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Disparity and Disproportionality Definition

Disparity

While all families have similarities and common experiences, each family is unique. Each family unit presents its own set of strengths and challenges. When families are unable to provide children and youth with basic needs, they should be able to access and use the types of services they require in the right amounts. The mix of services a family needs will vary from one to another, since no family is like another. Services should always be tied to a family's need.

Disparity occurs when services to one segment of the community, relative to other segments, are presumptively allocated, poorly provided or inadequate in addressing a family’s underlying needs; it also means that these differences in service delivery are not justifiable based on the family's identified need, available agency resources or other objective criteria. The effect is that differences may appear unnecessary, avoidable, unfair or unjust. In the context of child welfare, such disparity may result in the family’s inability to access quality care, resources, services or opportunities to thrive. The issue of disparity in public child welfare warrants great concern because families that do not get the help they need are at increased risk of experiencing negative children, youth and family outcomes.

Disparities are often social, political, economic and attitudinal in nature. Societal factors such as institutional and structural racism, poverty and classism have historically caused families of color\(^1\) to endure disparate treatment in this country. Even today, families of color are less likely to access quality health care, have opportunities for positive early childhood experiences, achieve adequate educational attainment and earn sufficient household income. Disparities also take place at the service system level. Compared to other children, children of color that become involved in the public child welfare system experience a higher rate of admission into foster care and a lower timely exit rate.

Disparities are often interconnected in a way that produces a ripple effect and may cause families to experience disparate treatment at multiple points throughout service delivery. For instance, a high admission rate into foster care can result from the absence of quality, community-based preventive resources in addition to culturally insensitive agency service strategies prolonging a stay once a family member enters care.

Disproportionality

Disproportionality refers to being out of proportion. Simply, it is the over or under-representation of certain groups (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, age, jurisdiction, etc.) in a public child welfare agency relative to the group's proportion in the general population. Disproportionality is caused by disparities, some in society at large, and some in public child welfare.

Our examination of disproportionality in public child welfare focuses on race because of the prevalence of racial disproportionality. National data show that although African American/black children account for 15 percent of the U.S. child population, they make up 45 percent of children in foster care.\(^2\) Native American children are also consistently

\(^1\) For the purposes of this document the terms “families of color” and “children of color” refer to families and children belonging to various cultural, ethnic, and racial communities, including African American/black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American/Alaskan Native groups.

overrepresented in public child welfare. Native American children experience system involvement at various stages of service delivery at about the same or slightly higher rate than African American/black children.³

The issue of under-representation usually receives less attention but should also raise concern because children, youth and families who are in need of services and do not receive them are also at risk for poor outcomes. For instance, data show that Asians and Pacific Islanders are nationally underrepresented in child welfare. While Asian/Pacific Islander children represent 3% of the total population under the age of 18, they are 1% of the foster care population.⁴ White children, who constitute 60% of the child population, account for only 36% of the children in out-of-home care. ⁵

While the national data provide a context, disproportionality is largely a local phenomenon. How disproportionality manifests will vary from one jurisdiction to another and therefore national findings cannot be generalized to reflect what is taking place in all states and communities. For instance, Hispanic children make up 17 percent of the child population and 15 percent of the population in the foster care system. This national figure appears balanced, yet Hispanic children are overrepresented in ten states. Since communities and states can experience different types of disproportionality, public child welfare agencies are encouraged to assess for the occurrence and type(s) of disproportionality within their jurisdictions in order to define the problem and provide relevant, effective remedies.

**Interrelationship of Disparity and Disproportionality**

The terms disparities and disproportionality are often confused. In fact, some mistake the terms for each other and may even, in error, use them interchangeably. Yet, the distinction between disproportionality and disparities described above remains critically important. Disproportionality results from disparities.

Disparities, in the context of public child welfare, are created by the policies and practices of public child welfare agencies, and other systems, and may include biased personnel decision-making. Disparities also come from other service systems (e.g., court system) and other larger, societal constructs outside of the agency. It is important to note that the public child welfare system cannot and should not be expected to single-handedly overcome disparities resident in society and other service systems. However, if disproportionality can be tied to disparities of treatment, quality of services or access to services in public child welfare (reasons related to matters of bias, racism, etc.), then the system has a responsibility to correct the disparity and its root causes. In some cases, correcting disparities might mean strategically partnering with other service systems to address disparities in the society at large.

Even if we eliminate disparities that are tied to inequitable treatment, and focused on providing high quality services to those who need them, it is possible to still have Disproportionality—a possibility that has some justification if service provision is tied to need. For instance, an agency might make intensive prenatal services and medical care available to an impoverished community to reduce the occurrence of low-birth weight babies—a characteristic that can bring families to the attention of public child welfare. Here, the service is tied to need and the goal is to achieve reduced disparity and break negative outcomes; as a result, the data could reflect

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that the population in this example is being disproportionately over-served. Yet, the goal of the intensive services is to help strengthen maternal and child health of the community and reduce dependency on public child welfare services. The real culprits of disproportionality are intentionally under-serving and over-serving without regard to need.

It is also important to note that the absence of disproportionality (in other words children represented in proportionate numbers) does not necessarily mean that disparities are absent. In fact, it is possible to observe proportionate numbers of children in care at various service delivery points while certain groups still face disparate treatment. In a hypothetical situation, African American children could represent 15% of the population of a county, and 15% of admissions to the county’s public child welfare system. Yet, they could face disparities by receiving fewer visits from social workers or home visits compared to their counterparts from other racial and ethnic groups once in care. Consequently, the disparity in social worker or home visits in this situation would very easily make it difficult for these children to make a timely exit out of the system. In fact, the disparity would likely cause these children a longer stay in out-of-home placement than other racial groups. Or, a hypothetical county that had high rates of older white youth entering care could also have high rates of African American infants entering care—these numbers could be offsetting and, if disproportionality was used as a signal that there was a need to change the service mixture, it would not show that both of these groups needed more attention. As a result, it is important for agencies to continuously look at their data to understand the full experiences of children, youth and families who become involved in the system to help families achieve positive outcomes.

Disproportionality indicates that an issue of unfair or biased public child welfare services may exist – but it is not proof that one exists. Disproportionality that remains, even after differences in need are well matched and addressed by services, may be desirable. The disproportionate service provision should not be withheld. Instead, the search may be better focused on whether earlier disparate treatment or social conditions created the differences in need.
Overview

This guidance defines racial and ethnic disparities and disproportionality and discusses the relationship between the two within the field of public child welfare. Because all critical areas of the Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance (PPCWG) can play a role in eliminating disparities and materially reducing disproportionate representation, discussions about disparity and disproportionality is woven throughout all of the other 13 PPCWG chapters:

- Administrative Practices
- Budget and Finances
- Change Management
- Communications
- Information Management
- Leadership
- Practice Model
- Public Policy
- Research
- Strategic Partnerships
- Strategy
- Technology
- Workforce

Why is this Critical Area Important to the Field of Public Child Welfare?
How Will Outcomes be Achieved for and with Children, Youth and Families?

By systematically examining this issue so deeply embedded within our society, systems, and individuals, public child welfare agencies can help the field to target interventions that will eliminate public child welfare service disparities over time. This approach will, in turn, help to reduce the disproportionality observed in public child welfare. Specifically:

- All children, youth and families should have the right to fair and equitable treatment based on their identified needs: families should receive the kind of resources and services they need to be safe, well and in permanent homes.
- Framing the relationship between institutional and structural racism and disparate treatment raises awareness about how and why disproportionality occurs in public child welfare and the role the system can play to eliminate disparate practices within the agency.
- The issues of disparity and disproportionality hold particular significance for the field of public child welfare because of its historical and enduring pervasiveness throughout society and evidence of disparate child outcomes.
Disparities in the Public Child Welfare System

At the public child welfare system level, disparities can be produced by the service strategy of an agency. The agency may lack culturally relevant policies, procedures, practices and decision-making. For instance, the agency may not have allocated enough prevention programs in high-risk areas of impoverished communities. The organizational culture of an agency may pose a barrier as well. If an agency observes disproportionality or disparity in its client population but lacks proactive leadership on the issue, the topic may be uncomfortable and challenging for staff to individually make sense of the issue to improve client service delivery.

The organizational capacity of an agency plays a key role in the agency’s ability to provide children and families with needed services. Data collection and analysis by race and ethnicity are critical components of organizational capacity. Agencies need specific, accurate data and data trends on children and youth involved in the system at all decision points, including referral, intake and investigation, reunification efforts, placement and pathways for exiting the system. Agencies lacking this type of critical data are unable to thoroughly examine their performance of service delivery to children, youth and families and are, therefore, in the dark concerning at which points disparities are occurring, causing the disproportionality that the agency is experiencing.

Another relevant organizational capacity issue pertains to the quality of the agency’s workforce. Biased decision-making of individual public child welfare workers and management staff contribute to disparate treatment. Or, staff that has not received adequate training may use a racially-biased framework or cultural misunderstandings in decision-making. Likewise, staff that lack guidance about what they can do individually to eliminate disparities may perceive that these issues are too difficult to address or that disparities are strictly a societal problem and not that of public child welfare. To this point, it is true that the issues of disparities are complex in nature with various culprits—however, individual workers can and do make a positive impact when they understand the powerful role they can play.
Disparities in Society and Other Systems

The public child welfare system is among many systems that may contribute to disparate treatment of families. Poorly resourced public education systems have also caused families of color to be denied opportunities for success in life and consequently perpetuate disparity. It is common for failing schools to be situated in poor urban settings where ethnic minority groups are the majority. These poor performing institutions tend to offer children an education that is poor in quality with diminished opportunity for attaining higher education and escaping the cycle of poverty.

The law enforcement system also shows a high incidence of minority disparate treatment, particularly among African American and Latino males. Parental arrests are a significant contributor to placement of children into out of home care. These arrests may not be equitable. Data show that for weapon offenses, whites and African American youth reported similar rates of carrying guns (5.5% whites and 6.5% African American), yet African Americans were arrested for weapons offenses at a rate twice that of whites (69 per 100,000, versus 30 per 100,000). Although these kinds of comparisons are difficult to interpret, if the same kinds of weapons and same kinds of activities with those weapons show that this is a reliable and valid comparison, then the discrepancy suggests that the probability of being arrested for a violent offense—given the same action—varies unfairly with race.

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Effects of Disparities

Disparate treatment yields negative outcomes for children, youth and families. Children grieve when they are separated from family and significant connections around which they have built their lives. They may also experience trauma, loss of identity or sense of connectedness to the family, community and school structures, including gaps in educational attainment that often result from moving around to multiple, new schools.

The family unit is also affected by disparate treatment. The family composition is designed to prepare children for civic life and self-governance. Families can lose this integrity and structure when they are faced with levels of state supervision. This effect on the family extends to the community level since communities are left dismantled when families are broken.

Disparate treatment has consequences for the public child welfare system as well and negatively affects the agency’s ability to perform. When children remain in care and do not exit in a timely fashion, agencies’ resources become stretched and limited. Child welfare staff are not used effectively (e.g., workers managing larger caseloads) when they could otherwise spend time and resources on other needed issues. At a fundamental level, jurisdictions not addressing this issue of eliminating disparities lose a critical opportunity to reduce the number of children in care. In fact, disparities may detract from permanency and child well-being goals and consequently may cause the agency to lose legitimacy in the community and among clients. Even state and federal stakeholders may deduce that resources are not being used appropriately and may take corrective action.
Approaches to Dealing with Disproportionality and Disparities

Before beginning any approach, agencies should be aware that effectively addressing disparities and disproportionality begins with data assessment. Good data enable agencies to evaluate the occurrence and types of disproportionality in a jurisdiction. Public child welfare officials have a responsibility to understand the situation in their jurisdiction without relying too heavily on what is understood nationally. While disproportionality is a national problem, it is also very much a local phenomenon and must be examined with local conditions in mind. An agency's data system, for instance, can reveal if an agency has a disproportionate number of Native American children entering foster care in a particular county; to this point, the data might also show that a large percentage of these admissions are Native American babies from a particular jurisdiction in the county. The more specific the data are, the better agencies are at identifying which disparities are contributing to the disproportionality they are observing, and the better they are at identifying opportunities to redirect their resources to eliminate the disparities.

Conversely, lack of data, or poor data leaves agencies tempted to guess about the problem, its root causes and any potential solutions for mitigating it. Agencies that lack data are encouraged to optimize internal resources to engage in and improve data collection efforts.

In addition to examining internal agency data, agencies may also gather data from external tools to gain a broad understanding of which disparities may affect families. Various tools have been developed to help agencies understand baseline data about the existence of disparity and disproportionality in their jurisdictions.⁹

Approaches to eliminate disparities will vary across agencies since no two jurisdictions are the same.

Examples of efforts to address the issues have included:

• gathering information about which disparities prevent certain groups from accessing, using or receiving needed services;
• gathering information about and leverage protective factors from various cultures that prevent families from needing out-of-home placement;
• examining how to make agency policies, regulations, training, supervision and approaches to service culturally and linguistically relevant for all families served by the system;
• examining ways to target and minimize biased decision-making of public child welfare personnel;
• focusing on forging strategic partnerships with local, regional, state and national agencies in education, juvenile justice, health and similar entities;
• strategically redirecting more resources to the more needy communities (since agencies may find that equally distributing resources among communities may be a source of disparate treatment since some communities are more affluent than others and may require less services); as well as
• structuring a comprehensive, systemic approach that combines several of these strategies since decision-making at all levels impact disparate treatment.

⁹ http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/dynamics/disprop/Disproportionality_Disparity_Meet.htm
Eliminating Disparity and Reducing Disproportionality Through Critical Areas

Addressing disparities and disproportionality in the public child welfare agency is work that collectively belongs to all members of the agency from caseworkers at the frontline to the agency director at the senior level. Each person will have a unique role to play and that role should be clearly defined. It is also recommended that the agency assign a person or team of staff to lead the charge and keep the effort organized and focused. Companion guides have been developed to illustrate the various roles that public child welfare agencies can play in eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality.
The Role of Administrative Practices

Administrative Practices plays a critical role in eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality for children, youth and families. Administrative staff members from many areas—including finance, information technology, human resources, and legal—help implement the vision, values and practice model of the agency. They often make critical decisions on behalf of the agency that require thoughtful problem solving.

To enable the agency’s work in eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality, the public child welfare agency must ensure that administrative staff members first understand the agency’s position on the topic through its values, vision and overall strategy. Agencies should give administrative staff and program staff an opportunity to talk about the issues of disparity and disproportionality through open forums. For instance, the agency can discuss the “well-being” topic to include matters of identity, culture and race and engage all staff in exploring how each work function of the agency contributes to this goal of public child welfare.

The work of creating equity and fairness for clients must first begin in-house with staff. Specifically, agencies must have created a fair work culture and climate for all staff. As an example, administrative staff must feel that there are true opportunities for growth and advancement in the workplace. They should also perceive that staff are treated fairly by agency leadership and observe that children, youth and families are treated fairly by agency staff.

While administrative staff persons do not interact with children, youth and families as much as they do with direct service providers, administrative staff can play a crucial role in helping the agency reach equity goals since they work with all aspects of the organization. They are involved in carrying out actions and decision-making (e.g., through policies, practices and procedures) that supports the work of eliminating disparities.
The Role of Budget and Finance

Budget and Finance can affect the public child welfare agency's priority of eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality. This function can direct, leverage, and maximize agency resources to help meet the agency’s identified needs. For instance, an agency can choose to direct resources to deal with an "environmental disparity,” or disparity occurring within the workplace. The budget document conveys the agency’s strategic direction of addressing the issue.

The budget and finance function should include frontline staff and management at all levels in the budget process as a strategy for eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality. Participation from a broad group of individuals and diverse perspectives in budget and finance activities on this issue promotes inclusion, creative problem solving and transparency. An agency’s decision to address issues of disparities and disproportionality using budget and finance resources can help an agency demonstrate and communicate its commitment to providing equitable treatment and service delivery investments. Put another way, it helps the community see that the agency can move beyond rhetoric and act on the issue.

Budget and finance plays a role in both defining issues of disparities and examining its long-term impact. For instance, an agency may first have to allocate resources to the area of research in order to collect the baseline data that helps define whether or not the agency has an issue at all. Regarding long-term impact, if the agency identifies disparities as an issue and has dedicated resources toward it, the budget and finance function can conduct return on investment analyses and analyze these data to consider how groups of people are receiving services in relation to other groups. The analyses conducted can also be used to understand the cost effectiveness of service delivery and can lend themselves to redirecting resources if needed.

Public child welfare agencies should be reminded that addressing the issue of disparities and disproportionality cannot be solved overnight and that seeing a return on investment may not be immediate or evident for years to come. Therefore, budget and finance initiatives that address disparity will have to carefully examine data to get a sense of what is effective or not, and why.
The Role of Change Management

As agencies continuously improve their effectiveness in managing change, they will, as a matter of course, experience opportunities for improvements in eliminating disparity and addressing disproportionality. This is because the underlying factors that support effective change management and effectiveness in general positively impact the root causes of disparity. While agencies may identify opportunities for improvement through discovery, they must follow up with action. Here are some primary examples of how effective change management supports the elimination of disparate treatment:

Agency leaders who are effective change agents establish specific plans and techniques for setting strategy and driving high-level changes. They model values that are spelled out to staff and embedded in performance management and other agency programs. From the top of the agency through front line practice, these leaders promote relationships that are strengths-based, solution-focused, collaborative and empowering. They establish a shared purpose and meaning for the agency’s work based on a clearly articulated vision and direction that exist outside of them as an individual leader. This approach to leadership is the opposite of highly idiosyncratic leadership, a form of leadership that typically creates dynamics within the agency that are highly personalized and subjective, mainly based on winning favor with those in power and therefore likely to result in favoritism and unfair treatment.

Agencies that become more adept at understanding and improving their cultures find that the healthiest culture is one that balances various cultural priorities with the mission to best serve children, youth and families. For example, a cultural priority to “treat staff right” is effectively realized when staff are engaged in constructive and collaborative problem-solving, empowered within specific boundaries to perform at a high level, held accountable in a reasonable and consistent manner, and developed in alignment with strategic priorities. Achieving this cultural effectiveness requires a balanced and nuanced approach, avoiding a culture where staff members are happy and comfortable but clients are no better served or even served poorly. In a balanced and nuanced approach to culture, staff members are by definition engaged more constructively, collaboratively, developmentally, reasonably and consistently.

Every agency has a set of “unspoken rules” by which its members learn how to get things done and reasonably fit in. In an environment where change management is effectively practiced, these rules are designed to fill in the gaps where written rules—policies, formal goals, objectives and measures, specific guidance conveyed in memos or formal training programs—cannot and should not be fully comprehensive. An example of such unwritten rules would be those that anchor an agency’s principles and values in daily practice, or those coming from the constructive coaching of a dedicated and experienced supervisor. In an environment where disparate treatment is most likely, unwritten rules typically serve as codes and passwords by which the “in crowd” maintains its control. These unspoken rules are experienced as land mines and stigmatizing factors for those not “in the in crowd.”

Effective change management approaches serve to improve situations where a particular department of function within the organization has felt inequitably treated. Well-planned road maps for change, broad-based projects driven by systematic continuous improvement techniques, and a culture where collaboration and teamwork is a major priority all result in breaking down departmental and functional silos and reinforcing the value that each role, function and perspective brings to the table. In the absence of such effectiveness, departments and functions that are treated as “second class” typically react by withdrawing and reducing their value to the whole, or by attacking the status quo in non-constructive and cynical ways. As a parallel process, this is also what typically happens when individuals and typecast groups are treated as second class.

Finally, the ultimate aim of effective change management practices is to create a “learning organization,” one that not only performs well today in the service of its clients but also
acquires new information, knowledge, insight and innovation each step of the way. Learning by
doing at the strategic, major project and daily operating levels of the agency leads to a
continuous reshaping of perception and perspective along a developmental, evolutionary path.
Learning is arguably the opposite of disparate treatment, as disparity is based on perceptions
and perspectives that are too static—narrowly typing situations and others in a simplistic, black
and white, and close-minded fashion. While an overly static orientation to unfolding
experiences tends to best serve the short-term interests of those “in the in crowd,” a learning
orientation will more likely serve long-term interests of the community as a whole.
The Role of Communications

Communications play a critical role in eliminating disparities and thereby reducing disproportionality for children, youth and families. Once a public child welfare agency has evidence that certain groups are disproportionately represented in the system due to disparities (based on factors such as race, ethnicity, language, etc.), the agency should respond by creating and implementing a communications plan to support the agency’s overall strategy in eliminating disparities.

A communications plan on disparities and disproportionality raises awareness among staff and the broader community. A good communications plan provides context and common language about the agency’s mission on eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality. The plan includes: to whom the message will be communicated (e.g., children, families, staff, policymakers), how and when the message will be communicated, as well as the specific individuals and organizations responsible for carrying out the plan. The plan should include agency executive leadership in its development and implementation. When developed and executed appropriately, the plan allows everyone involved in the relevant communications channels to have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do and how they will be accountable for outcomes. Specifically, Communications:

- Works closely with the agency lead as a starting point to examine the agency’s strategic plan and reviews it for any goals and objectives related to disparities and disproportionality.
- Helps staff understand the issues of disparity and disproportionality and emphasizes key messages to staff (e.g. helping staff understand that disparity is rooted in institutional and societal inequities). Crafts key messages that avoid common misunderstandings associated with this work (e.g. the belief that under-represented groups do not need attention).
- Formalizes agency strategies to communicate information on issues of disproportionality and disparities. Without strategic planning, Communications may be relegated to only crisis management communications.
- Clearly articulates what disparities and disproportionality mean for the organization, particularly how they are measured and observed within the agency through the use of data.
- Identifies and engages participation from a broad working team including leadership, managers, staff and relevant external partners. For example, the participation of Human Resources may be needed to assess performance management and acquire relevant training for agency personnel.
The Role of Information Management

An effective information management system can ensure that relevant data are collected to identify the presence of disparities and disproportionality in the public child welfare system. Data and information provide the basis for understanding this pervasive issue—a situation when a particular racial/ethnic group of children are represented at disproportionately higher rates than those from other groups or the apparent inequity in the provision of services which produces disparities. Data are analyzed and mined to alert supervisors and leaders to other differential impacts resulting from disparities and disproportionality.

For example—in recent years, more scrutiny has been given to the impact on the increasing number of African American children entering the foster care system. Understanding this issue requires effective and efficient information management systems that promote accurate and valid data collection on characteristics (e.g., ethnicity regarding reunification and adoptions).

Information management is a critical component in examining disparities and disproportionality. One way information management is used to address this issue involves the impact at various decision points when a child or family is first introduced to the public child welfare system. Those decision points include: whether a report is made, whether it is substantiated, if the child is removed from the home or does the family qualify for in-home services - all decisions that ultimately impact the outcome for this particular child or family.

As agencies develop or upgrade information management systems, staff that are working to eliminate disparities and reduce disproportionality can play an integral role. They provide a better understanding about the use of data collected related to disparities and disproportionality as well as ideas about how to collect the appropriate data. During various phases of this process, these staff members are also essential in communicating and building agency-wide support for the importance of this work. A highly effective agency will be empowered in using data to inform decision-making rather than functioning in an environment where data are seen as the “thing” that will reveal bad information about performance—particularly when addressing key but controversial topics such as disparities and disproportionality.

Collection of data is imperative to understanding the problem and evaluating how to address disparities and disproportionality. In important ways, data form the most powerful tool in first identifying this issue and then tackling it. A cautionary note regarding this issue is the notion that some agencies may not systematically focus on capturing certain types of data because of a general feeling of being “color blind.” The Disparity and Disproportionality Guidance identifies a variety of indicators to examine before determining to what extent an agency is experiencing disparity and/or disproportionality. It is important to note that the presence of either does not necessarily equate to ineffective or unsuccessful processes, procedures or programs. Information management systems are most effective when they provide leaders and staff with critical data and analysis capabilities to identify client characteristics, report quantitative and qualitative analysis, monitor agency performance and measure effectiveness.
The Role of Leadership

Leadership is central to any work in eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality. Leaders must create a vision to focus attention on what the agency is committed to do and how it should be held accountable. Leaders in an organization must shape the disparities and disproportionality conversation to help staff understand the phenomenon. They set the tone for how staff perceive, feel about, and react to the issues. Leadership facilitates trust among staff to allow open communication by means of relationship building and creating a sense of safety. Finally, leaders must assess their own beliefs, strengths, and challenges on how they will deal with issues of race and racial inequities. Such an effort involves an awareness of the political risks they are willing to take, their ability to mobilize others and gain a critical mass of support, and their ability to build capacity around eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality.

Leaders must embrace organizational values on these issues and visibly act on them. It is their responsibility to see that adequate resources and capacities are used to accomplish the work. Specifically, leadership must:

- Build public will for reducing disproportionality and eliminating disparities among agency staff and external service partners.
- Foster a safe environment, atmosphere and culture that encourage all levels of staff to have genuine and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about race and racial inequities.
- Develop leadership to hire and retain culturally competent staff across all levels – meaning staff members that are able to effectively engage and interact with families from various backgrounds. (For example, a hiring question might ask: “Why are people poor”?)
- Develop ways to measure worker performance regarding their ability to serve families of diverse backgrounds (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation) using data. For instance, the data might be based on a staff’s handling of a hotline call or decision to open a case.
- Develop a plan for training on disproportionality and disparity that addresses how new staff will be trained and how to meet the training needs of current staff.
- Act affirmatively to address staff members who use their power of position to discriminate against others.
- Engage the staff as appropriate in the planning and implementing of activities to encourage staff investment in eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality.
- Frame the issue clearly and develop a strategic plan for eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality.
- Promote legislative changes on the issue as needed for regulatory and policy support.
- Share responsibility through meaningful collaboration with other stakeholders (such as other human service and community agencies) across systems.
- Ensure that agency actions on the issue are based on data, focused on child and family needs, and demonstrate results.
- Make sure that service array is available and of high-quality.
- Value the uniqueness of each family and their input.
The Role of the Practice Model

The practice model defines how the public child welfare agency engages children, youth, families and communities in the development and delivery of a service array. It is a powerful agent of change for agencies seeking to eliminate disparities and reduce disproportionality. While practice models will vary across agencies, each should use one that is research based and provides equitable treatment for all people as a standard practice. In addition, agencies must identify how it can serve children, youth and families in an effective cultural and linguistic manner so that their unique beliefs, values, race, ethnicity, history, culture, religion and language are respected.

Agencies can help eliminate disparities by ensuring that its practice model has a well-established, fair decision-making process for serving children and families that is used by agency staff and contracted providers. Agencies should also work collaboratively with members of the community to understand the needs at hand so that resources and services are appropriately matched to the needs of each family. It is important that community members invited to participate in this work represent diverse perspectives, including community leaders, service providers and members of tribes.

Finally, the agency should respectfully engage families, meaning that all families are actively listened to and are invited to participate in the agency’s development or revision of the practice model. Agencies should draw on the various histories, cultures and traditions of families to inform a mutually developed practice model.

Recommended areas of focus when developing the practice model:

- Provide an adaptable, flexible service array, matched by the diversity of client needs;
- Align the service array with the agency’s vision, values and principles;
- Acknowledge agency views on disparity and disproportionality including the voices of employees, staff and contracting agencies;
- Develop a method for evaluating the agency’s performance in relation to the proposed service array;
- Employ culturally sensitive tools, measures and procedures for implementing and evaluating the practice model; and
- Use research or evidence-based practices.
The Role of Public Policy

Public policy can help public child welfare agencies formulate and garner support and resources for eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality. This guidance limits the term “public policy” to describe how an agency's policies or a full policy agenda provides legal governance and parameters for how the agency will eliminate disparities, including who will lead the effort, the activities to undertake, which resources will be used to accomplish the activities, and in many cases, how the intended effort will be measured.

In the case of disparity and disproportionality, a policy development effort can be helpful in bringing all relevant stakeholders to the table. When developing policies on this matter, agencies should make the effort to develop policies that are well thought out and vetted with a broad stakeholder group to encourage a sound product. The effort of inclusion also helps to minimize contention that may arise from a narrowly developed policy that yields limited or possibly even unintended poor outcomes for children, youth and families.

There are some immediate, positive impacts to creating policies that address disparities and disproportionality. Inequities can arise when cases are handled without standard protocols or decision-making. Policies can be tremendously helpful in spelling out acceptable or standardized behaviors and outlining appropriate actions. Well-articulated policy helps agency personnel understand the logic of the policy and enhances compliance with it.

Policy can also provide a strong basis for evaluation and research on whether current policy efforts to address disparity and disproportionality are effective and to what degree, if at all. These findings help agency leaders modify and improve future efforts.
The Role of Research

Research offers public child welfare agencies meaningful information about disparities experienced by children, youth and families. Research findings from monitoring and evaluation enable the agency to use informed decision-making in determining which interventions will help eliminate disparities. Research spurs innovation and facilitates continuous improvement by outlining what is needed to improve data collection methodologies on disparity and disproportionality issues.

While it is true that research can be expensive, public child welfare agencies are able to use money from IV-E funding that is set aside for program administration and training to research disparity issues at the agency. Funding research on disparities issues can facilitate the agency’s understanding of how to create equity for all through improved program operation, administration and training effectiveness. Public child welfare agencies can also consider partnering with philanthropies and community stakeholders to identify and leverage needed resources for research on the issue.

Agencies should be willing to make the research findings available to partners and stakeholders. Information learned from the research findings helps the agency gain a better understanding of the issue. The information can also prompt instructive questions and enable the agency to develop solutions. For instance, the agency would not hide or avoid baseline data that revealed entry and exit disparities for children of color; instead it would use these data to probe questions that would provide understanding as to how and why this has been happening in the agency.

Agencies should carefully think through the research questions to be studied, being careful that research questions are well designed, objective and avoid bias or personal agendas. Some useful research questions to study on the disparity and disproportionality issue might include:

- Which best practices are effective at eliminating disparities?
- What training and professional development measures are effective at eliminating disparities?
- What are the barriers that the agency faces in eliminating disparities?
- What are the agency’s areas of strength? And how can these strengths be effectively used to eliminate disparities?
- How do other issues such as poverty relate to disparities and disproportionality? What is the relationship?
- What kind of research is most appropriate for better understanding disparities and disproportionality issues?
- What capacity is needed to support a comprehensive plan to eliminate disparate treatment?
The Role of Strategic Partnerships

Eliminating disparities and addressing disproportionality are the result of shared work and partnership among public child welfare agencies as well as government, community stakeholders and allied agencies such as employment and training. Each type of partner adds value to the conversation. In particular, children, youth and families should inform the process because of the unique stories they are able to tell about their experiences, having been served by the public child welfare service system.

The type of partnership the child welfare agency establishes may vary according to the need that is presented. For instance, an agency’s partnership with community churches may involve the recruitment of foster or adoptive families, while partnering with the court may involve establishing protocols so that families involved in both systems are treated equitably. While public child welfare agencies may establish different types of strategic partnerships, all partnerships must promote communication, reduce duplication, coordinate efforts of promoting racial equity and leverage resources effectively.

Strategic partners may include:

- Children, Youth, Biological Family, Kin Family, Resource Family, Foster Family, Adoptive Family
- Public human services programs, including: Medical, Mental Health, Food Stamps, Education, Schools, Juvenile Justice, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Child Care, Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment
- Courts, Judges
- Law Enforcement, Court Appointed Special Advocates, Guardians Ad Litem, Nonprofits, Vendors, Service Providers, Contractors
- Policymakers, Tribes, Regulatory Bodies, Legislatures, Federal Government, State Government, Local Government
- Faith-based organizations
- Philanthropic Organizations
The Role of Strategy

The public child welfare agency’s strategic plan plays a significant role in eliminating disparities and addressing disproportionality. When disparity is present, the strategic plan helps staff, stakeholders, partners and community members become aware of and understand how the issue is occurring in the agency and community. It provides a game plan with measurable goals and objectives, outlining how the agency intends to go about eliminating disparities occurring within and outside the agency. Finally, the strategic plan establishes the direction, expectations and values from which staff at all levels will operate in the joint effort.

As a starting place, creators of the strategic plan should include a vision, mission and values statements that aims for “fair, equitable treatment” for all children, youth and families. These statements must be well known among staff throughout the organization. Likewise, behaviors and actions of leaders (e.g. treating families fairly and justly) must be consistent with articulated values. Strategic plan efforts to address disparity and disproportionality must also include the agency’s scan of the environment that notes challenges and opportunities in order to identify barriers to progress and prospects for achieving desired outcomes. This includes external and organizational strengths, gaps and capacity to change. For instance, an agency could consider if there is an opportunity to partner with a community board or seek out the availability and energy of youth wanting to champion improvements. The agency should also consider and determine if there is mistrust in the community of the child welfare agency, bad press or language barriers. Without performing the scan, the strategic plan is developed out of context and any efforts to address disparity and disproportionality stand a strong chance of proving ineffective.

Those who create the strategic plan need two essential things. First, some form of client analysis to understand who clients are and what they want and need to achieve desired results. In addition, they need a well-articulated practice model in order to know how to achieve that desired change. The latter is so important that agency leaders are encouraged to include staff at all levels—community stakeholders, as well as children, youth and families—in the development of the strategic plan. Agencies are also encouraged to include this broad base of stakeholders in the governing of the strategic plan for accountability.
The Role of Technology

The ever-increasing use of technology in child welfare practice can create opportunities to identify and monitor disparity and disproportionality in a timely way. When constructing technology systems, agency leaders must balance the promises of technology with the challenges it presents. The key is to design systems that capture the necessary, relevant information to address both more effectively.

Data elements should include information on race, ethnicity, and country of origin, health, existence of a disability, language, education levels and services. When appropriately linked, such data elements can measure disparities and disproportionality and measure the effectiveness of agency initiatives that are directed to eliminate disparities and reduce disproportionality. Software should be able to aggregate the information, and correlate it with caseworkers’ decisions about services such as placements, referrals for services, the use of community resources and in-home services. In addition, the software should be capable of capturing trends and measuring the impact of programs on disproportionality and disparities.

To enable technology staff to develop effective systems, agency staff, stakeholders and the children, youth and families served should be engaged in technology development planning, as appropriate and needed. When the agency is working with contract service providers and community based organizations on disproportionality and disparities, the agency should endeavor to make technology accessible and opportunity to participate equally available to these partners. Not only should these partners know what data are needed and how to collect it, where appropriate, the agency should provide technical assistance and/or access to the technology equipment. Analysis is more successful if all entities involved collect the same information, share it expeditiously, then recognize and address the issue or issues, collaboratively.

Technology that connects child welfare systems of care—physical, mental, and dental health, education, juvenile justice, child care, etc.—makes more information available to more people and provides different ways to look at the same data. Each entity can see where it fits and how they contribute to the overall picture. Effective technology helps people from different systems build relationships and work together to address the complex issues of disparities and disproportionality at all levels and promotes integrated solutions.

Agencies must be versatile and flexible in the tools that are chosen. Hardware requirements may include operating systems in more than one language. Software needs may consist of language translators, voice recognition and handwriting transcription. Employee and partner skill development and training should be provided to ensure equal opportunity to all. In addition, modern technology is proving to be an effective way for workers to communicate with children, youth and families served. But everyone may not have consistent, easy access to technology such as e-mail. Some may not be comfortable using social networking methods, finding it difficult to operate or a threat to their privacy. The choices that agencies, children, youth and families make to communicate with one another require ongoing evaluation to ensure that the technology used is effective, accessible and acceptable (e.g., not everyone speaks English).
The Role of Workforce

The workforce of a public child welfare agency can play a tremendous role in eliminating disparities and addressing disproportionality. Whether a frontline worker is engaging a family through a home visit, a supervisor is coaching a frontline worker to improve effective communication with a family or a program manager is determining the type of training needed by child welfare staff, each plays a part to create fair, equitable treatment for the children, youth and families they serve in the system.

The agency’s workforce plan can address inequities since it serves as a blueprint for how the agency’s workforce will operate. Creating or revising the agency’s workforce plan should involve all levels of child welfare staff since all will be required to share the vision, play a part in decision-making to support the vision statements and implement the practice model.

Another critical area of focus for eliminating disparities and reducing disproportionality in an agency is workforce development. Child welfare staff at all levels need relevant knowledge, skills and abilities as well as ongoing trainings on equitable treatment and issues of cultural diversity to make fair, unbiased treatment of children and families a reality. Examples of specific competencies include:

- Family-centered theory and practices
- Recognition of how a worker’s own background, cultural lens, beliefs, religion, attitudes and overall perspective serve as an important basis for decision making and the impact this has on service delivery
- Ability to acknowledge, respect and make room for others with different backgrounds and viewpoints

The ongoing trainings made available to child welfare should not dilute the issue of race just to focus on culture. Rather, it should go beyond culture and address the multiple factors that we use to distinguish identity. It is also important to note that while no one can ever become fully competent and knowledgeable of all cultures, child welfare workers can develop the critical skills needed to work effectively with all families with regard to eliminating disparities and addressing disproportionality.