



Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center

A Service of the Children's Bureau

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A Framework for Implementing Systems Change in Child Welfare: A Practice Brief

The Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center (WPIC) is one of five regionally based Implementation Centers, funded by the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to provide in depth and long-term consultation to support initiatives in counties, States, and Tribes to improve outcomes for children, youth and families in the child welfare system. In this approach, the technical assistance and consultation is intended to build capacity to implement system changes necessary for addressing significant, long standing challenges. To support sustainable improvements in child welfare systems, WPIC provides long-term, intensive training and technical assistance to overcome barriers, accelerate the pace of change, and operationalize core values system-wide to transform the system so that new policies and practices can be implemented. Three sites were chosen to be partners in this work with WPIC: the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, Los Angeles County, and the Navajo Nation.

This practice brief provides an overview of WPIC's framework for achieving sustainable systems change, which emerged from and has been demonstrated through the three child welfare implementation projects. The five key elements that make up the framework inform State, county, or Tribal child welfare leaders and related stakeholders of critical considerations as they embark on significant systems, practice, or program change.

Why Sustainable Systems Change is Important for Child Welfare

Child welfare systems face immense challenges to prevent abuse and neglect, reduce the number of children and youth being removed from their homes into foster care, ensure they are safely reunified or find a permanent place to call home. From prevention to permanency, many child welfare systems fall short of meeting these challenges. However, these barriers cannot be fully addressed by solely adding a new program, policy, or practice. A more comprehensive approach is required to achieve and sustain change: one that both addresses systemic issues, as well as implementation of practice innovations.

Improving child and family outcomes depends on improving the services families receive. This requires a transformation of the system. People and organizational structures need to change in order to implement improved practices and policies successfully. This requires a change in attitude (about the problem and the solution), behavior (in planning, assessing, and implementing practices), and relationships (interactions between people and systems).

Systems change involves losses for those involved, including the loss of current, familiar ways of doing business. Some resistance to change is to be expected. WPIC learned the importance of building strong partnerships, improving communication, and taking the time to establish trust among stakeholders as part of the systems change process.

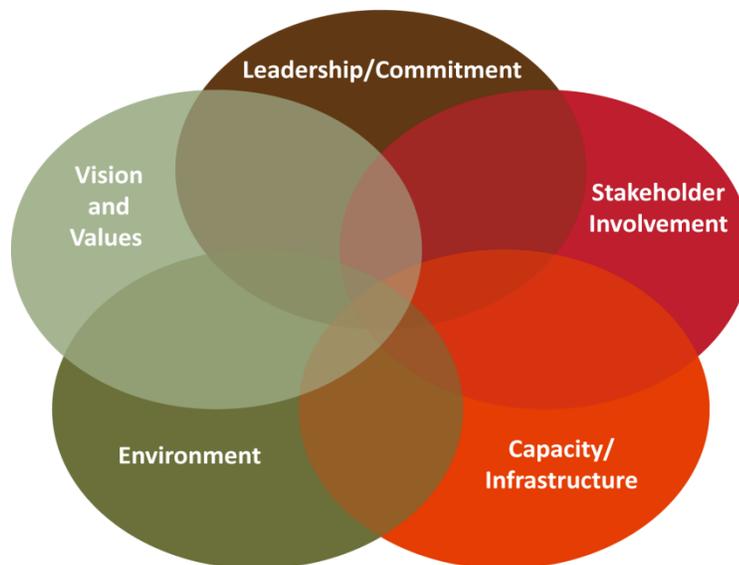


Lasting systems change requires an understanding of the relationships and the whole context of the individuals; organization; and political, economic, and social environment. Sustaining system, practice and program changes that will result in improved outcomes for children, youth and their families requires a comprehensive approach.

WPIC’s Framework for Achieving Systems Change: Five Key Elements

WPIC has identified five key elements that are essential to achieve meaningful, lasting systems change: vision and values, leadership and commitment, environment, stakeholder involvement, and capacity and infrastructure. Implementing systems change requires assessing the system’s strengths and needs regarding each of these elements; aligning organizational culture, policies, practices, and resources across each of these elements; and acting strategically in each of these areas to effect change. The process for enhancing each of these elements of systems change is not linear as they are interconnected. Each element influences and is influenced by the other elements and creating change in one element will likely impact the others.

Key Elements for Implementing Sustainable Systems Change



“As a former child welfare director who has implemented systems change, I think the key elements are such a great tool. The graphic shows all of the pieces you have to stay attuned to as you do the work. If this had been available when I was doing the work, I could have taken it to the Governor, the legislature, the public, and even my own staff. People need to see how their work fits into the bigger picture.”

—Marketa Garner Walters, WPIC Project Director and former assistant secretary of the Office of Community Services, Louisiana Department of Social Services

Vision and Values

Establishing a shared vision for change and reaching agreement about values that guide the vision provides an anchor in the turbulent waters of change. Shared values inform a vision and provide

direction and purpose for undergoing the effort to make the necessary changes. When challenges arise and the work gets difficult, reflecting back on the agreed-upon vision and values helps to realign and refocus efforts: Are we moving closer to, or have we strayed from, our common goal?

WPIC helped child welfare systems and stakeholders articulate and focus on achieving their project vision:

- *Navajo Nation project vision – Promote healthy families through strengthening traditional Navajo Nation child welfare practice while incorporating best practices that expedite permanency, including consistent implementation of concurrent planning.*
- *Los Angeles project vision – Achieve department excellence and child and family outcomes through enhanced business and data-driven decision making processes, respect for and inclusion of the voices of children, youth, and families; and increased leadership and administrative capacity to implement a Strategy Management Model to ensure the strategic goals (vision, mission, and objectives) are consistently implemented across the organization and informed by data and stakeholder input.*
- *Alaska project vision – Keep Alaska Native families intact while providing culturally competent continuum of services to prevent out of home placement, build community based services, and implement changes in child welfare practice so tribes can more actively participate in initial decision making and service delivery.*

Establishing a common vision and values in each of these projects, required engaging *all* stakeholders across the system, including staff, volunteers, and resource families who provide direct services and children, youth, and families who receive those services. Taking time to clarify the different perspectives, values, and expectations that are important to stakeholders creates an important foundation for mutual understanding and respect. Differences in opinions about values can be reconciled through courageous conversations, which highlight underlying barriers and illuminate differences, particularly among those with different cultural world views.

In Alaska, the establishment of a shared vision and values was hindered by decades of historical trauma and distrust between Tribes and the State. State and Tribal representatives engaged in courageous conversations: a process of speaking with a sincere desire to tell difficult truths, while honoring and preserving the integrity of all parties. Through these conversations, greater trust has been established, allowing stakeholders to articulate a shared vision and values and empower them to address difficult issues when values are not being honored.

The Navajo Nation intentionally articulated and communicated what they wanted for the Nation's children for policymakers, division leaders, staff, and families. *“Our Vision is to preserve and restore the harmony and unity of the family by providing for the care and protection of the children and families, which come within the jurisdiction of the Navajo Nation.”* —Navajo Division of Social Services, *Vision for Navajo Nation Families*

The Navajo Nation Division of Social Services published a brochure to communicate its vision and values to all stakeholders, across five regions in the Navajo Nation and 27,000 square miles across three States.

Once the vision and values are articulated, thoughtful and strategic planning can proceed to operationalize and align practices, policies, and procedures with these values. Implementing vision and values requires mechanisms that hold people in the system accountable. Incorporating these values into written policies and training will support ongoing supervision and coaching to direct service staff. A plan for strategically aligning values, practices, policies, and resources to achieve identified outcomes is developed and continuously monitored and results and feedback on progress are communicated to stakeholders.

Leadership and Commitment

Systems change is not easy, quick, or painless. Countless internal and external pressures can threaten to derail it. Leaders provide the face and voice of systems change efforts and maintain the sense of urgency for change in the face of these pressures. For systems change to be successful, leaders at all levels of the system must be engaged and committed to achieving expected outcomes.

Leaders have the power to turn potential roadblocks (such as a negative media attention, changing political leadership, lawsuits, etc.) into opportunities to advance and accelerate the change process. Throughout the systems change process leaders seek to build organizational capacity to learn, innovate, and adapt to changing priorities and new directions. In Los Angeles, leadership turnover was significant. During an 18-month period, there was a change of four child welfare directors. While a change in leadership has the potential to disrupt project momentum, it also may present new opportunities. New leaders can bring renewed commitment and new perspectives to project goals and fresh energy to facilitate implementation.

Gaining the support of key stakeholders who are in positions more likely to remain stable during leadership and personnel changes help maintain project momentum in periods of leadership instability. During leadership transitions, leaders across the organization were involved in the change process and played important roles as champions. *One of the main lessons is to find champions who want to do things a different way ... the champions are there, we just have to find them.* —Los Angeles project stakeholder

Leaders from *all* key stakeholder groups (internal and external, frontline staff and managers/supervisors) must be included and engaged. This is most successful when each leader's involvement is substantial, with clear roles and responsibilities assigned. In the Navajo Nation, the Natannis (leaders across child and family service system—social services, judges, attorneys, mental health, education, and law enforcement) were convened, and their ongoing commitment to the effort ensured that there was interagency collaboration and shared accountability. In the Alaska project, Alaska Natives recognized their role as leaders and found their own voices. Many of these stakeholders have since reported, *"I have come to realize that I am a leader. I do have a voice, and I need to speak up on behalf of Alaska's Tribal children."* —Alaska project stakeholder

Leaders are most effective when they communicate clear direction and hold themselves and others accountable to demonstrating agreed upon behavior changes. Leaders, informed by data, test assumptions, monitor expected outcomes against reality, and ensure that communication and feedback paths exist. They hold and communicate vision and values, engage stakeholders and monitor quality. Without intentional leadership, implementation strategies can lose clarity and focus. Good intentions and

good outcomes align when leaders know how to get results and have the processes and people in place to assure success.

Environment

Environmental factors are critical to supporting and sustaining systems change. Systems change requires considering the context and environment and approaches to achieving change within that context, rather than in spite of it. Organizational issues such as communication, problem solving, readiness for change, resources, and community relations, as well as larger social, economic, and political influences such as media attention, lawsuits, and elected politicians with competing priorities are environmental factors to consider. Where there is political will, community readiness, and organizational acceptance for the identified change, the change is more likely to move forward.

“The environment is always present. It’s the undercurrent you’re swimming with ... or swimming against.”
—Marketa Garner Walters

To support the Navajo Nation project, political candidates were engaged in understanding the challenges to permanency and importance of building capacity for concurrent planning for youth removed from their homes. In Alaska, candidates for Governor were provided insights into disproportionate tribal representation in child welfare, and an elevated awareness facilitated efforts to support practice and policy changes. In the Alaska project, efforts were made to create an organizational culture and environment that fostered and promoted open communication and creative problem solving between tribes and the Office of Children’s Services. Barriers, resistance, and conflict needed to be identified and constructively addressed, and questions about funding and adequate resources needed to be openly explored.

“I would like to see State and Tribal workers working side by side and collaboratively on these cases and have the skills and ability to problem solve when conflict arises.” Alaska project stakeholder

At the beginning of their WPIC project, the Los Angeles County child welfare system was facing a persistent and intense level of media criticism. Staff morale was at an all-time low. The WPIC team focused on creating opportunities for stakeholders to come together, through town-hall-style gatherings, to give voice to their frustrations as well as to celebrate success where it was occurring. By giving staff and other stakeholders an opportunity to provide “the other half of the story,” Los Angeles County was able to counterbalance what had been a pervasively negative environment.

Direct service providers who believe management is out of touch with the reality of their day to day work will follow existing norms rather than adopt new behaviors or practices. Managers must acknowledge that actions on the ground are influenced by environmental circumstances and act strategically given these circumstances to maximize opportunities and address barriers to achieve results.

Stakeholder Involvement

Stakeholder involvement is the extent to which related organizations, staff, parents, and youth have been fully engaged in the systems change planning and decision making process. Meaningful involvement of

stakeholders is important both to build systemwide support and to ensure that the systems change effort is responsive to the needs and desires of the community.

“Once you include stakeholders they come to expect it and keep us accountable.” —LA project stakeholder

Ensuring full representation across the community or among other departments within an organization may require addressing historical barriers, miscommunication, and mistrust, particularly around the allocation of resources and power. Additional resources also may be needed to facilitate full participation of parents and youth. Actively engaging community organizations, support groups, or advocacy groups can help the effort connect with hard-to-reach family stakeholders, while fostering broader systemwide support. These organizations also may help identify the community’s “unofficial leaders”—individuals who are trusted, respected, and willing to speak up. The participation of these individuals may be critical to gaining support from the rest of the community.

Frontline staff are critical for the planning and decision making, as they implement the practice changes and have perspectives and insights into what works and what doesn't. In the Navajo Nation, there were discussions with frontline caseworkers and supervisors about practice-level barriers to implementing the desired systems change, training, and resource needs and suggestions for improving practice and system functioning. This specific practice-level information was not known at the higher leadership level and would never have been identified without this direct engagement.

The Alaska project has found a unique way to accomplish meaningful engagement of foster youth in its systems change efforts. Facing Foster Care in Alaska (FFCA) is a group of current foster youth and alumni that work together to advocate for positive changes to the foster care system. FFCA’s advisory board is very involved in the systems change effort in Alaska—helping to create agendas, attending meetings, serving on the technical assistance team, advocating with the legislature, and helping to keep the focus on their vision for what is best for children and families in the Alaska foster care system.

An organization can implement practice changes through policies, procedures, training, coaching, and supervision and might achieve success from a mechanical point of view. However, expectations identified by engaged stakeholders promotes implementation that is less dependent on the threat of consequences, and motivated by the desire to achieve improved outcomes and be accountable to those being served.

Capacity and Infrastructure

Organizational capacity and infrastructure support can sustain changes in policies and practices within the system. These include funding, staffing, and training, among other factors. Child welfare systems may need additional resources to adequately fund or staff a systems change effort. Alternatively, a reallocation of resources may be necessary to ensure equitable distribution among stakeholder groups, so stakeholders feel they are cooperating rather than competing for limited resources.

Interagency agreements provide a formal framework for collaboration and enhance shared accountability. Collecting and analyzing data informs decision-making about the progress of the systems change effort. Data collection must be sufficient to provide the needed information, and this information must be accessible to all key stakeholder groups. In Los Angeles County, leaders developed a strategic decisionmaking model that will assist them in making management decisions that are more data-driven

and consistent with their overall strategic direction. Leaders were coached to analyze available data, asking “What does this tell us about how our child welfare system is working?” Leaders can then make more strategic decisions about policy and practice to address issues that the data reveals.

Peer learning is another strategy that can enhance the systems change effort by providing hope and showing project stakeholders that change is possible, creating a sense of hope and helping to identify how capacity and infrastructure can be developed to achieve systems change. As the Alaska leadership was unsure how to create differential response systems and build capacity for tribal in-home services, child welfare leaders from the State of Hawaii presented their experiences, sharing strategies and approaches for transforming the system. That experience informed the development of the Alaska in-home service model, which provided a vehicle for building the capacity for systems change among Alaska Native tribes.

Establishing standards of practice, documenting policies, and developing training is critical for building capacity. In the Navajo Nation, WPIC team members are working closely with frontline workers to build capacity in concurrent planning. Through very small, hands-on trainings and case reviews, workers are enhancing their ability to make the very best culturally responsive plans for the children and families they serve, thus ensuring consistency in their work with the Nation’s larger vision of strengthening and maintaining Navajo families. The Navajo Nation's tailored approach to concurrent planning emphasizes early engagement of families in identifying and developing permanency options for their children, with priority given to maintaining child connections to the family and culture. Revisions to policies and procedures, currently underway, will establish clear guidelines to support this practice.

The mechanisms for implementation include how the organization communicates the desired change; feedback loops for evaluating progress and ongoing quality assurance; processes for ongoing training, coaching, and supervision; and resources that are available. These essential capacities must be integrated into the infrastructure of the system.

Framework to Implementation

While implementing systems change is not a “one size fits all” process, there are consistent steps that have been identified and applied to ensure success. Based on extensive research of organizations that were successful in implementing change, James Kotter proposed an eight step process that has been adapted by WPIC¹. While WPIC’s framework for implementation describes *what* needs to be considered to sustain change, these eight steps describe *how* organizations can achieve change. Many of these steps were illustrated in the examples from WPIC projects throughout this practice brief.

These eight steps fall into three broad categories:

1. Create a climate for change:
 - Create and increase urgency and identify the need for change
 - Build guiding teams and form a powerful coalition with strong leadership and visible support from the key people in the organization.

¹ Kotter, J.P. Cohen, D.S. *The Heart of Change: Real-life Stories of How People Change Their Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002, 11).

- Get the vision right and create a vision for what you are trying to achieve and a strategy for executing the vision.
2. Engage and enable the whole organization:
 - Communicate for buy-in by communicating vision frequently and powerfully.
 - Enable action by removing obstacles and putting the structure in place for change, addressing barriers and rewarding those involved.
 3. Implement and sustain change:
 - Create short term wins by starting small to show and celebrate success.
 - Don't let up by building on gains and produce more change.
 - Make it stick by anchoring the changes in the culture and making them the core of the organization.



Conclusion

The process of implementing systems change begins with identifying the issues to be addressed and the goals and outcomes to be achieved. Assessing a system's strengths and challenges in each of the five key elements will inform strategic action necessary to effect systems change. Knowledge about the context is vital to clarify the problems, as well as the potential solutions to be implemented to address them. The following questions might serve as a starting point for considering readiness for implementing systems change:

- What is the problem or challenge we need to resolve?
- What is our vision for the children and families we serve?
- Do we have the leadership capacity to support our systems change goals?

- What environmental factors might help or hinder our progress toward goals? How will the political environment and internal organizational culture effect our ability to achieve the change we are seeking?
- Are stakeholders informing us about the challenges our system is facing, the direction we should be headed, and whether we are achieving the outcomes we are seeking?
- What capacity do we need to strengthen – staffing, funding, training, evaluation, or quality assurance - to achieve our goals?
- How might we proceed with a comprehensive systems change that can be sustained?

The WPIC framework provides child welfare systems with an understanding that all *five* key elements are essential for achieving sustainable change. Implementation efforts in isolation without each of these five elements are not sustainable. No one element is more critical than the others, although each may require more or less focused attention at different points in the process as each contributes to the likelihood of successful implementation. Recognizing the system’s strengths and needs in each of these areas helps to inform the organization how to proceed in creating the capacity to implement and sustain comprehensive systems change to achieve the identified goals and outcomes.