Systems of Care Family Involvement Series

In 2003 the Federal Children's Bureau funded nine demonstration grants, across 18 communities, to test the efficacy of a system of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system. This 5-year initiative, entitled *Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care* (Systems of Care), focused on infrastructure development to strengthen the capacity of human service agencies to support families involved in public child welfare through a set of six guiding principles:

- Interagency collaboration
- Individualized, strengths-based care
- Cultural and linguistic competence
- Child, youth, and family involvement
- Community-based approaches
- Accountability

In the evaluation of the Systems of Care initiative, one of the guiding principles in particular—child, youth, and family involvement[a]—was found to have a transformative effect on child welfare agencies. To better understand the strategies implemented and lessons learned, the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care (Center) conducted an indepth qualitative study entitled, *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative.*[b]

Drawing on the study's findings, the Center developed action briefs to support child welfare administrators and program managers as they build and strengthen their family involvement efforts. This action brief, the first in the Systems of Care Family Involvement Series, addresses capacity building at the child welfare agency level, and describes strategies for preparing an agency and their staff to engage families effectively. A companion action brief discusses capacity building among family members.

a Referred to interchangeably throughout this document as "family involvement" or "family engagement."

b Available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.

Building Agency Capacity
For Family Involvement in Child Welfare

Family Involvement in Systems of Care

Child welfare agencies participating in the Systems of Care initiative made significant strides in integrating family involvement into policies and practices in multiple realms (see Exhibit 1). As reported in interviews and focus groups with Systems of Care participants, family involvement had a transformative capacity.

- At the **case level**, family-centered practices promoted engagement of parents and family support networks in developing and implementing their case plans. Agencies adopted structured approaches such as Family Group Decision-Making and Child and Family Team meetings. Respectful engagement of family members in decisionmaking and case planning helped them recognize their own needs, strengths, and resources, and become more invested in plans tailored to their particular circumstances.
- At the **peer level**, family members who had previously been involved in the child welfare system served as mentors, partners, and resource guides to help parents currently receiving child welfare services navigate the system and meet their case plan goals. Grant communities helped peer mentors build leadership capabilities and strengthen the skills needed to support and advocate for their peers. In turn, recipients of peer mentoring felt more supported and gained greater awareness of resources and available options.
- At the **systems level**, family representatives adopted active roles in decisionmaking bodies, provided input on the review and development of agency policies and Program Improvement Plans, participated in training of child welfare staff, and served as spokespersons in community forums. Systems of Care communities broke new ground in giving families a voice in shaping policies and practices.[1]

1 For detailed descriptions of the family involvement programs and activities implemented by Systems of Care communities, see *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative* available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.

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As a result of their family involvement activities, child welfare agencies were better prepared to improve the fit between their services and families' needs. At the same time, families felt more supported and motivated to adopt active roles in working toward change (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010).

Despite the progress made, grant sites reported that family involvement was difficult and time consuming. The involuntary nature of participation in the child welfare system among families experiencing or at risk for abuse and neglect increased the challenge of family engagement. Furthermore, it frequently required a considerable shift in mindset from traditional casework. As they planned and implemented family involvement activities, grant communities had to address challenges related to the lack of structure and capacity of child welfare agencies to support family involvement, and the reluctance of child welfare staff to embrace the concept of establishing true partnerships with families. The grant communities underscored the importance of agency capacity building to set the stage for meaningful and sustainable family involvement.

Key Steps and Strategies for Building Child Welfare Agency Capacity for Family Involvement

The experiences of the child welfare-led Systems of Care communities point to seven key steps for building child welfare agency capacity for family involvement (see Exhibit 2). While presented as sequential steps, in actuality, several activities can occur concurrently.

Exhibit 1: Realms of Family Involvement

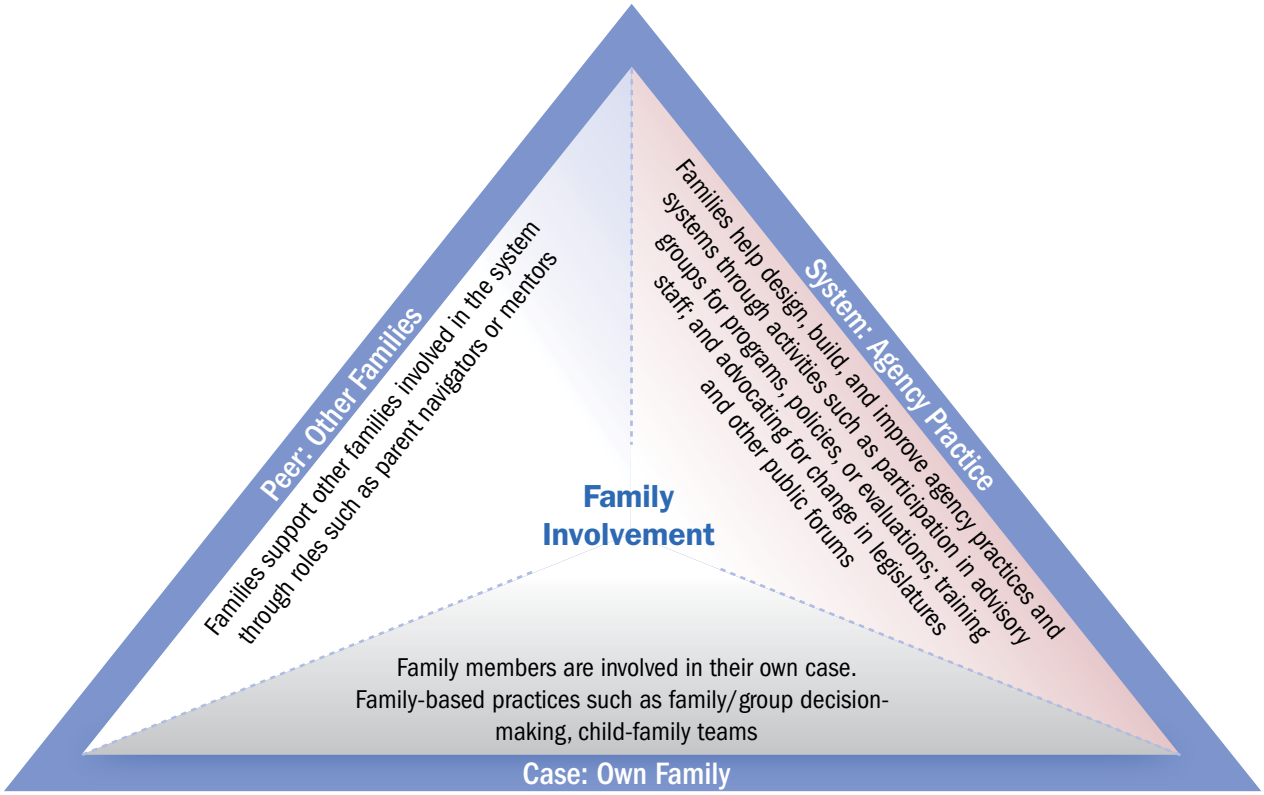


Exhibit 2: Action Steps for Building Child Welfare Agency Capacity for Family Involvement

1. Designate Staff to Coordinate Family Involvement Activities
2. Conduct Research and Needs Assessments
3. Develop and Communicate Guidelines
4. Conduct Staff Training and Outreach
5. Provide Supervision and Feedback Mechanisms
6. Integrate Family Involvement into Policies
7. Evaluate and Refine Activities

Step 1: Designate Staff to Coordinate Family Involvement Activities

An important initial step for building agency capacity for family involvement at the case, peer, and systems levels is to designate staff with specific responsibilities. Most of the Systems of Care child welfare agencies hired staff exclusively dedicated to the integration of family involvement within the child welfare system and across child- and family-serving agencies. Those staff members, frequently given the title Parent Partner Coordinator, were charged with developing, managing, and overseeing all aspects of family involvement activities and programs. They engaged in outreach and social marketing efforts, made presentations about the importance of family involvement, and served on interagency workgroups where they advocated for involvement of children and families. They also recruited and supervised family members who served as peer mentors and participated in system-led activities.

Designated staff should have substantial knowledge and previous involvement with the child welfare system, either through their work or personal experience. Systems of Care stakeholders noted that this expertise and experience help staff members garner respect among case managers and supervisors, and build trust with participating family members. Self-motivation, passion for their work, and commitment to the underlying values of family involvement were also identified as important staff qualities.

Tip From the Field

Dedicate a full-time position to family involvement activities. The success of staff in integrating family involvement into local child welfare agencies was significantly affected by the structure and capacity of their positions. Overall, stakeholders agreed that those positions should be full-time to ensure that family involvement programs are fully operational. Grant communities that did not develop full-time positions reported that their family involvement efforts were hindered, as staff were unable to dedicate the time and resources necessary to support activities.

"The reason [case managers] do this work is because they believe in it and they want to make a difference, and they want to work with families…It's meaningful and important… [Having case managers work directly with Parent Mentors] has re-energized staff…It has allowed staff to see that changes do get made and people do move forward."

– Systems of Care Project Leader

Step 2: Conduct Research and Needs Assessments

In the early stages of planning and implementation of family involvement activities, communities found it helpful to conduct research on family involvement initiatives in other localities and solicit input from the communities and family members they serve. Learning about other existing family involvement initiatives helped communities identify promising strategies and build on lessons learned. At the time these grant communities were beginning their programs, information on family involvement in child welfare was limited, so they relied on literature on effective consumer involvement practices in general and on family involvement efforts in related fields, such as mental health.[2] Since then, more has been written about family involvement specific to the child welfare field. This research base, coupled with training and technical assistance opportunities, can help provide a foundation for new family involvement initiatives (see the resource list on page 13 as a starting point).

In addition to research on family involvement in other communities, internal research and assessment can help child welfare agencies tailor new family involvement programs to their own specific needs and to the contexts of their communities. To gather input and feedback, Systems of Care communities used parent surveys; needs assessments of specified target groups;

and community forums among representatives of birth parents, foster parents, kin caregivers, grassroots organizations, church groups, and other community members. Community, agency, and family assessments can help agency leaders identify and address structural, cultural, and organizational needs, as well as potential barriers to family involvement.

Tip From the Field

Reach out to peers who have been engaged in family involvement efforts. Program managers noted that peer-to-peer information sharing among their counterparts made them realize that they were not alone in facing certain challenges, and helped them develop strategies and re-energize their efforts to overcome them.

Considerations That Inform Guidelines

- Who is the target audience (e.g., all families involved in the child welfare system, fathers, emancipating youth, kin-caregivers)?
- How will families be selected for participation?
- What are the desired outcomes?
- What program models or strategies have been shown to contribute to those outcomes?
- What policies, procedures, and practices are needed to implement, support, and monitor the family involvement activities?

2 In particular, Systems of Care grant communities drew from the experiences of another set of grant communities funded under the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Systems of Care (see systemsofcare.samhsa.gov).

Step 3: Develop and Communicate Guidelines

As child welfare agencies move forward with family involvement programs, it is important that they develop and communicate clear guidelines, which will be shaped by their research and needs assessments, program objectives, and expectations. The guidelines can also be thought of as a roadmap that reflects underlying values and specifies how members of a group will work together to support family engagement (Center for Study of Social Policy, 2010).

Guidelines address the fundamentals of program operations. In a family teaming approach, for example, guidelines would address the specific model to be employed (e.g., Family Group Decision-Making, Family Team Conferencing), how families will be referred, who will be invited to team meetings and how, when and where meetings will be held, whether facilitators will be used, and what support processes will be employed. For peer mentoring or advocate positions, guidelines will include agreed-upon eligibility requirements (e.g., a specified period that a family's child welfare case has been closed, sobriety requirements) and specify systems for work assignments and supervision.[3]

Tip From the Field

Address structural and logistical elements that facilitate or impede participation among family members. For example, in some Systems of Care communities, working family members were unable to attend meetings convened during agency business hours. Local child welfare agencies adjusted their policies and related guidelines to allow agency workers to participate in meetings outside traditional hours, when working family members could more easily attend.

3 For more information on eligibility requirements for family participation, supervision of families, and other topics related to engaging and supporting families, see the action brief *Building Family Capacity for Family Involvement* at www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.

Step 4: Conduct Staff Training and Outreach

As child welfare agencies begin to introduce family involvement strategies, they should make significant efforts to gain the critical support of frontline workers and supervisors. In Systems of Care communities, family involvement activities often met resistance from frontline staff, some of whom feared that they would result in greater workloads, while others had difficulty believing families were in the best position to inform decisions that would affect children and families. Changing the attitudes and beliefs of frontline staff was not easy.

To enhance workforce capacity around family involvement, Systems of Care project staff engaged in numerous activities to communicate the importance of family involvement to child welfare administrators, supervisors, and case managers. During staff meetings and trainings, child welfare staff received information about the benefits of family involvement, the role of participating family members, the peer-to-peer support and resources available for system-involved families, and the implications of family involvement for day-to-day practices. Stakeholders noted that effective managers highlighted success stories in

meetings to bolster staff morale. In response to an internal assessment of strengths and weaknesses of family assessment activities, one community went beyond basic training and held intensive retreats among unit staff that featured indepth discussion and planning sessions. Other communities reported that discussions—between program leaders and staff, between families and staff, and between "champions" and more resistant staff—were instrumental to gaining buy-in over time.

Staff training and professional development is critical to prepare caseworkers for the culture shift of family involvement, help dispel misconceptions about system-involved families, and address caseworker concerns and questions. Of particular importance is providing training to better prepare staff to sit at the table with youth and parents as their partners. Such training typically encourages staff to adopt a strengths-based approach, and to actively listen to youth and parents. Training can help underscore the message that true family involvement means viewing family members as equals, which is often a significant paradigm shift for case managers.[4]

Tip From the Field

Ask family members to co-facilitate trainings related to family involvement. Co-trainers can help model effective partnerships between practitioners and family members. By sharing their personal experiences, family members provide case managers and supervisors with a better understanding of families' perspectives, and the ways that family involvement and peer support can help meet families' needs while also achieving the child welfare agency's goals of safety, permanency, and well-being.

4 For more information about training and links to sample training resources, see the *Systems of Care Infrastructure Toolkit: Training, Development, and Human Resources*, available at: http://www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/soctoolkits/index.cfm.

Common Concerns to Address in Training

- Concerns that family representatives do not have the skills to work with other parents
- Concerns that family involvement programs might result in greater workloads for case managers
- Fears that family representatives cannot be trusted
- Anxieties about speaking freely in the presence of family representatives
- Worries that family representatives will not maintain appropriate boundaries
- Concerns that participating family members will be prone to substance abuse relapse

Recognizing the high turnover rate of case managers, several communities introduced family involvement concepts and programs in new employee orientations. To foster long-term change, they also recognized the importance of educating and attaining buy-in from supervisors and helping them become effective coaches. Toward that end, one community developed specialized training specifically for supervisors on how to implement and support their caseworkers in family-centered practice.

"...Where the real magic happens in the curriculum is when the social workers begin to connect with the Parent Partners, and the Parent Partners begin to connect with the social workers, and they realize they have an awful lot of similarities and in many cases not a lot of differences. And they begin to really respect and appreciate each other as human beings."

– Family Engagement Supervisor

Step 5: Provide Ongoing Supervision and Feedback Mechanisms

As with any new program or practice, ongoing supervision and feedback mechanisms are key components. Consistent guidance, mentoring, and constructive feedback provide valuable support to frontline staff as they learn to work with families in new ways. Managers and supervisors also can support staff emotionally by providing an environment where staff feel safe to admit mistakes, share concerns, and suggest new approaches.

Tip From the Field

Make use of existing technology and quality assurance systems to support family involvement activities. For example, one grant community used an automated information system to alert social workers, supervisors, and managers via e-mail to schedule Team Decision-Making meetings for emancipating youth. Over time, case workers no longer needed second reminders, as scheduling the meetings became routine practice.

"It's a constant struggle trying to show the relevance of [community] constituents being part of practice and policy change…Because this work is fairly new you're always attempting to show the value…You just have to teach, repeat, repeat, teach, and repeat again because it's new."

– Systems of Care Staff Member

Step 6: Integrate Family Involvement Into Policies

Institutionalizing family involvement efforts throughout the child welfare system and promoting sustainability beyond a specific project period requires integrating family involvement in agency policies. Policies can include legislation and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that mandate family involvement and require family member participation in decisionmaking bodies. Those policies not only help ensure that family representatives are included in agency work groups and committees, but also facilitate allocation of fiscal resources necessary to support family involvement at the systems and organization levels. At the case level, policies and corresponding manuals and training curricula can be adapted to address requirements for engaging families in case planning processes through family conferencing or other selected approaches. One Systems of Care child welfare agency, for example, revised its child protective service policy manual to include policies and forms aimed at facilitating identification of strengths during family assessments and incorporating them into the required team case planning process.

Tip From the Field

Involve parents in development of policies, procedures, and materials communicating family involvement policies. ncorporating the family voice is particularly relevant to materials distributed to families to help them understand the child welfare system, child protection and court processes, and parental rights. Several communities invited family representatives to review and revise parent handbooks and enhanced the materials by infusing parents' perspectives.

"We are working with families. They have strengths and we need to build on those. [Case managers] need to hear that from managers and supervisors...but it also has to come structurally through policy and procedure...With both of those things we can involve parents."

– Systems of Care Project Manager

Step 7: Evaluate and Refine Activities

Evaluation of family involvement programs is critically important to their success and sustainability. Program evaluation is an opportunity to assess implementation, modify family involvement activities to ensure they are meeting their goals, and identify the extent to which family involvement results in improved outcomes at the systems, organization, and individual case levels. In addition, agency leaders can conduct cost-benefit analyses to compare the resources required to operate family involvement programs to the outcomes achieved. Systems of Care leaders reported that evaluation findings helped them gain buy-in for their programs from administrative and community leaders and secure ongoing support.

Tip From the Field

Pilot family involvement programs. To facilitate the success of family involvement programs, some grant communities piloted their programs in a subsection of their service delivery area. Piloting the programs allowed initiative leaders to assess and refine components and build a foundation of staff support prior to more widespread implementation.

Local Evaluation Findings Point to Effectiveness of Systems of Care Family Involvement Programs

- Families felt supported, informed, and empowered to make necessary changes.
- Families had greater awareness of permanency options available to them.
- Peer support resulted in improved safety and permanency for children:
  - In Contra Costa, CA, 62 percent of children whose parents had paired with Parent Partners reunified with their parents within 18 months of removal, compared to 37 percent of children whose parents did not have Parent Partners.
  - In Clark County, NV, the percentage of alleged re-abuse cases of children placed with kin-caregivers decreased substantially, from 13 percent in 2005 to 4 percent in 2008.

– Anthony, Berrick, Cohen & Wilder, 2009; Denby, 2009

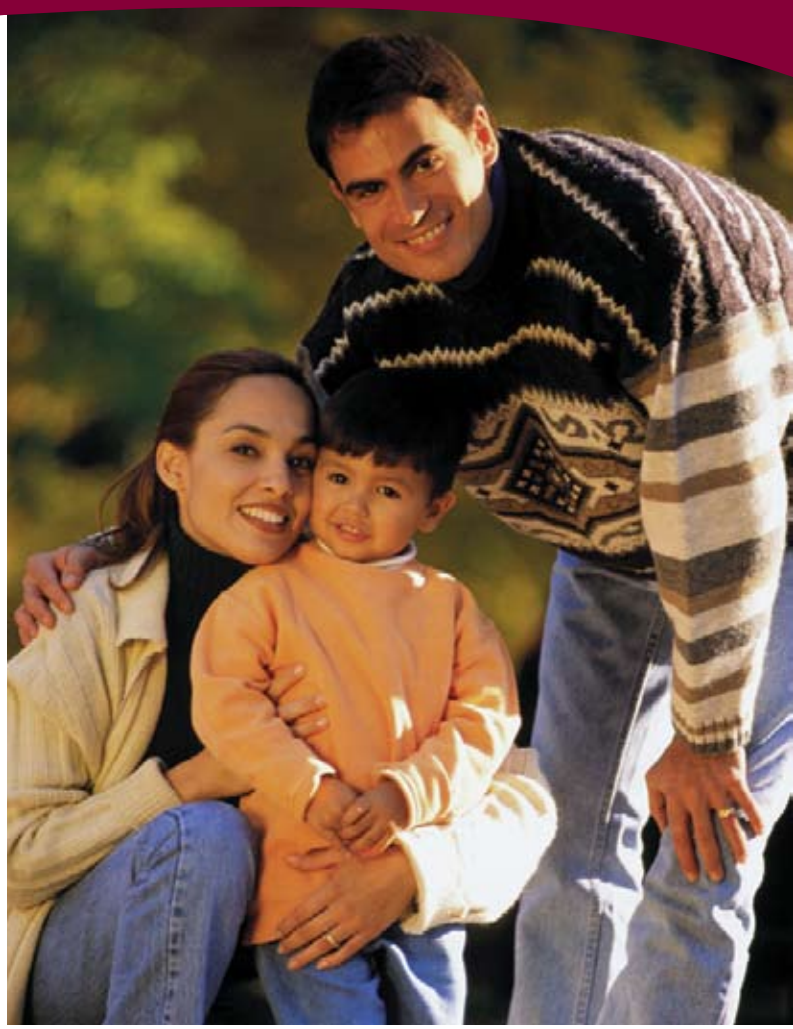
Conclusions

As child welfare agencies participating in the Systems of Care initiative embraced the principle of family involvement, they made considerable progress involving families in meaningful ways—routinely engaging them in case planning, providing peer-to-peer support, and incorporating their voices at the systems level. Stakeholders acknowledged that it was not easy to make the conceptual shift away from traditional casework practices and to view families

as true partners. The path to family involvement was filled with challenges and often required leaders to rethink and redirect their efforts. As with all aspects of creating change, leadership was critical in championing, supporting, and institutionalizing family involvement programs.

Agency capacity building was an important contributor to successful family involvement in Systems of Care communities. That finding is in line with a growing body of research that highlights the influence of organizational factors and a supportive work environment on effective family engagement (see, for example, the literature synthesized in Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood & Vesneski, 2009). The communities established an infrastructure for family involvement and created a favorable environment by dedicating full-time staff positions and implementing guidelines and policies that defined and reinforced expectations related to family engagement. To promote family involvement as an ongoing component of child welfare work, leaders spent considerable efforts generating buy-in and preparing frontline workers and supervisors through outreach and training. Research played a significant role, including external research on effective practices, internal assessment of agency and family needs, and program evaluation to assess how initiatives were working.

The experiences and lessons learned by the Systems of Care communities, coupled with emerging research on effective family-centered practices, can help other child welfare agencies prepare for family involvement activities. By adopting the capacity-building steps and strategies outlined above and, particularly, integrating such steps into family-centered strategic plans, child welfare administrators and program managers can set the stage for successfully working with families to achieve positive outcomes.



"There's never going to be a template for how this works...I think our growing pains and our bumps along the way are what made us stronger and I think each community has to face those in their own way. You just really have to have a certain tenacity to do this... Maybe it's just kind of an expected part of the process; you're going to have to fall off the horse and get back up a couple of times. It's very difficult to implement this kind of programming. It's a paradigm shift for agencies, for families, and for workers."

– Systems of Care Project Director

References

This publication draws primarily from:

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2010). *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau. Available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.

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Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2010). Growing and Sustaining Parent Engagement: A Toolkit for Parents and Community Partners. Available from: www.cssp.org/publications/growingandsustainingparentengagementtoolkit.pdf.

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Kemp, S. P., Marcenko, M. O., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare*, 88 (1) p. 101–126.

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care. (2009). *Systems and organizational change resulting from the implementation of systems of care*. Washington, DC: Children's Bureau. Available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/SystemsandOrganizationalChangeReport.pdf.

For More Information – Selected Online Resources on Family Involvement

Child Welfare Information Gateway
www.childwelfare.gov/famcentered/casework/engagement.cfm

- *Family Engagement*
  www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fam_engagement/index.cfm

National Center on Family Group Decision Making
www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/national-center/

- *Practice, Policy and Implementation: An International Annotated Bibliography of Family-Engagement Strategies in Child Welfare*
  www.americanhumane.org/protecting-children/programs/family-group-decision-making/practice-annotated-bibliography/

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement
muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/index.htm

- *CFSR Training Package. Module on Engaging Birth Parents, Family Caregivers, and Youth.*
  http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/cfsr_trainingdetail.htm#stakeholders

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

- *Family Engagement: A Web-Based Practice Toolkit*
  www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/fewpt/index.htm

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care
www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.

- *A Closer Look: Family Involvement in Public Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care*, www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/acloserlook/familyinvolvement/
- *Action Brief: Building Family Capacity for Family Involvement*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm
- *Family Involvement in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative* www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/FamilyInvolvement_Report.pdf.
- *Meaningful Family Involvement: Beyond the Case Plan*, www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm.