



Systems of Care Leadership Series

In 2003 the Federal Children's Bureau funded 9 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.

To support grant communities' efforts in building systems of care and to learn more about systems and organizational changes within child welfare, the Children's Bureau established the National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care (Center).

As the Systems of Care initiative progressed, it became clear that leadership was an essential component for successful implementation. To understand this critical aspect further, the Center's national evaluation team conducted an in-depth qualitative study, *Leadership in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes through Systems of Care Initiative*. This study draws on qualitative data collected in interviews with key stakeholders across participating communities to describe the characteristics of effective leaders and explore the processes they use to achieve systems and organizational change.

To help put research into practice, the Center developed a series of action briefs on key leadership topics for administrators and program managers responsible for systems change initiatives. These action briefs highlight key findings from the leadership study, share lessons learned by Systems of Care grantees, and outline key steps for initiative leaders to advance systems and organizational change.

Gaining Buy-In From the Front Line During Times of Change

The success of child welfare systems change and reform initiatives hinges on acceptance and application at the practice level. As such, gaining buy-in from and providing support to frontline workers is a critical aspect of systems change leadership. Drawing from the experiences of the Children's Bureau Systems of Care grant communities as they embarked on comprehensive systems and organizational change,¹ this brief:

- Examines the critical role of frontline staff in implementing change
- Outlines key steps and strategies for engaging the front line during times of change.

While this brief discusses strategies in the context of systems of care, the lessons learned and tips offered have broader application to other child welfare agency reform efforts that reflect new ways of working with children and families.

Frontline Staff as the Linchpins of Change

With the goal of improving outcomes for children and families, child welfare agencies across the country have been pursuing systems and organizational change. Some of these change efforts reflect the promotion of specific principles such as family engagement or community-based approaches, while others like systems of care simultaneously address multiple principles across child- and family-serving organizations. Many of the change initiatives focus on the implementation of evidence-based or evidence-informed programs.

Systems change frequently commence from the top down. Nevertheless, systems level changes without corresponding practice level changes will be meaningless (Milner, 2003). While organizational structure, policies,

¹ See *Systems and Organizational Change Resulting from the Implementation of Systems of Care*, available at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/evalreports/reports/SystemsandOrganizationalChangeReport.pdf



culture, and administrative and human resource supports can all contribute to change, all of these factors “exert their influences on consumers [i.e., children and families] indirectly through practitioners” (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

With the advancement of new reforms and promising approaches, workers must not only implement new protocols and procedures but also adapt to new ways of thinking. For example, as new directions encourage family engagement, it falls to the frontline worker to move away from long-standing practices of making decisions *for* families and instead engage youth and family members as partners in decision-making and case planning. This shift requires a fundamental change in mindset from a deficit-focused approach toward a strengths-based and inclusive perspective. In addition, as child welfare agencies embrace the idea of collaboration, child welfare workers must adopt new approaches in their day-to-day work to coordinate with staff from other child- and family-serving organizations and bridge the divides that separated traditional service delivery. Child welfare caseworkers and supervisors become the “linchpins” to incorporating principles or values into case planning and service delivery to meet the needs of children and families and, ultimately, enhance outcomes.

As such, gaining buy-in from and providing support to frontline workers is critical to the success of change initiatives. As Systems of Care grantees found, however, garnering support for a new initiative among the frontline is not without challenges. These challenges include resistance to change, workload concerns, and competing priorities.

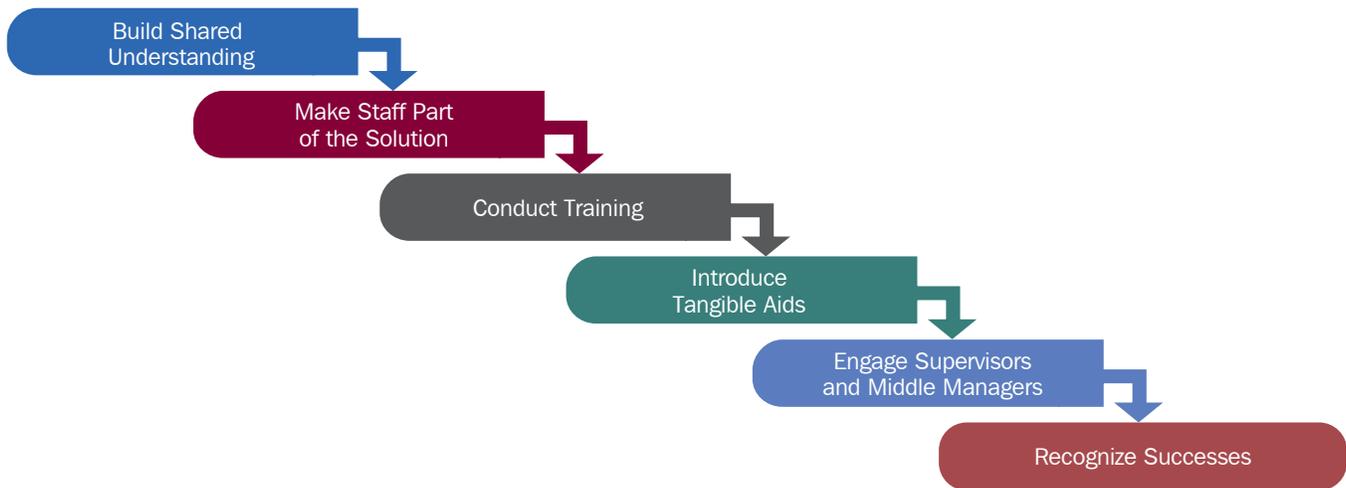
Overcoming Resistance to Family Involvement in Systems of Care

Resistance to change, particularly as it related to family involvement, was common in Systems of Care child welfare agencies. The Systems of Care initiative called for staff to treat families as partners in developing their own case plans and empower family members to participate in agency decision-making, applying their experience as service recipients to systems change activities. Some workers feared that family team meetings would result in an increased workload. Other workers had difficulty believing that families were in the best position to make and inform case and policy decisions. Changing the attitudes and beliefs of frontline staff was challenging.

Over the course of the initiative, Systems of Care leaders spent considerable time reaching out to child welfare staff, working with “champions” of the effort, offering training and guidance, and adapting policies and procedures to institutionalize expectations. As the innovative idea of family involvement took hold and successful experiences were shared, most child welfare staff in grant communities began to embrace the principle and incorporate it into casework practice. These efforts not only resulted in a transformative shift in child welfare agency culture, they also produced positive outcomes at the case level (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010a).²

2 For more information, 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

Exhibit 1: Action Steps for Gaining Staff Buy-in



Key Steps and Strategies for Gaining Buy-In and Supporting Frontline Staff During Times of Change

As shown in the exhibit and discussed below, the experiences of the child welfare-led Systems of Care communities point to six key action steps for generating buy-in and providing support for frontline staff during systems and organizational change. While presented here sequentially, several steps may be put into practice simultaneously, and initiative leaders may have to circle back to prior steps during the course of implementation.

Step 1: Build a Shared Understanding of a Vision for Change

A fundamental early step in bringing about change is creating a purposeful vision that clearly identifies where the organization is going. In addition to setting a direction and focal point, a strong shared vision can motivate and inspire action toward common goals that support the vision (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2010b). Effective leaders must communicate their vision as well as its anticipated benefits to staff and other stakeholders.³

Systems of Care leaders used various strategies and mediums to communicate their vision. Project directors made presentations at agency staff meetings, held discussion sessions, published articles in newsletters, and sent broadly disseminated e-mails. Several child welfare agency directors attended meetings to discuss the initiative, explain its relevance and importance in day-to-day work, and keep staff motivated toward achieving the vision.

Systems of Care stakeholders reported that routine and ongoing communication with staff members was vital to ensuring the success of the change initiative. By keeping communication consistent, leaders helped people believe in and stay focused on goals. The literature on leadership confirms, “By making sure that employees hear about the proposed changes many times across multiple channels, they inspire employees to identify with the leader’s vision and reinforce the need for a new strategic direction.” (Collins, Lowe, & Arnett, 2000, p. 37–38).

3 For more information, see *Leadership in Systems of Care: Creating and Communicating a Shared Vision*, at: www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/actionbriefs/briefs/CreatingandCommunicatingaSharedVision.pdf



Tip From the Field

“Connect the dots” to other ongoing initiatives. Staff can become overwhelmed by the number of new initiatives introduced within an agency and the competing priorities for their time. To allay concerns and lessen perceived conflicts, Systems of Care leaders focused on identifying how Systems of Care complemented the underlying values and goals of other agency efforts, including the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), multiple-response system reform, and family-centered case practice models.

Step 2: Make Staff Part of the Solution

According to Systems of Care stakeholders, the most effective way to establish buy-in is to include people from all levels in decision-making processes. While their suggestions may not always be feasible, it is important that staff know that their input is welcomed and heard. Further, stakeholders noted that if people believe their views are connected to a common goal, they are more likely to feel a part of the vision and be willing to work to achieve the initiative’s goals.

Systems of Care leaders engaged staff in a variety of ways. They solicited input and feedback from groups of staff about the initiative’s vision and its implementation. They also worked one-on-one with staff members. Project directors met with managers, supervisors, and frontline staff to share their

“A vision is effective only if it is shared by those who are necessary to its implementation. In most cases, that means that the articulation of vision must be a negotiated process, in which those who will implement the vision have a voice.”

– Garner, 1989, p. 19



“Being involved in the decision making] made us feel like this is our plan as an organization, not just the leader’s plan.”

– Systems of Care Stakeholder

enthusiasm for Systems of Care and explore staff ideas and concerns. Staff reported that through these one-on-one meetings, they felt valued in the organization and they began to recognize the project directors’ passion and commitment to Systems of Care. Many of the child welfare agency leaders and Systems of Care project directors followed a participatory management style; they encouraged staff to come to them if they had issues, maintained an open-door policy, and supported staff to collectively identify problems and find solutions. In addition, Systems of Care leaders encouraged the formation of committees and workgroups—with staff representation—to make strategic decisions and tackle implementation issues, while providing their support and encouragement to enable the work to take place. This approach empowered staff and helped them take ownership of the initiative.



Tip From the Field

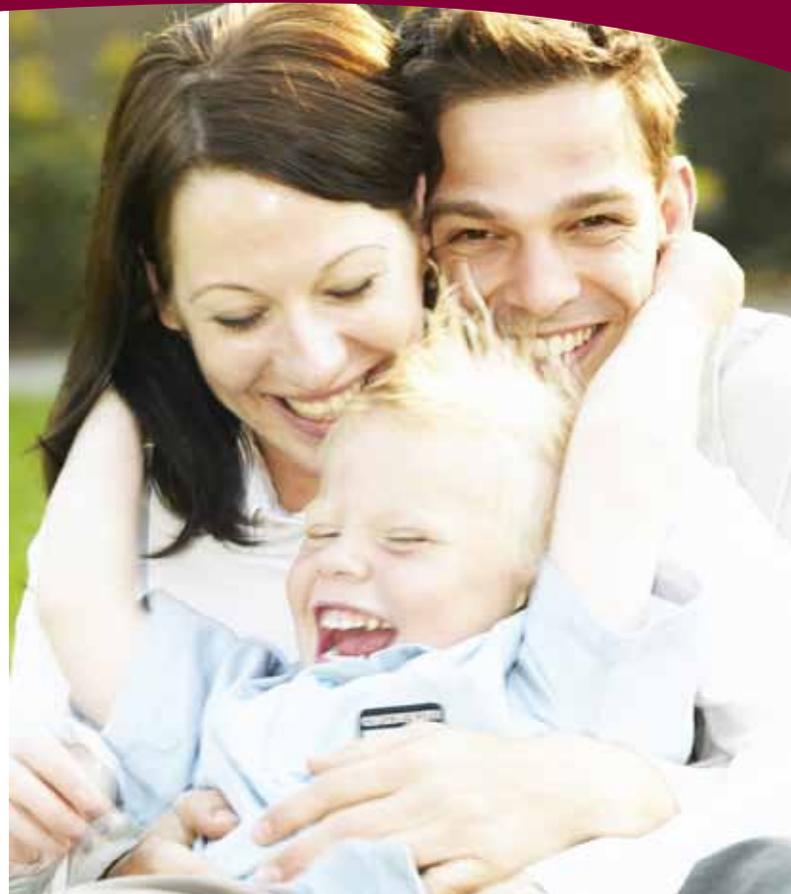
Find natural leaders to take charge and motivate staff.

Systems of Care project directors paid close attention to those frontline staff members who were most willing to lead the charge of change and promoted their successes. Initiative champions talked with and encouraged other staff members. Resistant staff began to observe through example the value of Systems of Care and its potential impact on families in the system.

Step 3: Conduct Training to Support Change

Training is a critical element in supporting and, moreover, sustaining the momentum of change to meet the needs of an evolving environment (Collins et al., 2000). As identified by the National Implementation Research Network, training is a core component or “driver” for successful implementation of new programs or practices (Fixsen, et al., 2005).

Systems of Care leaders provided training opportunities to teach the concepts and principles promoted by the initiative and to build staff skills for effectively infusing those principles into their work. Trainings were available on a number of topics, particularly cultural competence and family involvement, two of the more challenging aspects for frontline staff. In many cases, interagency partners, family members, and community members were invited to attend trainings with agency staff. Family members often served as co-trainers, sharing their personal experiences and providing their perspectives on the supports and services available to children and families. Trainings helped connect child welfare staff with resources within public child- and family-serving agencies and the broader community. As such, staff could readily apply acquired knowledge to practice. The trainings offered by grant communities generally authenticated systems of care principles and practices, which motivated and enabled staff to embrace the initiative.



Tip From the Field



Practice what you preach. In addition to instructional training, leaders and managers should model the behavior they want staff members to adopt. For example, one Systems of Care community provided training to supervisors on using strengths-based approaches in performance reviews and other work with frontline staff. In another community, the child welfare agency director implemented staff meetings that paralleled family team decision making meetings. By modeling the practices among staff, the leaders demonstrated how the strategies could work effectively and enabled workers to become comfortable with the processes.

Some communities integrated training on systems of care principles and their connection to child welfare practices into new worker training. As such, all new staff were exposed to the materials and could begin to integrate the principles into practice at the earliest stages of their work. Given the high rates of child welfare staff turnover, this approach can help sustain an initiative over time.



Tip From the Field

Clarify what your initiative means in day-to-day terms. Help staff understand how systems change goals and underlying values relate to everyday practices. As a child welfare agency leader explained, “... we have posters all around the agency [with the systems of care principles] but staff don’t really understand what is expected of [them] and how [they] should act... so while you can specify that you ought to do this in policy, it’s another thing to actually manifest that in day-to-day behavior and how people interact with others.”

Step 4: Introduce Tangible Aids to Support Change

Systems of Care research found that among the most important factors in securing buy-in from the front line were tangible aids that helped caseworkers with their work or translated concepts into practical guidance. Engagement of caseworkers frequently hinged on a “brass ring,” a concrete component of the initiative that workers found useful. For example, one community’s Team Decision-Making guidelines helped caseworkers translate systems of care from theory to practical application. Another community introduced an automated management information system as part of the systems of care emphasis on accountability. Buy-in and support for systems of care among frontline staff improved as workers recognized the advantages of the system in documenting their cases more efficiently and reducing time spent on paperwork.

“[Systems of Care] really does tend to be a philosophical view and unless you have something like a practice, like family group decision-making meetings, that mirrors the principles, it’s really hard for caseworkers and supervisors to really wrap their hands around what are you asking them to do.”

– Systems of Care Project Manager



Step 5: Engage Supervisors and Middle Managers

Child welfare supervisors and managers play a pivotal role in organizational change. They serve as key translators of their agencies’ visions, values, and practices (Hess, Kanak, & Atkins, 2009). They represent a key linkage between leadership and the frontline. One child welfare agency leader spent considerable time conducting “meet and greet” meetings with supervisors to advance systems of care efforts because she understood that “very few things happen within the child welfare agency without supervisors influencing the work.”

In Systems of Care, engagement of supervisors and middle managers was essential to communicate relevant policies and procedures and to provide caseworkers with guidance, coaching, feedback, and support on integrating principles into practice. In one community, a subcommittee consisting of cross-system supervisors was created to discuss the initiative, review what was working and not working at the practice level, and identify solutions to improve policy and practice. The supervisors then communicated with the frontline staff directly responsible for implementing the practice changes required by the initiative. In some cases,



Tip From the Field

Don't neglect emotional needs. Systems and organizational change can cause disruption and confusion that may have an emotional impact on staff. Systems of Care leaders, managers, and supervisors supported staff emotionally by providing an environment where staff felt safe to admit mistakes and share their ideas, fears, and hopes.

supervisors were able to model and reinforce underlying systems of care values in their interactions with staff (e.g., strengths-based performance reviews).

Step 6: Recognize Successes

Buy-in increased gradually as initial successes took hold and were celebrated. Systems of Care stakeholders underscored the importance of recognizing successes during meetings and group communications and acknowledging staff who contributed to and supported the initiative. One leader consistently ended meetings with a success story. Such recognition can help keep staff motivated, particularly when roadblocks and challenges arise.

Tracking data to demonstrate the initiative's impact on outcomes is another powerful tool in gaining stakeholder buy-in. Working closely with local evaluators, Systems of Care communities collected and

Conclusions

The importance of staff buy-in to the success of a child welfare systems change initiative should not be underestimated. Without integration and application at the front line, even the most well-crafted and research-backed initiative will remain inconsequential. Most Systems of Care leaders initially encountered resistance among frontline staff. Through dedicated outreach efforts, they worked to build a shared understanding for their vision and provided staff with a voice in the initiative's direction. They helped develop staff knowledge and skills through training, enlisted the support of supervisors and middle managers to provide ongoing guidance, and offered tangible aids to get the work done. Further, they built morale by celebrating successes and achievements.

While outreach and engagement are frequently emphasized in the early stages of a change initiative, they should not stop there. Continued engagement—for example, through open forums, annual retreats, discussion of evaluation findings—can reenergize stakeholders who often face competing priorities and can burn out easily. In addition, given the high rate of turnover within child welfare agencies, ongoing engagement and routine training are important to communicate initiative goals, underlying principles, and related practices to new staff. Ongoing efforts will not only garner critical buy-in of the front line but also support sustainability of the initiative.

Tip From the Field

Pay attention to incremental achievements. Systems change efforts are typically oriented toward long-term change. To keep momentum, however, it is often necessary to focus on the short- and intermediate-term changes that will contribute to the long-term impact.



References

This publication draws primarily from:

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For More Information – Selected Online Resources on Family Involvement

Child Welfare Information Gateway

www.childwelfare.gov/management

National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement

muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute

www.ncwwi.org

National Implementation Research Network

www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn

National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care

www.childwelfare.gov/management/reform/soc/communicate/initiative/ntaec.cfm

Child Welfare Implementation Centers (Regionally based centers focused on implementation of strategies to achieve systems change)

- Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (Serves Regions III and IV) www.accwic.org
- Midwest Child Welfare Implementation Center (Serves Regions V and VII) www.mcwic.org
- Mountains and Plains Child Welfare Implementation Center (Serves Regions VI and VIII) www.uta.edu/mpcwic
- Northeast and Caribbean Child Welfare Implementation Center (Serves Regions I and II) muskie.usm.maine.edu/ncic
- Western and Pacific Child Welfare Implementation Center (Serves Regions IX and X) westpac.fmhi.usf.edu/default.aspx

