

Capacity Building Center for States Podcast
HOW WE PARTNER WITH THE COMMUNITY TO IMPROVE SERVICE OPTIONS
Podcast Episode 6: Coordinating Prevention Services in the Community
TRANSCRIPT

ROBERT MATTHEWS [00:07]: When the Family First legislation passed, for Washington DC, we didn't feel there was going to be a heavy lift, one, because of our standing relationship in partnership with the collaboratives for 20 plus years. And so we as a district had the infrastructure in place. We wouldn't have to necessarily go out and find community partners. They were already here.

Narrator [00:33]: That was Robert Matthews with the District of Columbia's Child and Family Service Agency talking about the Family First Prevention Services Act. The legislation is a historic shift toward providing primary prevention services intended to strengthen families and reduce the placement of children and youth into foster care. You'll hear more from him in this episode of the podcast series "How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options." I'm Betsy Lerner with the Capacity Building Center for States. We know agencies are always working to find ways to better support the families and communities they serve. But we were curious, as an agency works to develop a more collaborative service array – one that is responsive to families and youth – what strategies are helping them change their organizational culture to support putting families at the center of their work? Take a listen to episode six.

[01:31]: [Music introduction]:

Narrator [01:55]: In previous episodes, you've heard about how the Child and Family Service Agency in the nation's capital has developed and sustained collaborative partnerships, created a framework for change, and used data and stakeholder input to improve their practices. In this episode, we'll investigate how the agency and their partners work together to ensure services focus on primary prevention. You'll hear about their strategies to coordinate service planning and delivery, to be culturally responsive to the community, and provide seamless services to families.

[02:33]: Across the country, child welfare systems are devising plans to lay out how they will respond to Family First legislation. The plan submitted by DC's Child and Family Service Agency was the first in the nation to be approved by the Children's Bureau. Robert Matthews and Natalie Craver, leaders for DC CFSA, talk about how they worked with community collaboratives, sister agencies, and service providers to develop the plan. Part of their overall framework is to narrow their front door by preventing unnecessary removal of children from their families. They envision primary prevention as services beyond the front door, describing them as front porch or front yard services. I asked Robert about the collaboratives.

ROBERT MATTHEWS [03:25]: They also, even before this legislation was passed, had always messaged the need to go further upstream. And how can we as a system create processes for families that may not come to the attention of child welfare agency, but by chance have risk factors that, over time, if not

really intervened or supported could. So they've actually always been there and, to me, very incrementally and gradually have been trying to push the system in a way where we needed to do this, whether we had the legislation or not.

NATALIE CRAVER [04:04]: So we have a continuum even outside of the front door of services. And our providers understand that, if there's been some engagement, it's part of the front porch. If there's no engagement at all, you're in our front yard and we want to keep you as far away from the front door as possible over time.

[04:20]: As we engage in different conversations, folks know about, what are the front yard services going to look like in the future. So we're definitely having those conversations in the language we use in how we continue to make that a part of our ongoing meetings and our partnerships. That's been a huge part of even how we build our family first prevention plan is that our services are really grounded around our front door services, our front porch services, and our front yard services.

Narrator [04:47]: One of the strategies to coordinate those services is co-locating staff in the community. I asked Robert how that worked.

ROBERT MATTHEWS [04:55]: The collaboratives who've been in the community definitely understood the advantage of having CFSA co-located with them. But trying to get the buy-in of staff was a little challenging initially. But over time, they've seen that, if this is where families go, they feel reluctant to come to CFSA, the child welfare agency, because of the very nature of what they believe or perceive our role is.

[05:22]: Some perceive child welfare just in general as, you're going to take my baby away or take my child away, versus going to another building or another organization to feel like, I feel like you're here to support me. So why not jointly have a conversation and dialogue with these families in an environment where they feel safe, where they don't feel like I have to come and be defensive. And so that was really the push behind it. And over time now workers feel that that environment now is safe for them, but it also makes their job a bit more easier because they can better engage families where they feel safe.

[06:00]: [Sounds of traffic, office chatter, Spanish language spoken in background]:

JULIE DAZA [06:05]: My name is Julie Daza. I'm a supervisory social worker here at Child and Family Services Agency and I'm co-located at Collaborative Solutions for Communities.

[06:16]: I think it's a constant work in progress. There are definitely times that we get it right. And at the same time, one of the benefits of being in the community is that you really get to know your partners.

[06:31]: We are in the heart of Columbia Heights, which historically has been an immigrant area of DC, and very heavily Latino populated. It was the right place to be for my work, as well as the team's work,

as there are two bilingual staff members that I work with now. And in addition, the Collaborative has a significant bilingual population.

[07:02]: When I started, I truly advocated to be in a Latino community. I'm bilingual in Spanish. And I had a lot of knowledge with the immigrant communities and just being able to communicate in a language that was familiar was my passion.

[07:18]: I always thought about for immigrant populations, really not knowing the system or knowing who to trust per se, and being able to say, well, you can contact so-and-so at this organization and we can call them right now to see if they can meet with you. It just gave a more fluid sense and supportive to the families that they could connect and hopefully build that trust with another provider.

[07:42]: So one of the things that I've always enjoyed about being in the community is that with the Latino families, they really already knew the Collaborative. So even though they might have started working with CFSA because of abuse or neglect, I would say, well, my office is located at the Collaborative. Are you familiar? Then, absolutely.

[08:05]: I think being a close-knit community, you know a lot of people. And families know a lot of people.

[08:10]: Oh you were referred this program. Well, who referred you? And they start communicating. And then an unintended benefit, at times, is you have these-- I'm thinking of a few moms that I worked with that they built a relationship, a supportive relationship having been referred to a program. And they started communicating and they became their own little village, which was definitely a benefit.

Narrator [08:36]: Each one of the collaborative hubs responds to the unique needs of its community. They provide a wide variety of prevention services for families who live in the community. Services like crisis intervention, life skills and workforce development, parenting empowerment, adolescent services, fatherhood support, youth activities... you get the picture. A lot of services that help to strengthen families so that they can thrive. Sharafdeen Ibraheem is their deputy director.

SHARAFDEEN IBRAHEEM [09:10]: What makes East River very unique, and I think what makes us kind of stand out, is we have a full cradle-to-seniors model at East River. Fully we serve the entire family. So from infant to toddlers to youth to adults to seniors, we have the whole umbrella of programming available and supports.

[09:31]: Many of the work of the collaboratives pretty much drives out of case management. And from that case management umbrella, we tackle several needs of homes, of families.

[09:43]: Housing typically comes up. We're not a housing program. We don't have a housing program. But we tend to provide supports around housing with first month's rent, utilities assistance. We get a lot needs around food assistance, transportation. Then we also have a referral and linkages that supports, where we link families to behavioral health services, substance abuse services.

[10:10]: What East River is really big and proud of is our parenting supports that we currently are providing and offer to families in ward 7. We use an evidence-base model for our parenting program and supports for residents and community members who attend our parenting workshops. We also work with families around financial literacy.

[10:30]: Two years ago, CFSA actually gave us the opportunity to work with families on a special project called Safe Sleep DC, which was really tackling child infant mortality in DC. And that became something that we did for the past two years and we've continued to take that on after the funding ended for that. So we have an expansive list of programming and supports, but typically, really comes from our flex funding that we get from CFSA to connect and provide support to those families so that they can get ahead of these situations before it becomes a dire matter, necessarily.

NARRATOR [11:09]: Here's Natalie Craver again, talking about planning for and coordinating the broad array of prevention services that are needed to support strong families and strong communities.

NATALIE CRAVER [11:20]: In our plan, we've talked about how our services go beyond just what is part of the legislation currently and how, between our other prevention services—which we recognize not every intervention for a family is going to be the right fit as a fidelity monitored EBP, and that we have some services in place that are kind of a hybrid of taking in evidence based intervention and how over time it's evolved in practice with the collaboratives where they're seeing they can put two different models together and it works really well.

[11:49]: So as we were developing our plan, it was really grounded around looking at service utilization at the collaboratives where we do have some evidence based interventions already in place and we're already doing some of this work. And our sister agencies have a number of practices that are part of their core mission and their core work that are supported on the initial list of clearing house to be rated services.

NARRATOR [12:11]: One of those agencies is the District of Columbia Department of Health. Vinetta Freeman is their Early Childhood Division Chief. Her role is to ensure that families that are prenatal or have children ages 0 to 5 have the supports and services that they need to be healthy and ready for school.

VINETTA FREEMAN [12:31]: In my current role, our partnership is primarily focused around home visiting and sharing how we can link families to supports that's going to help them increase their parenting skills and their parent child interaction. And that relationship has been in place for at least the last three years.

[12:51]: When CFSA, the federal agency, first put out an application for ACF to rethink the Title IV-E waiver for child welfare agencies, one of the initiatives that was written into that grant application was

home visiting. And so they immediately reached out to the Department of Health, as we are the lead agency for home visiting, to figure out how could we collaborate.

[13:15]: And so we also had a federal grant, and we didn't want to duplicate services but really align and blend how we could leverage both funding opportunities to serve families. So that really was the first opportunity to say, how can we leverage the federal opportunities but not duplicate services and really align the work and then really figure out who has the expertise to do what aspects of the work. So that's really how the relationship began.

[13:46]: So from the very beginning, both agencies knew that it was critical to have the service provider at the table and understand their systems and how they engage families and the implications that it would mean for families and for our agencies because, as we all know, when you have federal funding, you still have reporting. But-ultimately, the purpose of the funding is to serve families. So we brought the agencies to the table and really collaboratively developed process flows, referral forms.

[14:21]: We try to remove barriers. We have monthly call to talk about what's going well, what's not going well. But the family shouldn't know that this is a government ran program. They do know that they have a social worker, and this social worker is referring them to a community based organization for x services. And that's all that's really important for the family to know, that their needs are going to be met by a community based organization that understands their needs because they're actually in the communities that they live in.

[14:55]: So it's been a long process, but we're all committed to ensuring that it's a seamless process and all parties understand their roles so that we are supporting the families through the soft handoff from one agency to the community based provider.

NARRATOR [15:11]: In addition to the monthly calls, CFSA and partner staff meet to cross-train and learn more about each other's roles. CFSA also collaborates to deliver prevention services with Mary's Center, a health center that focuses on the social, emotional, and physical health of everyone who engages in their services and programs. I spoke to Alex Harvey, who oversees the Parents as Teachers Home Visiting Program, and supports the family workers as they engage and partner with young families who are themselves in the care of CFSA and are parents of young children.

[15:47]: [Sounds of a playground, children's voices, a parent's voice]:

ALEX HARVEY [15:52]: The Parents as Teachers Program itself is really focused on preventing abuse and neglect. And so built into our program right away is this kind of emphasis on developing and working with parents to engage and find those skills that help avoid those issues later on down the line. And so again, it's just a parallel in our goals.

[16:19]: In general, we have a long history of building partnerships throughout the district. This program in particular, we work closely with the social workers assigned to these parents by way of getting the referrals from them and then engaging in some initial conversations to help us outreach and really start

connecting with that parent. We work with other agencies in terms of using space to deliver our services outside of one of our agencies, but in a location that is more convenient for that family to reduce barriers to getting to us. So they can get the most out of what it is there they're looking to get.

[17:04]: And I think it's also helpful in a way that's maybe not measurable but to hear from the social worker, right, how engaged that mom is with their child or just to hear how passionate the social worker is about, oh, this family, I love going to go see them. This family, we started off this way, but there's a lot of growth. And that is, I think, also encouraging to hear just over the phone that initial conversation.

[17:35]: And there's information about families that you don't think to put on paper that can be incredibly helpful, right? They give you a phone number, but it's only through dialogue that you learn they don't answer. But if you text them, that'd be really great. And that can be really key to getting that mom involved, right, knowing, oh, they're in school, so outside of school hours, right? Just those little things are surprisingly very helpful that you don't think to even question when you just received the paper information. So that's been great.

[18:11]: How families are reporting their experiences in our program and how connected they feel outside of our program to, again, want to make sure that in the absence of PAT or the family support worker. The parents know who they can call, when they need to call, and that they are confident in their abilities to be their child's first teacher. They know what to expect. They are prepared to go forth and advocate for themselves and their child.

NARRATOR [18:49]: After talking with a few of CFSA's partners, I asked Robert and Natalie what they hoped these Family First efforts would bring—how they might define success.

ROBERT MATTHEWS [19:00]: Understanding as I said previously, that even if we didn't have this legislation, this is what DC believes we should be doing it for our children and families. This is something we believe we need to do because we've taken the time to really thoughtfully think about what's needed, what supports are needed.

[19:19]: What success looks like for me can vary. One, we're doing this for the children and families. So when we're looking at, from a safety lens, it's to ensure that we are reducing maltreatment or the reoccurrence of maltreatment if it has happened before. Success to me looks like where we would not have families recycle back to our attention. And that mainly will probably lie in how well we do prevention and how well we partner with our community-based providers.

[20:02]: Success is also having the ability to continue our partnership as we have a back and forth dialogue as to what's needed in the community. Although we can't quantify that, but the success that partners feel like they have a voice is also important and essential.

NATALIE CRAVER [20:23]: I want to say ditto to that because we do so much. I mean, our outcomes and how we measure success and how we even hold our partners accountable is the same measures that we're looking at ourselves. And beyond that, I'd say that a lot of our work has focused around how to engage the health and human services cluster and how to make sure all of our social service safety net

organizations are really thinking about how we share some of the same families. And we are doing so much work to ensure that the same family doesn't touch our systems.

[20:57]: And how do we better collaborate and partner to ensure that a family touched by one organization doesn't have to be touched by other organizations if there's not a need to and that we're really having that no wrong door approach to how we serve families. And I think our work on the prevention plan and our Families First DC Initiative are really leading the way for us to continue to engage our sister agencies in our cluster in a way that we deeply understand each other's work. And that, from a leadership level to a worker level, we're able to really inform service delivery in a way that's reducing bureaucracy and creating really great customer family experiences that we're really looking to support families that way.

ROBERT MATTHEWS [21:49]: You said in a nutshell, though, no wrong door. No wrong door.

NARRATOR [21:53]: Thanks for listening to the sixth episode of the podcast series “How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options”. The District of Columbia’s CFSA was able to build on their well-developed collaborative relationships to strengthen their network of front door, front porch, and front yard services. It’s clear that CFSA and their partners keep families at the center of their planning processes so that prevention services respond to the needs of individual communities, and families really do come first. What did you hear that you might be able to use to help your agency shift the focus of the child welfare system toward prevention services? I hope this episode has left you inspired and sparked ideas that you can put into practice at your agency.

[22:42]: [Music]:

NARRATOR [22:52]: This podcast was created by the Capacity Building Center for States funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau under contract number HHSP233201500071I.