

# A CLOSER LOOK

## Cultural Competency<sup>◇</sup>

*“While children of color represent approximately 33 percent of all children in the United States, they are 55 percent of the foster care population. African-American children face the gravest disparities; they are 15 percent of the child population, yet 38 percent of the foster care population.” (Pew Commission, 2004, p.50)*

### Overview

While today’s child welfare administrators address the challenges of improving child safety, well-being, and permanency, they also must meet the needs of an increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse child welfare population. The disproportionate numbers of children of color who are part of the child welfare population represent only the tip of the iceberg in dealing with cultural issues. Children of color are overrepresented in almost every part of the child welfare system. Families of racial and ethnic minority groups are investigated more frequently; their children are more often found to be “victims” of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment; and, compared to White families, they experience a higher percentage of child removals from family homes (Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, n.d.). Empirical evidence shows that the race of children and their families has a measurable impact on the factors that inform the determinations involved in removing children from parental custody, the length of time they are in the system, services families receive, adoption rates, and overall outcomes (Cohen, 2003).

However, child welfare systems are not alone in facing culturally significant issues such as disproportionality. Across multiple social service systems, including health, education, law enforcement, and juvenile justice, such disparities are evident (Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, 2006).



### Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care

In 2003, the Children’s Bureau funded nine demonstration grants to test the efficacy of a systems of care approach to improving outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system and to address policy, practice, and cross-system collaboration issues raised by the Child and Family Services Reviews. Specifically, this initiative is designed to promote infrastructure change and strengthen the capacity of human service agencies to support families involved in public child welfare through a set of six guiding principles:

1. Interagency collaboration;
2. Individualized, strengths-based care;
3. **Cultural and linguistic competence;**
4. Child, youth, and family involvement;
5. Community-based approaches; and
6. Accountability.

*A Closer Look* is a series of short reports that spotlight issues addressed by public child welfare agencies and their partners in implementing systems of care approaches to improve services and outcomes for children and families. These reports draw on the experiences of nine communities participating in the Children’s Bureau’s Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care demonstration initiative, and summarize their challenges, promising practices, and lessons learned. Each issue of *A Closer Look* provides information that communities nationwide can use in planning, implementing, and evaluating effective child welfare driven systems of care, and is intended as a tool for administrators and policy-makers leading systems change initiatives.

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Two facts reveal a contradiction at the heart of the child welfare system:

- There is no difference between races in the likelihood that a parent will abuse or neglect a child.
- There is a great difference between races in the likelihood that a child will be removed from home and placed in foster care (Casey Family Programs, 2007, p.3).

Poverty, exposure to violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and other contextual factors place families, especially families of color, at risk for child welfare involvement. Simultaneously, culturally incompetent practices place families at increased risk for these and other negative outcomes, thereby increasing the burden on vulnerable families (Hornberger, Gardner, Young, Gannon, & Osher, 2005). U.S. Census Bureau projections suggest the United States will become even more culturally diverse, raising the likelihood that disproportionality will increase without focused and effective system change initiatives that prioritize cultural and linguistic competence (Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity, n.d.).

“Disproportionality, the condition of overrepresentation and disparity in the treatment of children of color in the child welfare system, is embedded in the structure of our system, in administrative and legislative policy, in practice, and in individual relationships between workers and their clients. It has its root in historical conditions, and it arises from factors such as poverty, education levels, income, household composition, and lack of resources.” (Casey Family Programs, 2007, p. 4).

## Defining Cultural Competency

The Child Welfare League of America defines cultural competency as “the ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and protects and

preserves the dignity of each” (Child Welfare League of America, 2001, Cultural Competence Defined). A definition of cultural competency in public child welfare should also consider age, especially concerning youth transitioning out of the child welfare system. A context of cultural competency means a commitment to re-evaluate the exclusive, adult-centered culture of child welfare agencies at minimum and an active agenda for empowerment and inclusion of youth at best (National Child Welfare Resource Centers, 2007).



Cultural and linguistic competence suggests more than just language proficiency, but a commitment to incorporate the cultural knowledge into policy and practice. Language is a crucial aspect of culture and a primary vehicle for transmitting knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and social expectations. Consequently, social service systems committed to cultural competency should consider linguistic and literacy issues in developing a comprehensive strategy. The National Center for Cultural Competence (n.d.) explains that to become culturally competent, organizations must have:

- A defined set of values and principles and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally;
- The capacity to value diversity, conduct self-assessment, manage the dynamics of differences, acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of the communities they serve; and
- Incorporate the above in all aspects of policy-making, administration, practice, and service delivery, and systematically involve consumers, key stakeholders, and communities.

Cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over time rather than being a static, one-time achievement (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; McPhatter, 1997). Cross et al. described the process of becoming culturally competent as a continuum ranging from cultural destructiveness, cultural incapacity, cultural blindness to the ultimate goal of cultural proficiency.<sup>1</sup> This cultural competence continuum takes into account the continuous organizational changes in child welfare agencies, as well as contextual changes affecting the communities served by child welfare systems, making cultural proficiency a desired goal in an effort to improve outcomes. Though knowledge about and research on cultural and linguistic competency are expanding and calls for change are increasing, considerable variability remains in system responses to effectively serving culturally and ethnically diverse populations (McPhatter & Ganaway, 2003).

## History of Cultural Competency in Public Child Welfare

Federal legislation governing the consideration of race and ethnicity in placement and adoption decisions, services provided to tribal children and families, and timelines to effect a permanency plan for children in care guides the child welfare system's effort to address disparities. The 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994, and the 1996 Inter-Ethnic Placement Provisions, which amended the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, prohibit the use of race as the sole or primary factor in making permanency decisions, while recognizing the importance of culture and race/ethnicity in promoting the overall well-being of children in care. While the data on the impact of transracial placements are ambiguous, this legislation has not eliminated racial/ethnic disparities in the length of time in out-of-home placement nor the time between termination of parental rights and adoption (Vidal de Haymes & Siman, 2003). Complicating the issue further, tribal child welfare systems and the State and local child welfare agencies that work with tribes face multiple layers of jurisdictional and bureaucratic challenges.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the cultural competence continuum, see <http://www.ncccurrricula.info/documents/TheContinuumRevised.doc>.

*“Cultural competency means being aware of your own cultural beliefs and values and how these may be different from other cultures—including being able to learn about and honor the different cultures of those you work with.”*

—Agency Staff Member

Cultural and linguistic competence requires a thoughtful multi-level, multi-systems response that integrates policy and practice improvements and makes use of organizational assessments of cultural and linguistic competence, training, and quality assurance reviews, such as Child and Family Services Reviews, to promote shared accountability.

## Challenges and Strategies in Achieving Cultural Competence in Child Welfare Driven Systems of Care

The experiences of the nine grant communities involved in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care initiative, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they implemented to address them provide useful information to administrators nationwide for operationalizing cultural competency in a systems of care framework for change.

### 1. Limited baseline knowledge of agency performance on cultural and linguistic competence

**Challenges.** Grant communities had to engage and educate key system stakeholders to advance from individual to system impact on cultural and linguistic competence. Many grantees invested considerable time in obtaining agency leadership support for an in-depth examination of agency performance in the area of cultural competence.

**Strategies.** Jefferson County (Colorado) System of Care conducted two analyses about racial disparities and disproportionality in the child welfare system. In the first, a local evaluation team analyzed Global Positioning System data that cross-referenced the origination point for child maltreatment allegations

“Cultural competence will have to be inextricably linked to the definition of specific child welfare outcomes and to an ongoing system of accountability that is committed to reducing the current disparities among racial, ethnic and cultural populations.” (Cultural Competency Charter Team, Kansas Family Centered Systems of Care, n.d.)

and referrals with demographic data. This analysis revealed that communities with high concentrations of families of color tended to have higher numbers of allegations and referrals than their White counterparts. Preliminary analysis of agency data indicated differences in assessments and subsequent decision by race/ethnicity. The results were the foundation for a community engagement strategy with various communities of color and agency staff. A Minority Overrepresentation Forum was designed to draw attention to the issue and establish a partnership with the community for collaborative problem solving.

Kansas Family Centered Systems of Care conducted an organizational self-assessment on cultural competency within the child welfare agency’s central office. After learning the results, the leadership authorized a cultural competency charter work team to identify and assess agency activities, resources, or assets that focused on multiculturalism, cultural diversity, and/or cultural and linguistic competency. These assessment activities led to the establishment of a cross-function team composed of customers, community stakeholders, staff, and leadership to develop short- and long-term strategies to improve cultural and linguistic competency throughout all divisions.

## 2. Difficulty defining and operationalizing the cultural and linguistic competence principle

**Challenges.** The comprehensive nature of cultural and linguistic competency made it challenging for many demonstration sites to find a starting place that maintained an emphasis on infrastructure development and foundation-building activities required by the initiative. Justifying a focus on cultural competency to child welfare agency staff was especially challenging in communities where cultural competency was associated with racial/ethnic diversity. Additionally, making the case for cultural

competency to agency staff was challenging in some grant communities because staff considered their practice culturally competent.

**Strategies.** To increase awareness of cultural diversity, many grant communities went beyond merely providing information on shifting demographics.

Jefferson County System of Care created a cultural awareness training program that included a monthly brown-bag lunch series for agency staff to discuss the meaning of cultural competence, explore their own cultures, and gain awareness of the diverse cultures represented in the community. In addition, the grant team followed a community engagement and education approach to raise awareness of cultural diversity within the county agency and to present information about child welfare services and supports at an annual community resource fair. These community engagement activities laid a foundation of inter- and intracultural appreciation upon which some of the more challenging work of assessing minority overrepresentation and disproportionality in the county system could be based.

The Family Centered Systems of Care in Kansas followed a similar strategy that included leadership support for events that highlighted the cultural diversity of agency staff. Such a strategy is particularly important in culturally homogeneous communities where, without the presence of racial/ethnic diversity, an erroneous assumption about an absence of culture can persist. Encouraging agency staff to acknowledge and appreciate their own cultural heritage creates opportunities for a broader understanding of the impact of cultural heritage, and promotes recognizing and addressing cultural biases in everyday experience and practice.



In the cultural and linguistic competence continuum, staff and community awareness of cultural diversity is considered an entry-level intervention. Yet in many cases, awareness of cultural diversity is the extent of the agency's strategy to become culturally competent, rather than just the beginning. However, the grant communities found that such a beginning, as part of a comprehensive cultural and linguistic competency strategy within a system change context, can advance agency progress toward cultural and linguistic competence. The CRADLE in Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York City used a multifaceted outreach strategy that began with multicultural awareness community events, as well as training and professional development for agency staff, and progressed to an intensive joint training curriculum, including the Undoing Racism™ workshop, for community members, community-based agency staff, and city staff. The Medicine Moon Initiative in North Dakota developed and administered a survey that emphasized identification of cultural strengths and showed that communities were interested in bolstering and reconnecting to cultural values for building the system of care infrastructure for a tribal child welfare agency.

### 3. Unclear connection between cultural bias and its impact on everyday decision-making

**Challenges.** Even when grant communities increased awareness of cultural diversity, generating awareness of the role of culture in everyday decision-making often was challenging. Barriers existed to encouraging frontline workers, supervisors, and other agency and



community-based organization leaders and managers to take the next steps to understanding cultural bias and its impact on child welfare decisions. Grant communities found that awareness-building activities needed to provide personal reflection on entrenched beliefs as well as introduction of new concepts.

**Strategies.** Partnering4Permanency in Contra Costa County, California, created a training program designed to help staff understand cultural bias and its impact on decision-making and practice. To complement this training, each office scheduled a facilitated, intensive staff retreat at which they addressed performance indicators related to racial disparities and disproportionality, reviewed staff activities to determine effectiveness in addressing disparities, and provided an opportunity for each workgroup to draft an equity plan. The county ultimately created a comprehensive strategy that provided this training to all agency administrators, managers, supervisors, frontline social workers, and support staff.

The CRADLE expanded this approach to incorporate personal learning and reflection on culture, offering the Undoing Racism Community Organizing Workshop for child welfare professionals, family partners, and community members. The training helps participants surpass the symptoms of racism to reach a clear understanding of what it is, where it comes from, how it functions, why it persists, and how it can be undone. To date, the CRADLE has blended funds with 29 local providers and trained more than 140 staff and community members, including executive directors and agency directors.

### 4. Staff turnover

**Challenges.** According to a nationwide study, child welfare agencies averaged 20–40 percent staff turnover in 2006. The same study revealed that some agencies experienced 100 percent turnover (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Worker retention presented a challenge for grant communities as they operationalized the

*“The Undoing Racism workshop...gave me a better understanding as to what role I play in my community and how I can be better for my own community.”*

*—Community Member*

cultural and linguistic competence principle in systems of care. System transformation depends on staff being available to design and implement new policies and practices. Systems change initiatives in child welfare can be adversely affected unless the issue of staff retention is addressed throughout and beyond the change process. Staff turnover can impede agencies' ability to make immediate and long-term progress toward improving outcomes for children and families.

**Strategies.** Many grant communities offered training and professional development to improve staff, agency, and community cultural and linguistic competence. However, even for communities with extensive training and workshop offerings, gauging progress in the beginning and intermediate stages of the grant was difficult because of frontline and leadership staff turnover. After cultivating leadership awareness and support for cultural competence work, several grant communities had to begin again several times due to turnover in agency, tribal, court, and other crucial leadership positions.

Several grant communities embedded cultural competence objectives into existing State reforms or federally mandated activities to maintain a focus on cultural and linguistic competence and guide practice, despite staff turnover. Partnering4Permanency included cultural and linguistic competency goals in its State Program Improvement Plan. Kansas Family Centered Systems of Care integrated performance indicators for cultural and linguistic competence, along with the other systems of care principles, in the contracts for private service providers. The North Carolina Department of Social Services developed a comprehensive 3-day cultural competency training curriculum in partnership with culturally diverse staff and community-based organizations serving overrepresented communities of color. The curriculum is being piloted in three regions in the State, and is slated to become a mandated training for all child welfare workers and supervisors.

## Implications for Administrators and Stakeholders

More than other systems of care principles, achieving cultural and linguistic competence can require a



dramatic shift in personal and organizational cultural beliefs, values, policies, and practices. Agency professionals, service recipients, community members, and other child welfare system stakeholders need to assess culturally ineffective practices and outcomes and establish new organizational cultural norms that promote cultural proficiency.

The experiences of the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care grant communities provide several promising approaches for other communities to consider as they construct systems of care driven frameworks for change:

- Establish baseline knowledge of system performance outcomes related to cultural competence that includes assessment of practice outcomes and agency policies. This information should be shared throughout the service array and with the community.
- Make a comprehensive plan for improved practice related to cultural competence that includes a clear definition of what cultural and linguistic competency is and outlines expectations for cultural proficiency at every level of the system. The plan should be developed in collaboration with agency staff, service providers, family partners, and community members.

**“First and foremost, I believe the environment needs to change to encourage caseworkers to challenge their current practice. It needs to start from the top and go down.”**

**—Agency Staff Member**

- Provide reinforcements and system supports that increase self-awareness, knowledge, and capacity for culturally and linguistically competent practice throughout the system. Reinforcements and supports should include culturally competent program evaluation with dissemination of results throughout the system and community.

In working with diverse groups, child welfare agencies need to understand how deeply embedded cultural factors have an impact on their organizations, the individuals that work within them, and the families served. Just as the demographic profile of the Nation’s communities is changing, so too are the characteristics of child welfare agencies. Promoting culturally competent child welfare systems is vital for responding to the country’s evolving demographics and for addressing the factors that contribute to culturally ineffective practice. Child and Family Services Reviews and subsequent State Program Improvement Plans provide an opportunity for States to engage a broad base of stakeholders in making cultural and linguistic competence a central component of child welfare system improvements.

The activities of the communities involved in the Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care demonstration initiative are contributing to greater knowledge about culturally competent child welfare systems. The work of the grant communities provides useful practice-based evidence for other communities

“What is needed is courageous, strong, sincere, visionary, and accountable leadership that can bring hope and promise and people together to change our institutional inequities and disproportionality.” (Casey Family Programs, 2007, p. 10)

interested in using a systems of care framework to transform child welfare systems and improve outcomes.

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## Improving Child Welfare Outcomes Through Systems of Care Demonstration Sites

**California**—Partnering4Permanency—  
Valerie Earley, Project Director,  
[vearley@ehsd.cccounty.us](mailto:vearley@ehsd.cccounty.us)

**Colorado**—Jefferson County System of Care—  
Susan Franklin, Project Director, [SFrankli@jeffco.us](mailto:SFrankli@jeffco.us)

**Kansas**—Family Centered Systems of Care—  
Beth Evans, Project Director, [ebme@srs.ks.gov](mailto:ebme@srs.ks.gov)

**Nevada**—Caring Communities Project—  
Tiffany Hesser, Project Director,  
[HesserTi@co.clark.nv.us](mailto:HesserTi@co.clark.nv.us)

**New York**—The CRADLE in Bedford Stuyvesant:  
A Systems of Care Initiative—  
Nigel Nathaniel, Project Director,  
[Nigel.Nathaniel@dfa.state.ny.us](mailto:Nigel.Nathaniel@dfa.state.ny.us)

**North Carolina**—Improving Child Welfare Outcomes  
Through Systems of Care—  
Eric Zechman, Project Director,  
[ericzechman@ncmail.net](mailto:ericzechman@ncmail.net)

**North Dakota**—Medicine Moon Initiative:  
Improving Tribal Child Welfare Outcomes  
through Systems of Care—  
Deb Painte, Project Director,  
[debp@nativeinstitute.org](mailto:debp@nativeinstitute.org)

**Oregon**—Improving Permanency Outcomes  
Project—Patrick Melius, Project Director,  
[Patrick.J.Melius@state.or.us](mailto:Patrick.J.Melius@state.or.us)

**Pennsylvania**—Locally Organized Systems of  
Care—Andrea Richardson, Project Director,  
[anr63@pitt.edu](mailto:anr63@pitt.edu)