



Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance
Strengthening Families in the 21st Century

Strategic Partnerships Guidance

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Strategic Partnerships Definition

The field of public child welfare establishes and maintains strategic relationships with children, youth, families and stakeholders to improve outcomes by promoting trust, goodwill and accountability.

Overview

Positive outcomes for children, youth and families are a shared community and government responsibility. The work of public child welfare is complex and multifaceted, requiring resources and specialized skills that no one agency can provide to meet all the needs of children, youth and families. To this end, strategic partnerships enhance and strengthen the work of the public child welfare agency.

This guidance will address how an agency should strategically build or change a system to meet the needs and deliver positive outcomes for children, youth and families. It describes the work partners should do to sustain, enhance and continuously improve their relationships.

Questions the Guidance Will Answer

- Why are strategic partnerships important and how do they directly affect outcomes for children, youth and families?
- What is the strategic work in developing effective partnerships?
- What are the dimensions of partnerships that can be considered?
- What are the key processes and how do they support and reinforce an effective partnership?
- What are the roles, responsibilities and competencies of child welfare leadership and staff to develop and sustain effective partnerships?
- What do agencies need to consider in addressing the issue of disparities of services?

Why is this Critical Area Important to the Field of Public Child Welfare?

- Collaboration is in the best interests of not only public child welfare but children, youth and families and all human service programs and agencies.
- It is widely recognized both inside and outside the system that by combining efforts, sharing resources and working towards common interests, entities working in collaboration can accomplish more for children, youth and families than if each partner acted alone.
- Public child welfare cannot be everywhere. The community and stakeholders have to be aware and involved in order to safeguard children and youth and strengthen families. The community and stakeholders must be engaged, intervene and support families before, during and after they face crises.
- Effectively and efficiently using resources through strategic partnerships positions public child welfare as good stewards of public funds and reduces the duplication of services for children, youth and families.

How Will Outcomes be Achieved for and with Children, Youth and Families?

- Effective partnerships address each child's, youth's and family's specific individualized needs and build on their strengths without taking a cookie cutter approach.
- Effective partnerships share some common values and beliefs, are accountable and work towards the same outcomes.
- Effective partnerships take into account the work of stakeholders and the community and use their individual skills and expertise to meet the needs of children, youth and families.
- Enhancing the access to and quality of services through effective partnerships help eliminate disparities and reduce disproportionality.
- Encourage and ensure continuity of care and support after public child welfare's formal involvement.

What are the Markers of a Successful Partnership?

- Partners spend time and energy to build, develop and sustain the relationship and feel that the use of their time together is productive. The partnership will be stable and experience longevity.
- Partners demonstrate regular communication, mutual respect, trust and share information. Feedback should be attended to in a way that is transparent and evident.
- Partners are willing to step forward to support and advocate for the common goal. If partners disagree, they do so respectfully and openly. In a crisis, budget or lobbying, partners respond and come together and do not work against each other.
- Partners innovate, monitor and continuously improve their practices in order to accomplish the goals they establish for the partnership. Their successes may lead to an expansion of initiatives, replication and requests for technical assistance.
- Leadership, political leaders, county executives and city managers demonstrate support through concrete actions such as allocating resources to the partnerships.

Strategy

An effective strategy for partnerships establishes an approach to building and maximizing relationships to achieve positive outcomes for children, youth and families. When working with external partners, it is important for leadership to understand the context in which the agency is operating. Unless the agency is new, which brings about its own dynamics, typically there are past factors which could impact the potential effectiveness of the partnerships. Answers to the following questions will assist in clarifying an intentional and clearly communicated approach which will also consider the history of partners.

- What are the current needs of the children, youth and families and does the agency have the capacity to address those needs?
- Who does the agency currently partner with to meet those needs?
- What are the circumstances under which the agency has a relationship with these partners?
- What kind of relationship does the agency have with the partner?
- When and under what circumstances does the agency change the nature of the partnership?
- Under what circumstances does the agency terminate the partnership?
- Does the agency have a reputation of being a difficult partner? Is the agency known to be one that others do not want to work with or pressures others to get what it wants?
- Are the partners competing over minimal resources?
- Does the agency have a tendency to not operate under business practices?
- Is the agency mandated to form partnerships with unwilling partners?
- Is there a power differential between partners?
- Is there a healthy vs. unhealthy tension?

Types and Levels of Partnerships

Strategic Partnerships come in many different shapes and sizes. Partnerships are complex and over time can have varying levels of trust, experience, turf issues or can need more or fewer resources (e.g. energy, staff and money). This guidance establishes four dimensions of partnerships: networking, cooperation, collaboration and integration. Each of these dimensions can mature over time by becoming more purposeful, intentional, developed and sophisticated. These four distilled or idealized categories of strategic partnerships are represented through a chart. These categories are not mutually exclusive, such that a strategic partnership that you may be engaged in will probably not fit neatly into one category. Real world partnerships may have elements of multiple categories. The purpose of this chart, and our attempt to provide these categories, is to aid in evaluating your partnership as to what degree it achieves your intended level of strategic partnership and to identify areas for improvement.

The successful, maturing strategic partnership addresses differences in organizational cultures, values and diversity, and continually reinvents itself to strengthen its ability to achieve its outcomes. Reinvestment strategies are supported and allow for agencies to keep and use unspent revenues from one fiscal year to the next to provide an incentive for positive outcomes. Successful implementation requires addressing client rights and responsibilities and forming solutions to confidentiality and data-sharing barriers. Moreover, successful partnerships have leaders who see the whole as more important and functional than the parts.

Networking, cooperation, collaboration and integration are described in more detail and an example of each is given to better explain the differences between the four dimensions.

Dimensions	Networking	Cooperation	Collaboration	Integration
Level of Support Required	Individual	Management or Policies	Systems/Agencies/ Offices	Governor/Legislators/ Top Administrators
Purpose	- To share information - For episodic joint activities	- To support a common goal - To streamline services	- To achieve common goals and outcomes	- Re-structuring of services through formal blending of separate entities into one
Coordination	- Short-term or episodic, even if occurring at regular intervals	- Mid-to long-term plans - Activities occur on a regular basis	- Financial agreements blended or braided funding typical - Interagency management teams, oversight groups, or steering committees necessary	- Co-location, joint funding, and managing of services under one management entity
Institutionalization of the Partnership	- Informal	- Mission of each organization supported by the joint activities - Documentation of partnership is typical, but not required	- Formal written agreements, contracts, MOUs	- Statutory and/or regulation - Durable and sustainable - Continuous improvement approach promotes quality and relevancy of partnership
Responsibilities of Partnership Members	- Only certain individuals are responsible	- Most individuals must be aware of and able to support the partnership	- Daily business of every staff member to support the partnership	- Responsibilities are integrated into policies and procedures
Consumer/ Stakeholder Experience	- May be aware of coordination between multiple organizations to provide the service/benefit	- See some difference among partnering agencies	- See little difference among partnering agencies	- Perceived as a seamless, transparent system - Consumers may have little or no knowledge of activities undertaken to achieve integration
Organizational Boundaries	- Relatively unaffected	- Somewhat diffuse to facilitate smooth service delivery/ access	- Mostly diffuse, service provision should be seamless	- Funding and service silos are absent
Metrics and Measurement	- Not required - Numbers of people served and items collected are typical examples of what is collected	- Goal that could be evaluated - Partnership processes might not be in place to facilitate this - Accounting for activities and process indicators are typically accessible at this level and should be assessed	- Outcomes measurement should be integrated into formal agreements	- Established methods for evaluation across agencies

Networking

Networking is defined as the process undertaken by individuals from two or more completely independent agencies or entities for the purposes of information sharing or episodic joint activities that are informally coordinated. Networking can occur through informal information sharing, time-limited ad hoc meetings and low-level coordination amongst individuals within organizations. Networking may occur with all levels of staff; however, policies and accountability among the agencies or entities do not typically address the relationship and it is therefore informal. Networking may or may not require formal evaluation or monitoring of the relationship.

Example: An agency may find that after doing an environmental scan that an increased number of children coming to the attention of public child welfare are from households experiencing domestic violence. The individuals of the agency therefore begin networking and reaching out to those agencies that provide domestic violence services in the community to make them aware of the situation. Information such as agency structure, demographics, intake criteria, contact information and a process for timely updates are shared between agencies.

Additional examples:

- Using technology (e.g., Wikispaces, video technology, dedicated web site) to share information.
- Collecting donated items from various groups for holiday gifts, prom and job interviews for distribution to children, youth or families.

- Child welfare worker service brokering and advocating with independent service providers.
- Publishing and regularly distributing relevant publications (e.g., Annual Reports and agency report cards).
- Sharing emergency contact information (when relevant) and a clear identification of what constitutes an emergency.
- Accessing relevant professional meetings, conferences, workshops, seminars and other cross-training.
- Developing robust information management systems that can easily access and report ad hoc information.

Cooperation

Cooperation is defined as the process of working together for a common purpose to achieve a common goal. Typically, cooperation is used to create a seamless system or an easier, non-duplicated point of access for children, youth and families. At a management level, cooperation involves sharing strategic direction and coordinating mid-to long-term plans. Cooperation also operates at the practice level—coordinating service plans on a regular basis. Cooperation is harmonious and mutually beneficial. Each agency’s or entity’s mission is supported by the joint activities. Written agreements, memorandums of understanding or contracts are typical with cooperation arrangements, but not required. Relationships are characterized by increased trust, and consumers and stakeholders often see little difference among the partner agencies because boundaries are less important and not a barrier to access. At this level of strategic partnership, most individuals in the agency or entity must be aware of and able to support the focus of the partnership. The partnership measures the goals and accounts for activities and progress.

Example: An agency may find that after doing an environmental scan that an increased number of children coming to the attention of public child welfare are from households experiencing domestic violence. The leadership of the agency therefore begins networking and reaching out to those agencies that provide domestic violence services in the community. Additional assessment determines that the public child welfare agency and private providers are serving the same families and have common goals. They decide to support each other in the delivery of services by developing a regional sponsor group to address the root causes or by assigning liaisons to troubleshoot issues as they emerge.

Collaboration

Collaboration is defined as the process of actively working together, requiring a sustained effort of work towards common outcomes at a systemic and practice level. Successful collaborations are formally established through written agreements, contracts, memorandums of understanding and other formal activities, and integrate outcome measurement. Often financial agreements are crafted to blend or braid funding. Interagency management teams, oversight groups or steering committees oversee the effort at a systemic level. Greater involvement of top level executives leads to greater success of the collaboration.

Often, collaborations form to provide a child-centered, family-focused, community-based approach toward cross-system delivery and management of services. Activities may include the cross-training of staff for the purpose of embedding each other’s practices, inclusive encouragement, empathy and recognition in the staff. Families often experience seamless access to and delivery of services.

Example: An agency may find that after doing an environmental scan that an increased number of children coming to the attention of public child welfare are from households experiencing domestic violence. The leadership of the agency therefore begins networking and reaching out to those agencies that provide domestic violence services in the community. Additional assessment determines that those families involved with the child welfare agency are waiting for appointments with the domestic violence counselors, and are therefore not

able to meet the individual goals outlined in their service plans. As a result, the public child welfare agency and the domestic violence provider create a formal agreement and establish a method for evaluation in which the provider prioritizes those families, thus increasing the likelihood of expedited services and positive outcomes.

Integration

Integration is defined as a blending, uniting or joining of separate entities into one whole. This may take the form of several agencies or entities co-locating, joint funding and managing services in one location under one management entity for the purpose of serving children, youth and families. In order to fully integrate services, policies and practices, the entity may need to be restructured. Accountability and evaluation is established across all entities.

Families and stakeholders perceive a seamless, transparent system. Duplication and fragmentation of services are minimized. Regardless of the door of entry, families get what they need. Funding and service access silos are largely absent.

The integration of public human service and management entities often requires statutory or regulatory changes. Consequently, integration is the least frequent form of strategic partnerships, but it is the most durable and sustainable.

Example: An agency may find that after doing an environmental scan that an increased number of children coming to the attention of public child welfare are from households experiencing domestic violence. The leadership of the agency therefore begins networking and reaching out to those agencies that provide domestic violence services needed to assist in prevention in the community. Additional assessment determines that children, youth and families are not able to access the domestic violence services and as a result can not attend case management and therapy appointments. In this case, it is decided that domestic violence staff will be co-located within the public child welfare agency to increase accessibility and utilization. As a result of the integration of the two agencies, combined training is provided to all staff and services are streamlined and seamless.

Planning for the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership

Public child welfare agencies have to be very clear about what their core mission is and about how the partnerships they choose support their mission and the outcomes that are associated with it. When partners with different core missions come together for a common purpose, it is important to be clear about what the partnership seeks to achieve collectively. The partners should invest some effort and time in planning and engage in clarifying these cornerstones for the partnership.

This section outlines the components partners need to consider when beginning the work of establishing or modifying a strategic partnership.

Conduct an Internal and External Environmental Scan

It is critical to assess the current environment in which the public child welfare agency is operating in order to identify opportunities and barriers which impact achieving positive outcomes for children, youth and families. Listed below are factors of the environmental scan which may require the formation of, or changes to, an agency's strategic partnerships.

- Changes in political leadership and agendas, mandates, laws, regulations, policies and practices.
- Evidence-informed practices.
- Changes in social/economic context.

- Changes in available resources or a scarcity of resources.
 - Major budget deficits.
 - Changing national economic picture.
 - Immigration and migration issues, including mixed immigration status families.
 - International and transnational issues.
- A tragedy or crisis occurs that brings attention to a service.
 - Change in business practices or philosophy.
 - Creation of a transparent system of contracting such as performance-based contracts rather than a fee-for-service system.

Within public child welfare, constraints exist that can affect the degree or strength of the partnership. Time, energy and money all have their limits and can be a determinant to how formal or informal a relationship becomes. Additionally, the use of a self-assessment can determine the readiness of prospective partners, which if low, can be a barrier to the development and sustainability of the partnership.

Define the Purpose of the Partnership

To benefit from the investment in partnerships (time, resources, etc.), there must be clarity about how specific partnerships will contribute to positive outcomes and serve to achieve the needs of the agency and of the participating partners. There should be a clear connection between the need for the partnership and the overall agency's Strategy, Practice Model and Workforce plans. An assessment of partners includes whether there is a shared desire for collaboration, identification of resources from each partner and the link to relevant outcomes. It is important to recognize that sometimes partnerships cannot and should not form for various reasons.

Effective partnerships need to be grounded in a shared agreement of the outcomes to be accomplished through the partnership as well as a set of measurements to determine whether the outcomes are being achieved during the life of the partnership. Investing time at the outset to establish these outcomes ensures a greater likelihood of focus and success in achieving desired results. Committing these outcomes to writing ensures both clarity and agreement, and jointly identifies all of the resources available to support achievement of the outcomes and captures respective commitments from each partner.

The issue of disproportionality illustrates an example of a purpose in a partnership. A public child welfare agency struggling with the over- or under-representation of certain groups of children in the system may seek out strategic partnerships with community stakeholders to reduce disproportionality and eliminate service disparities. For instance, an agency determines that a high number of babies born with substance abuse from certain populations are entering into the child welfare system. The agency therefore might identify and contract with appropriate substance abuse prevention/treatment systems as critical partners that can help affected and at-risk families get the services they need to avoid entry into the child welfare system.

Evaluate the Benefits of Partnering

Consider the reasons for initiating or modifying a partnership:

- To have impact on the same client/client service synergies.
- To gain an effective child welfare champion by building a relationship with the partner.
- To create efficiencies.
- To avoid duplication and reduce fragmentation of services.
- To provide a better service than you can alone.

- To gain access to a partner's resources.
- To access people you need through partner relationships.
- To use the environmental and political credibility of a partner.
- To use the partner's "loud voice" (e.g., media, media darling).
- To be a good reference to others on your behalf.
- To gain moral and psychological support.
- To have a partner with skills and capacities complementary to your own.
- To decrease the potential of harm by the partner or because the risk is too great to not have them as a partner.
- To increase the potential for innovation by interacting with a partner.
- To win in a democratic process or vote.

Establish and Confirm the Criteria of Partners

When considering who to partner with, it is important to evaluate the benefits to the partnership. The following are questions to ask:

- Do we share the same vision, mission, values, principles and outcomes?
- Do they have credibility in the field and in the community?
- Are we or they structurally or legally required or permitted to partner?
- Do we or they have resources to share?
- Are their skills and capacity complementary to our own?
- Is there a potential conflict of interest which may arise?

Target the Partnership

Categories of Partners

With so many systems affecting families, lives and the supports that they or their children need, public child welfare cannot do its work in a vacuum. Identifying who is at the table and what is known about them are critical to the overall assessment when determining if the right partners are present to achieve the desired outcomes. Additional partners might be identified or included to meet the needs of children, youth and families.

Multi-disciplinary partners (inside and outside of government) should always be considered if not already present.

◆ **Children, Youth, Biological Family, Kin Family, Resource Family, Foster Family, Adoptive Family (both in the United States as well as in foreign countries)**

As the recipients of the services of the public child welfare agency, these partners should participate in the assessment, planning and service delivery/treatment processes. These processes should be designed to optimize active participation and promote the expression of individual choices.

These partners should have a formal role in informing the policies, procedures and protocols of the agency. It is the responsibility of the agency to provide assistance to families so that they understand the processes established to develop policy and practice standards. They should be consulted whenever possible in the development of these items and should be included in any policy forums that are developed to inform the community and seek input. Agencies are encouraged to facilitate the creation of Parent Partner programs, Youth Councils and other forums for gaining input from these critical partners.

Families should also provide both support and direction to better define the quality markers and standards that relate to accomplishing the goal. They should be involved in quality assurance and program evaluation activities.

- ◆ **Policymakers, Tribes, Regulatory Bodies, Legislatures, Federal Government, State Government, Local Government**

Policymakers as “partners” are, in fact, representing the governance of the agency whether directly or through provisions of law, allocation of resources or oversight. All policies and activities of the agency should reflect the direction that is provided by policy makers and the agency should seek clarification of legislative or administrative intent whenever there is any doubt about the intent of the laws, regulations and other governing principles that are given to the agency.

- ◆ **Public Human Services Programs (Medical, Mental Health, Food Stamps, Education, Schools, Juvenile Justice, TANF, Child Care, Developmental Disabilities, Workforce Development, Vocational Rehabilitation), Substance Abuse Providers, Hospitals, Housing**

The public child welfare agency should be coordinating with these other agencies to identify how they serve common clients and can maximize their effectiveness in achieving the outcomes that are critical to each partner and to the children, youth and families they serve. Mature partnerships collaborate to blend or braid funding, or to create common assessment and service delivery processes. Public health and human services agencies can integrate their programs to reduce duplication and fragmentation, and to make access to services by families seamless and more helpful.

These other public health and human service agencies provide critical ancillary services to maintain children in their own homes. They are key in both prevention and after-care/wrap-around services. Further, these agencies can help reunite families by delivering critical services to birth parents through residential or community-based care and family support services. When such services are delivered with the explicit objective of re-uniting or maintaining family connections, they can be particularly effective. The public child welfare agency should develop strategic partnerships with these agencies to assist families in accessing necessary supports and services that are not available within the agency itself.

Vignette: Child welfare and public education professionals in California have come together to form the California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care (CEC). The goal of this collaboration is to increase educational outcomes for foster care youth in three counties: Fresno, Sacramento and San Diego. As part of this initiative, Fresno County has adopted a comprehensive Foster Youth Student Information Database that allows all stakeholders to gather and transfer the student's health, placement and education records. This database helps create a seamless transition for youth who need to be enrolled in a new school.¹

- ◆ **Courts, Judges**

The relationship courts and judges have to the public child welfare system are distinctly different than other partnerships. Because courts have “the primary obligation to ensure the legal and constitutional rights of children, youth and families²” and judges “make all their decisions based upon applying state law and court rules of procedure to the facts put before them³,” courts and judges should not “partner” with the public child welfare

¹ American Bar Association and Casey Family Programs. (2007). *Blueprint for change education success for children in foster care*. Washington, DC: Legal Center for Foster Care and Education.

² American Public Human Services Association. (2009). *A framework for safety in child welfare*. Washington, DC: National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators.

³ American Public Human Services Association. (2009). *A framework for safety in child welfare*. Washington, DC: National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators.

agency at the individual case level. The court is expected to make decisions based on evidence before them and on the recommendations of the public child welfare agency. By not “partnering” on the individual case level, the court and judges are able to remain unbiased or uninfluenced in their decisions.

It is critical, however, for the public child welfare agencies and the courts and judges to form partnerships to inform system improvement initiatives. At a strategic level, when public child welfare agencies and the courts and judges partner to improve system processes and resolve practice issues, outcomes for children, youth and families are affected. Examples of partnerships between the two entities may include the development of communications or decision-making processes, the implementation of coordinated or shared training and opportunities to meet to review data and outcomes.

◆ **Law Enforcement, CASA, GALs, Law Guardians, Deputy Attorneys General, Foster Care Review Boards**

These partners have a statutorily defined public safety role that specifies how they relate to abused and neglected children and to the public child welfare agency. The public child welfare agency should meet regularly with these partners to clearly outline their relative roles in serving children, youth and families and to collaborate on the development of policies, protocols and practices to achieve common goals with a shared set of measurements (e.g., time to permanency, etc.).

- With local law enforcement agencies, public child welfare agencies should have detailed, updated Memoranda of Understanding to define the responsibilities of each agency when they are involved with common cases or investigations, including protocols for what happens to children if the primary caregiver is arrested, and to describe which cases will be handled unilaterally.
- Effectively working with CASA, Respondent Counsel and *Guardians ad litem* require the public child welfare agencies to have common training on assessment tools, cultural competency and the format and function of legal planning protocols and documents. The more commonly developed and accepted the protocols are, the less likely that proceedings will be adversarial, and the greater likelihood that families will be helped by the legal process.
- For cases involving foreign nationals or cases involving relative searches and placement for families not residing in the United States, there should be the development of “best practice” guidelines and policy to assist judges and other court staff on these often rare but complicated cases.

The efforts by these partners are critical to the process of ensuring children’s safety and timely permanence. Sometimes members of these groups are responding to an alert of some kind and are often called on to make instant decisions, which are later revisited and in some cases revised, which can strain the partnership. This area of decision-making is a good place to ensure that a partnership’s stated goals are maintained. At all times consider implications of actions, protocols and practices on disproportionality and disparate outcomes.

◆ **Nonprofits, Vendors, Service Providers, Contractors, Private Providers**

These partners provide direct services to the children, youth and families of the public child welfare agency and are essential for remedying the conditions that led to the abuse and neglect, or the risk of abuse and neglect. Sometimes these partners carry out the public role of the agency through privatization. The public child welfare agency should assess if these providers share a similar vision and mission, shared goals and adhere to the agency’s Practice Model. Additionally, the agency should meet regularly

with these providers in order to design and implement services that specifically address the needs of children, youth and families in the child welfare system and, where appropriate, to write contracts that specify the nature of these services and their relationship to achieving jointly agreed upon outcomes.

◆ **Community, Advocates, Local Foundations, National Organizations, Universities, Faith-based Organizations, National Associations, Service Organizations**

These partners represent the community at large and can advocate for resources and policies that are essential to the creation of an effective service delivery system. The agency should be sensitive to the interests of these stakeholders and responsive to their requests for information and input to the development of policies and bring them to the table in partnership capacity.

Members of this group provide critical watchdog/oversight functions for the community both in short-term emergency situations and also in long-term evaluation capacities by setting agendas, reviewing outcomes and coordinating additional collaborations. In short, they are critical to ensuring accountability among partners.

Partnership Structure

After an assessment has been completed to identify the purpose of the partnership, it is important for all parties to determine and agree upon the appropriate structure the partnership will take.

The structural forms that these types of partnership can take are:

- Committees (serving together or forming a joint one)
- Boards
- Coalitions
- Sponsors/Oversight Groups
- Contractual Payers and Performers (typically one partner is a funder and one is providing a product or service)
- Informal Groups and Networks—exchange clubs, Kiwanis, Rotary

Key Processes

The purpose of this section is to highlight some key processes, which when carefully cultivated, will offer necessary support to partnerships without becoming an impediment to the most important aspect of the collaboration—achieving its stated goal.

Governance and Ground Rules for the Partnership

At the outset of each partnership, it is critical to come to agreement on how the partnership will be managed, how decisions are to be made and who has the authority to do what with respect to the terms of the partnership. Key questions to ask:

- Who has authority for what?
- Who serves in which role?
- Who can make the final decisions?
- Are there occasions or topics when the answers to these questions may change?

Establish or formalize the relationship when this is appropriate. Depending on the nature of the partnership, this may be in the form of a contract, a Memorandum of Understanding or it may be more informal such as a signed letter of agreement. In any case, the document would specify the purpose of the partnership, name the members and establish their roles and be clear about the expectations and associated responsibilities for the partners. Many of the process principles outlined in the sections below should be incorporated into the partnership agreement.

Partners should define what constitutes a potential for a conflict or perceived conflict of interest, particularly with entities that receive public funds but who also have a place at a collaborative table.

All stakeholders or partners by definition are responsible for supporting a partnership. Often the structure of the partnership helps defines the roles. For example, in a contractual relationship, the parties may negotiate the partnership strategy, but then the public child welfare agency may assume a leadership role in monitoring the relationship, gathering information, reporting on progress and then soliciting input for improvement.

It is equally important to establish ground rules with clients and consumers which will govern the relationship when engaged in a partnership with the agency.

Decide on Communication Strategies

Frequent communication among members is essential to a functional partnership. Generally, regular, informal communication via telephone and email will keep members informed. However, the agreement that forms the partnership should specify regular formal communication that keeps stakeholders informed about the partnership's activities.

Communication should not be limited to the partnership, but should also include managers, staff and leadership. This fosters accountability, while also supporting the partnership itself so that information about what the partnership is doing is shared among those who may be in a support role rather than a decision-making role.

First and foremost we are stewards of the public trust. Therefore clear confidentiality policies must be in place. The policy should reflect the principle that respecting the privacy of individuals involved in the child welfare system is a critical ethical and legal necessity. Mature partners develop information-sharing agreements, which should include families having informed consent rights to decide what information will be shared and with whom.

In most cases, there should be transparency without information overload. Everyone need not know everything, but successes—evidence that the partnership is making a positive difference—should be made public. Similarly, failures (but not each stumble) should be made known, along with the action steps being taken to prevent re-occurrence. And finally, vocal critics should be heard and acknowledged; sometimes they can become the best allies.

Whenever meetings are convened with external partners, the public child welfare agency should be clear about its openness and willingness to work in concert with its partners; the agency should consider convening advisory councils that invite the participation of partners in the development of policies and seek input on existing policies, protocols and procedures. The agency should convene such a council regularly—or create another forum—in order to review performance and to seek suggestions regarding how to improve performance by collaborating with partners.

It is important that the public child welfare agency share clear information about what it does and does not do (e.g. where it can intervene and where it cannot). Information about each partner which should be shared includes: organizational information such as size, structure, mission, budgets, annual reports, publications and press releases. When there are multiple means for regular communication, myths can be dispelled and misconceptions about mission, goals and objectives of one another's agencies or entities can be avoided.

Information about past efforts or alternative partnerships and collaborations can be used as reference points, as can information about pitfalls, counter-pressures, political problems or any potential issues that might compromise or test the partnership.

Establish a method to regularly air grievances. Honest and sincere feedback should be sought and provided, as in any other healthy relationship. Unresolved conflict among partners should be addressed through an agreed-upon method. This is also a time to review shared goals.

Vignette: A Healthy Families Program in Fairfax County Virginia provides many good examples of ways to promote information sharing among partners. Rather than dividing up the county and working in parallel, the two public and three nonprofit agencies involved in the Healthy Families program operate as one. For this arrangement to go smoothly, opportunities have been created for partners to meet and share information at every level of the agency. At the highest level, quarterly meetings are held for the Executive Committee, which is composed of the executive directors and key decision makers from the partner agencies. During these meetings Committee members see each other's budgets, expenditures, case loads and client and shared program outcomes. They discuss trends, gaps in services and staffing needs. Their meetings are facilitated by a program manager. This program manager also separately facilitates meetings among the managers and supervisors of the respective agencies. Although these mid-level staff members get information from their own directors, the Healthy Families program manager ensures there is time for additional clarification and discussion of operational details. She also ensures there are opportunities for supervisors and direct service staff to provide feedback during these meetings about successes or difficulties they are having. Minutes from the directors' and managers/supervisors' meetings are shared across the partner agencies with staff at all levels. As still one more way of gathering and sharing information, at least annual surveys are conducted with staff and clients and survey results are shared. Information flow through all levels of the partnership is fluid and transparent.

Decision-Making and Power Relationships

Partners do not always agree. The process for maintaining the partnership must support the opportunity to articulate and negotiate differences. This is true with respect to all partners, and particularly for those who may also be receiving services from the partnership.

Who makes the decisions and who has the power must be decided and the parameters specified in each partnership. In some partnerships, both partners assume some or all decision-making authority and accountability. It might be that at certain points in the continuum the agency must act alone in order to preserve its unique role as a public agency with a specific mandate. In particular, where decisions must be made regarding child safety, the agency seeks maximum input but is legally responsible for making decisions about removal. In legal matters, confidentiality must be honored where voluntary releases of information are not available from families.

Power as well as decision-making, except with courts and judges at the case level, must be mutually shared among partners to effectively achieve consensus and the goals of the partnership. This is particularly true where (a) there is a fiscal relationship between child welfare agency and partner, and (b) the partnership involves children, youth and families. Key questions to consider:

- How do power dynamics affect the relationships?
- Have areas of potential conflict been articulated and addressed?
- How does each party stand to gain or lose if the partnership goals are or are not achieved?

Being attentive to one's personal behavior is critical to the process of working together as partners. In particular, when engaging with partners, ask the following questions:

- Am I quibbling over the little things?
- Do I give in or hold my ground?
- Is my behavior supporting this partnership?
- Does my behavior suggest that I am resentful? Passive aggressive?
- Does my behavior both demand respect for myself and reflect respect for others?
- Do I demonstrate or model behaviors which I desire in a partnership?

The agency should understand and think about children, youth, and families as customers in much the same way that businesses think of customers. Partners "pay" us with their monetary and in-kind support. We must think about and be able to articulate what the partner/customer needs, not just what we need. What's in it for them? In effective partnerships, each partner is openly clear about its needs and about what it needs to maintain its commitment.

The legal role of policy makers and courts is a significant intersection that defines specific levels of engagement, while the role of other groups (public and private services providers, families and youth and advocates) relies on the development of trust between the agency and its external partners and will vary from community to community based on local history and politics.

The public child welfare agency, the courts and policy makers should guide this work and honor the professional status of public and private partners. In addition, children, youth and families should be viewed as central to the discussion of how the agency does its business, invoking the principle "nothing about us without us." Families should have a seat at the table.

Setting and Establishing Healthy Boundaries Among Partners

- Each partner should be strong enough in their own right.
- Tell the truth even when it is not popular.
- To have the leverage and confidence to say no when asked to do something that may violate their values.
- Knowing what the non-negotiables are and not giving those up.
- Each partner should be clear about the expectations of the partnership.

Establish Methods for Data Collection and Analysis

The process for collecting and analyzing data related to the work of the partnership should be clearly defined. This should include an approach for determining what data resources exist to support the work of the partnership, from where they are available and how frequently they are updated. These procedures should include methods for collecting, storing and refreshing information, with an explicit emphasis on maintaining privacy and confidentiality with respect to individual level data.

The process for collecting data should also include information from the partnership that explains why the data are being collected, how they will be used and how the information that they yield will be shared back to the community.

Data sharing materials are important to establish the credibility of the agency as it strives to become transparent to its partners; these materials both explain the meaning of the data as well as provide regular public reports. Descriptive materials that explain what the agency does, and what it does not do, will help partners understand how they can work effectively with the agency. Because of the wide variety of partners, materials should be provided in clear, understandable English, devoid of acronyms and language that is only understood within the bureaucracy.

Finally, in order to form effective partnerships with public and private service providers the partners should be able to provide data about the needs of the targeted client population. In return, public and private providers should be able to provide transparent information about their capacity to provide services to these clients, including any funding or statutory limitations that inhibit their ability to meet these needs.

Establish Methods of Evaluating the Partnership

Strategic planning should be done together with the partnering agencies and common goals should be established. Review of the work being performed in common or program projects should be done periodically, which will result in a program management report. Partnerships should be monitored and evaluated in the context of what they are intended to achieve and the work that is to be undertaken. The following questions should be asked:

- What is working?
- What is not working?
- Are there unintended consequences?
- What changes should be made?

Anonymous surveys can supplement the input that is provided by partners, but a level of professionalism and insight is required of an effective partnership, and it is in these qualities that the partnerships must be evaluated.

Share responsibility for preparing for and reporting to auditors and accrediting processes conducted by independent bodies.

When partnerships are not working effectively, and governing bodies (legislatures, Boards, Governor, etc.) have mandated partnerships, these governing entities will provide the negative feedback that is necessary for holding the agency leadership accountable.

Changing, modifying or terminating partnerships should occur in the same manner that they are initiated—in open, honest and sincere in-person communications.

Processes for Continuous Improvement

- The partners should systematically follow some general steps to assess, evaluate and monitor the effectiveness and progress of the plan.
- Identify gaps in services and continuously review the strategic plan. Create teams to address and implement ways to respond to service gaps.
- Partners should come with an openness to learn.
- Periodically conduct community, client and customer surveys.
- Continuously evaluate demographic changes within the community and study data in an effort to improve outreach and service delivery.
- Evaluation should be in the form of a continuous quality improvement cycle, with feedback from all relevant sectors.

Operations

In order for the public child welfare agency to establish and sustain effective partnerships, child welfare leadership must pay attention to certain internal areas: the roles and responsibilities of the agency staff, the competencies of these staff, how the partnership gets institutionalized and embedded in the agency and communication policies and procedures.

Professional Roles and Responsibilities

Strategic partnerships are critical to the successful work of the public child welfare agency and they require the ongoing work of professionals at every level. At each level there are specific roles and responsibilities that leadership must clearly articulate, regularly communicate and embody in training, quality assurance and performance evaluations. Direct involvement by leadership is critical in the early phases of a new partnership to ensure the vision is shared and that barriers to implementation are addressed from the beginning.

Agency Leadership

The Child Welfare Director or Executive Team is responsible for ensuring that strategic partnerships are initiated and that they flourish. They not only make the connections with their counterparts in partner entities, but they are also responsible for initiating and carrying out the various methods through which partnerships are built. Leadership is responsible for the allocation of sufficient resources to support these activities and for the delegation of decision-making authority to specific subordinate staff for carrying out their accomplishment. Leaders also must ensure that the principles of partnership are infused in all workforce orientation and training.

Middle Managers and Supervisors

Middle managers and Supervisors are designees. They are often asked to carry out the day-to-day work and they are generally responsible for making sure that partnerships are functioning properly, that information is being shared appropriately (both up and down the line) and for monitoring and reviewing progress toward agency goals. They have collective responsibility for shaping programs while also clearly delegating appropriate operational decisions to the staff level. They are also responsible for holding their staff accountable to these principles and for their own collaborative and inclusive behavior in interacting with strategic partners.

Frontline Staff

Line staff should have a clearly articulated role within the system and should be given training, resources and authority to work toward clearly understood outcomes. They are to be both protected and held accountable—and trained to work as partners both with other service providers and with those they view primarily as clients. They need to both receive and provide information relevant to collateral service providers and to those they serve as clients. As with all levels of the agency, they are accountable for carrying out their work in a spirit of collaboration and partnership. Ultimate decisions about whether specific actions can be carried out in the spirit of partnership or must take another course should be resolved at the management or leadership level in the agency, i.e. unless otherwise directed. Line staff should act as equal partners with collateral providers and clients alike.

Primary Point of Contact

Agencies with sufficient resources should consider appointing a specific primary point of contact that has responsibility for monitoring and maintaining contact/communication, facilitates joint planning and ensures that the partnership activities are carried out effectively and efficiently. This ensures that the maintenance and sustenance of strategic partnerships, while everyone's business, does not unwittingly become no one's business. If resources or other reasons prohibit an agency from creating such a position, the responsibilities of such a position must fall to the Director or Deputy Director to ensure that they are carried out.

Professional Competencies

There are a number of specific competencies that are necessary for agency professionals to have in establishing and maintaining strategic partnerships. Not all of these are essential for everyone in the agency. The importance of each of these depends on the specific responsibilities assigned to the agency personnel being evaluated for their capacity to support the strategic partnership work of the agency. These include:

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

- The understanding of the value of initiating and sustaining partnership strategies
- The understanding and clear knowledge of the mission, goals and objectives of the agency and of partner agencies
- The understanding of power dynamics and respect for authority
- The understanding of the roles of the branches of government and separation of powers
- The understanding of the role of government in the lives of individuals and communities
- The understanding of both quantitative and qualitative information about the agency, partner agencies and the milieu in which they work
- The understanding of the etiology of abuse and neglect, theories of change and systems responses, including issues of disparity and disproportionality.
- The ability to negotiate, compromise and collaborate
- The ability to be strategic and convey relational empathy. The ability to meet new people, win them over and make a connection
- The ability and desire for accountability and ownership of the process and product
- The ability to build trust, be honest, open and transparent
- The ability to work effectively with others who have apparently divergent goals and objectives
- The ability to engage effectively in interest-based negotiation
- The ability to critically review and extract meaning from the available information
- The ability to clearly communicate the work of the agency, its needs and its constraints
- The ability to use discretion and judgment—can read a situation accurately and diagnose its implications

Institutionalizing and Sustaining the Commitment to Partnerships

Too often the work of establishing and maintaining strategic partnerships grows out of the commitment and values of specific leaders in the agency and does not outlast their tenure in the agency. It is imperative that the work of building strategic partnerships includes attending to the activities necessary for institutionalizing this work. The commitment to strategic partnerships must become a core element of the culture of the agency. By focusing on the principles that are the essential underpinnings of culture change, leadership will be able to ensure that the work that they do in establishing partnerships will be sustained beyond their time in the agency. Institutionalizing and sustaining the partnerships requires continuous work at all levels of the agency. This is accomplished through: formal policies, procedures and communication with staff; modeling and leadership of senior staff and accountability.

Formal Policies, Procedures and Regular Communication

- Policies must be clear and well-established. The agency must include information about institutionalizing partnerships in its orientation and training programs.
- Internal communications should include discussion of the process and outcomes of strategic partnerships at regularly convened staff meetings, and the principles of engaging in partnership should be infused into staff orientation and training.
- Staff needs to be clearly informed and aware that there are partnerships and, where necessary, trained so that they understand both the nature of the partnerships and their specific role (if any) within it.

Modeling and Leadership

- Modeling by agency leadership is essential so that the entire workforce bears witness to the importance of this strategy. In turn, managers and supervisors must reflect the behavior of the leadership and model it for their staff.
- Policies and procedures cannot substitute for modeling behavior by the agency leaders and managers.
- Outcomes are enhanced when leadership and management model and communicate the value of establishing and maintaining partnerships.

Accountability

An evaluation of each staff member's role in maintaining partnerships should be built into the performance appraisal system of the agency.