels if they are working with multiple governmental agencies. As a means of facilitating a cross-agency approach to family engagement, there are several steps that should be undertaken as a foundation for building a stronger federal partnership between the agencies. Those efforts should include:

- Establishing a common definition of family engagement.
- Developing a joint mission statement and principles that are the foundation for the partnership efforts.
- Developing support for family engagement efforts across agencies to reduce siloing between the agencies and promote joint decision-making.
- Developing a process to continuously identify and modify federal policies that may undermine family engagement.
- Supporting and/or conducting rigorous research on the impact of family engagement on child, youth, and family outcomes and system performance.
- Identifying foundations or philanthropic organizations that can partner with the federal agencies in advancing family engagement efforts.

In addition to these preliminary steps, it is recommended that a number of overarching activities be undertaken within and across the federal agencies that would strengthen the federal government's family engagement efforts at the tribal, state and local levels. These activities include the following:

- Conducting a scan of all family engagement related activities in an effort to avoid duplication of work in this area, streamline efforts, and create greater efficiency and effectiveness in programs, training, technical assistance, and research.
- Requiring greater cross-systems coordination, collaboration, data sharing, and integration of efforts as appropriate.

⁵ The recommendations are being submitted to each of the referenced federal agencies: The Children's Bureau, Department of Education, OJJDP, and SAMHSA
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- Supporting the increased use of data collection and analysis as a means to determine areas of strength and weakness in engaging families (e.g. inclusion of family engagement standards within the Performance-Based Standards).
- Combining resources to establish a single, cross-agency TA/Resource Center on family engagement or requiring greater levels of collaboration and integration of the current TA Centers in their support of tribes, states, and local communities.
- Providing training for federal staff on the value and importance of family engagement, as well as on ways to effectively engage families.
- Hiring family members (parents/youth) in strategic positions to help support this body of work.
- Changing the language in block and other grants to require the involvement and support of family partnerships.
- Creating a national annual award for outstanding and innovative family engagement work.

These activities should be linked to the following recommendations, each of which is categorized within one of the three key areas of focus previously noted.

AREA OF FOCUS

I. Creating and embedding family-focused and strength-based policies and practices within each agency to institutionalize the active and meaningful involvement of family members in their youth's care.

Recommendations:

- Identify and support the implementation of policies and practices that effectively engage families through demonstration programs, training, and technical assistance.
- Create a multi-system family engagement resource website that maintains information on all federal, tribal, state, and local efforts, including legislation, policies, and practices.
- Ensure that all individuals working within or under contract to federal government agencies are trained on family engagement. Training should be reinforced through ongoing supervision and performance measures.
- Support the infusion of family engagement principles in workforce development and family councils in all government facilities to serve as a conduit between families and facility staff.
- Ensure that each federal agency works in conjunction with their tribal, state and local partner agencies in the development and use of a family involvement brief, brochure, and/or orientation session that informs families on how to navigate the respective system from the local to federal levels.
- Support an increase in the engagement of families across disciplines at both the upper management and direct service levels through ongoing training opportunities at the tribal, state and local levels that instruct staff on how to better engage families.
- Support a national peer-to-peer network that aids families and workers in supporting each other through distance learning opportunities.
- Support multi-systems informational training opportunities on system navigation for families as they become engaged with additional systems of care.
- Develop or support training across systems for staff related to consumer stigma and sensitivity as it relates to biases former consumers and family members receive from people in the field.

- Identify ways to utilize schools as a central location to begin and maintain the engagement process as families penetrate other systems.
- Define and support the role of the courts as a convener across agencies and the bench in improving family engagement.
- Support the expansion of the use of mentoring to include extended family members as mentors.
- Create a cross-system mechanism for measuring systems' performance in engaging families, not just the families' responsiveness to the system.

AREA OF FOCUS

II. Building a systemic infrastructure that formally includes families in the development and implementation of agency/system policies and practices.

Recommendations:

- Create a family engagement toolkit for government employees and contractors that provides guidance related to formally engaging families at the policy making level.
- Require at all levels of government that family advocates are involved in the review of Request for Proposals (RFP) for client-based supportive services. All RFPs should require that prospective grantees include a family engagement component in their response.
- Support the formal involvement of family representatives in the process of interviewing and hiring staff in key line level, management, and administrative positions.
- Support the formal involvement of family representatives in the process of creating, reviewing, editing, designing, and disseminating written and electronic media materials that define and describe agency policies and procedures so that such materials are accessible to family members from diverse backgrounds and educational levels.
- Ensure that government funded programs, including residential facilities, have staff to serve as a family engagement point person or ombudsman.
- Support the creation of a Family Advocate/Engagement Specialist position at all levels of government (federal, tribal, state and local). This person, preferably a family member who has experienced the aforementioned systems, would serve to improve policies and practices that impact how the agency works with families, including but not limited to, engaging in the following functions in their formal roles:
 - Training staff on family engagement and providing post-training support.
 - Supporting an internal family network/council that consists of parents, youth, and family members.
 - Providing on-site case consultation to workers to strengthen their ability to work with and engage families on a daily basis.
 - Training families in advocacy and agency policy to prepare them to participate more fully and formally in policy development.
- Create multi-agency demonstrations projects on formally engaging families at the policymaking level.

- Provide incentives/rewards for states that are successful at formally engaging families in policy development.
- Include youth and family input on their experience with relevant service systems as part of federal, tribal, state and local monitoring and accountability procedures.
- Appoint family members to existing federal councils (e.g. the Coordinating Council for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention) and encourage the same at the tribal, state and local levels (e.g. through Children’s Cabinets or other similar policy making groups).

AREA OF FOCUS

III. Supporting families to become more effective external advocates and assisting them in having their voice heard in improving policies and practices involving the engagement of families.

Recommendations:

- Create a federal family network to serve as an external advocacy group across federal agencies on family engagement issues. The network should be a model that is easily adaptable within every tribe, state and locality with each governmental entity being either encouraged or required to support the development of such a network.
- Develop guidelines on how tribal, state and local agencies can provide opportunities for advocates to impact system decision-making processes.
- Help to cultivate an environment at the tribal, state and local levels that supports and welcomes the participation of external partners as advocates in encouraging system improvements.
- Provide grant support to community agencies for family advocacy training.
- Support the creation of advocacy mentoring networks consisting of parents currently and formerly involved in the systems and designed to provide on-going training to family and community members on how best to advocate for policy and practice improvements.
- Support internal staff training at all levels of government on how to strengthen families in utilizing their “voice.”
- Encourage and support the creation of forums at each level of government to provide an opportunity for families and communities to hear about the work in the agency and provide feedback regarding the current state of family engagement efforts.
- Provide funding and technical assistance support for grass roots family mobilization efforts that serve as a family/community engagement accountability mechanism for the systems.
- Ensure that the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Acts State Advisory Groups (SAG) and other similar groups created by federal authorizations or otherwise, encourage and/or support the role of family advocates. This includes requiring or encouraging the SAG state plans to describe how they will support family advocacy.

CONCLUSION

We commend the federal agencies that have partnered with us in this undertaking for their efforts to enhance their support of the engagement of families within and across their respective systems. It is our hope that our recommendations will serve as building blocks through which the federal agencies may strengthen their existing practice of family engagement and create strong collaborative relationships among each other in support of this work. The recommendations are not exhaustive; but do represent the product of a focused and meaningful discussion between interested parties and federal agency representatives. In that regard, the information should serve as a starting point for federal agencies to explore how they can better collaborate in their work in this area. In addition, while the information contained herein is being provided to those agencies for their consideration, we also believe it has utility at the tribal, state and local levels in improving cross-systems collaboration on family engagement and hope it will also be used in that manner.

The reader will note that in this document the term *family engagement* is used to explore this body of work. It is a term that is being used within the fields of child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and mental health to describe how these systems are working with families. However, it is our goal to see the work in this area evolve beyond engaging families, to fully partnering with family members to enhance the way our systems function on both a policy and a practice level. It is our expectation, therefore, that in the future we will be writing about *family partnerships* in describing how our systems work with families to achieve better outcomes for “our” children and youth.

We would like to acknowledge the meeting attendees who all contributed to the information provided in this bulletin. Special thanks goes to American Institutes for Research for their assistance in capturing the proceedings.

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