

Capacity Building Center for States Podcast
HOW WE PARTNER WITH THE COMMUNITY TO IMPROVE SERVICE OPTIONS
2: Starting and Sustaining Collaborative Partnerships
TRANSCRIPT

SHARAFDEEN IBRAHEEM [00:07]: So, over a period of time, over the years, there's an expectation that the collaboratives can do everything. And we have to know that we cannot do everything. Not on our own. Which is why we have to identify who our partners are, what supports truly are missing in our communities, and how do we address those service gaps?

NARRATOR [00:24]: That was Sharafdeen Ibraheem, with the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative in DC talking about sustaining effective partnerships. You'll hear more from him later in this episode of "How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options". I'm Betsy Lerner, and in this podcast series, we're talking with child welfare agencies and their community partners who are working to develop a service array that's responsive to families and youth, and asking the question, what strategies are helping them change their organizational culture to support putting families at the center of their work? Take a listen to episode two.

[00:58]: [Music introduction]:

NARRATOR [01:05]: In the previous episode, you heard about what child welfare agencies in Kentucky and the District of Columbia are doing to put prevention services into practice and the importance of strong leadership. But the agencies aren't doing it alone-- collaborative partnerships are essential to their efforts to build prevention services for families.

[01:26]: We wanted to know more about what it takes to start and sustain these partnerships. If you are listening to this podcast, you're probably familiar with the Child and Family Services Review that the federal government conduct to help States improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families. In CFSR Round 3, the District of Columbia, unlike any other jurisdiction to date, had both items in the Service Array and Resource Development systemic factor rated as a strength. That means families throughout the district can access services that meet their individual needs in their community. This is due, in large part, to their work the agency does with collaborative groups to make services available to people where they live. I talked with Robert Matthews and Natalie Craver, leaders at the DC Child & Family Services Agency, about how they have established robust relationships with other partner agencies.

[02:26]: [Sounds of walking down a hallway, door opening/shutting, muted greetings between people]:

ROBERT MATTHEWS [02:31]: We have a 20 year plus history with having community collaboratives here in the District of Columbia. And so, what they've been for us is a partner, when children and families come to our attention, at times when there may not be a disposition or a finding through a child protection investigation. However, there are risk factors that exist within that family. And so, we will refer to the collaboratives.

[02:57]: The real goal is to ensure that, wherever the families live, that the collaboratives are that safe haven, they're that hub to where families feel more comfortable. They feel safe to go to receive services. And so, really, the goal is to ensure that services are accessible and available to them wherever they go.

NATALIE CRAVER [03:16]: We partner with a number of non-profit organizations across the city to provide community-based child welfare prevention services.

[03:24]: And that ranges from our longstanding partnerships with the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative agencies, which are five nonprofits that are strategically located across all eight wards of the city, to serve as our community-based case management supports to our families. Once we determine that a case no longer is at the risk level or that we have safety concerns to warrant a case staying open with CFSA, we will step that case down to community-based supports, which are all voluntary, to support families so that they can strengthen their families in their communities and continue to access resources and supports as needed, as well as an array of housing supports.

[04:01]: And through our 20 year plus history in partnership with them, what we've seen is, from years of having over 3,000 children in out-of-home placement to now roughly about 860 kids--and this has happened over two decades. And they've played an integral part in helping to reduce that because, when you have a child that's been removed or separated from their parents and then you have what we call an out-of-home placement case, when reunification or guardianship or adoption has been established and finalized, then they still need ongoing support, because they have to go back home or they go back to another family.

[04:29]: The collaboratives have played an integral role in providing no supports necessary, hopefully, to where we don't have to see those families again to where they've been self-sufficient simply because of the services and support they've received from the collaboratives.

NARRATOR [04:52]: To investigate further, I asked Robert and Natalie to explain how the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative agencies all work together with CFSA, and how their strategies have evolved over their two decades of collaborating.

ROBERT MATTHEWS [05:07]: One of the main tenets that we've tried to push is public private partnership. And so, with that understanding that CFSA is the funder, we know that they're naturally community-based providers may see themselves as competitors. But we were very thoughtful and methodical about trying to develop a partnership where the competitiveness would not necessarily be at the table.

[05:33]: So what that looks like is that we made a concerted effort to ensure that, as we're developing programs or processes, that they are at the table with the funder, which would be child and family

services. So, we meet with them regularly, monthly. They have a lot of say and involvement with, how should contracts be written so that it's fair, but understanding that all communities look different.

[05:57]: What they bring to the table is their understanding of their community. And so really, they've been so informative to help make CFSA aware, hear the needs of the community. And then it then becomes CFSA's job to figure out how do we resource that, how do we make that possible and turn it into a reality.

[06:15]: It's not us just talking to them, but it's them providing information back to us as well as to the collection of data, which has evolved over time. Definitely under Natalie's leadership, we've been able to collect more data, which has helped informed how we should move forward in better supporting families and children.

[06:32]: Partnerships take effort. And it takes time, and they evolve over time. So being able to engage a community-based provider--I'm going to use that term first before it gets to a partner. Because you're a provider at first because we're a funder and we're providing funds to provide a service.

[06:51]: True partnership comes when both can sit at the table and help develop and not just be provided a directive. So, the partnership has to come when the agency, the funder can shift its perspective on being a funder versus a partner. And so, you really have to begin to turn the page on that as well and be able to allow your providers to have a voice and have a say.

[07:17]: Now what we have to understand is that you may not reach full consensus. We may not get everything we want. The provider may not get everything they want. But you can meet in the middle and make some compromises. And that's the beauty of a partnership. That's really the beauty of family. Who gets everything that they want? No one does that. And so, I would really, really urge those who are just beginning this work to think about some of those particular first steps in trying to build their community service array.

NARRATOR [07:47]: I also had the opportunity to hear from Mae Best, executive director of the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative for the last 20 years, who was at CFSA when their collaborative efforts first started.

MAE BEST [08:00]: Hi, my name is Mae Best. I am the executive director of the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative. So, I've been in that position for 20 years. The organization has been around for 21 years. I was at CFSA, actually, when the idea of the collaborative movement first started. East River was the very first collaborative founded.

[08:25]: All of the community partners--and there were a lot of people that came together to say that they agreed with the idea of family preservation and prevention and keeping children out of the child welfare system. So, everybody throughout all of the eight wards of the district came together and we all

decided--they all decided, I was part of the planning process, as well, that we would develop organizations or groups in the various wards to work with CFSA.

[08:55]: At the same time, CFSA was looking at bringing their workers to the community, diverting children from coming into foster care by referring children to community partners. So we had both going on. We had the community wanting to provide prevention services that would prevent children from coming into child welfare, and on the other hand, we had CFSA asking us to help them divert so children would come to the attention of child welfare and then they would be diverted to the community partners. It was a great opportunity.

[09:30]: Of course we fought, but the fighting was a friendly fight because we both felt we wanted to do the same thing. We wanted to reduce the children from coming into foster care, and we wanted to just work, provide resources to community residents. And that pretty much was how we got started. So, we started out with eight collaboratives. There are now five.

[09:55]: And the reason most of them, the other three, are no longer in existence is because we self-evaluated ourselves. We self-monitored. And if we felt that a collaborative was not acting in the true spirit of what we thought we should be doing, then there was a vote, and the others were let go.

NARRATOR [10:14]: Sharafdeen Ibraheem, deputy director at the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, spoke to me as well. You heard him at the top of this episode. He works hand-in-hand with the executive director and supports senior leadership across programming and expansion of the organization.

SHARAFDEEN IBRAHEEM [10:30]: There have been times where we've had to really have some hard conversations about the value that we bring to the work that's being done in partnership with CFSA. And I think that the traditional social worker mindset is, if you're not licensed, if you haven't been trained to do this work a certain way, it's hard for me to really see value in what you're offering. And because of the experience of being co-located and working in partnership together, I think that has really helped to curb some of that stereotype, or those biases that were there prior.

[11:04]: I mean, there are countless times when the co-located units--the CFSA co-located units--reach out to our Family Services director and clinical directors. And they want to have a consultation on an issue or on a case that is going on with the family. And literally, they have impromptu staff meetings at 4:00 or 5:00 in the evening. And everybody gets in a room, and they really try to hammer out how they're going to tackle the issues. And they have great successes. So that happens all the time.

[11:30]: Even before it gets to that level, once the cases are being worked by the social workers, they have informal consultation with our family support workers. And they're partnering on cases. They're reaching out to get resources in a community, sharing resources with one another. So, it definitely has come a long way in that respect, for each other's role.

NARRATOR [11:52]: I asked both of them to share what advice they would give to another community trying to work with a child-welfare agency to build a prevention services collaborative.

MAE BEST [12:01]: The first thing to do is to bring your community together--to talk about what's there, what's not there, what can you do? And just start having community conversations.

[12:12]: Then, I would go to the child-welfare agency. Talk with them about what you'd like to provide to the community and ask if there is any way they can be a partner. Initially, it's not always money. So initially it's like, maybe, money to just come together to talk. And then you work together to develop a plan, as to how the child-welfare agency and other partners can come in.

[12:40]: So it's like you just come together, have your community conversations. This is what we did in the beginning, and this is how we've grown. And I think this is the best way to start out.

SHARAFDEEN IBRAHEEM [12:50]: Just add to that, I would say also in that process of formation, I think it's important to know what you are trying to address. Know what purpose you are there for--and staying to that script, sticking to that script, playing to your strengths.

[13:11]: You can't do everything, so you've got to know truly where your value is in the process. So, some of those things, I think, are essential and critical for any network, any coalition, any movement. Because it's important that you don't dilute and stretch yourself in the process, because then you start having some challenges.

NARRATOR [13:37]: Even though CFSA has well-established partnerships with collaboratives in the nation's capital, other agencies around the country are just getting started. Eric Clark, the Commissioner for the Department for Community-Based Services in Kentucky, revealed how his agency is beginning to reach out to communities to make positive changes in their organizational culture and build collaborative relationships.

ERIC CLARK [14:00]: And one of the key ways we believe we can do that is start seeking collaborative opportunities with community partners and defining ourself as, yes. The Department for Community-Based Services plays an important role in the lives of families and children. We are the state's child welfare agency. However, we are not the child welfare system. The system belongs to all of us, and we all need to figure out a way to come alongside and partner together to improve the lives of our families.

[14:37]: Well, there's strength in numbers. And again, we're the child welfare agency in each community. But we're not the system. And going out and building partnerships with the faith-based community, going out building partnerships with community mental health providers, we're tapping into resources within our local public health departments, leveraging the support of just families who can perhaps be a respite provider for another family, bring a meal--it's all hands on deck.

[15:07]: We can only do so much in the Department for Community-Based Services. So, if we're going to expand our service array and engage holistically, it's going to take communities owning their issues, recognizing what the needs are, and finding ways to come alongside.

[15:25]: But the folks who aren't in this work have an impression that we are just this broken, failed system, because of these bad outcomes or high-profile things that happen, that define ourselves for us. So, I think that another key component of what we've done here in the department is we've put forward a strategic communication plan. We're now on social media, believe it or not. I know everybody's been on social media for years, but we're now on social media. And it's this approach that we need to start defining who we are for us, and we are not this narrative that's out there that people believe that we are.

[16:04]: And part of this strategic communication plan is sharing our collaboration with community partners across the state. This rolled out at a good time because we had Social Worker Appreciation Month. We had Child Abuse Prevention Month. We've got Foster Parent Appreciation Month going on right now, so there's a lots of events. Lots of things going on in communities to support all the work that we're doing and things we're doing every day.

[16:29]: So we're able to come alongside these organizations and communities and share with them, through our social media platform, what they're doing. And what we're finding is, is they very much want to share what we're doing on their social media platforms. So, there's that true, genuine partnership and collaboration going on. That has trickled down, where I think people are seeing a different culture in our agency. They're feeling a different culture, and there's a different narrative going on out there right now, that we're very excited about.

NARRATOR [17:01]: The importance of establishing collaborative involvement can't be overstated. You heard how DC built and maintains collaboratives by establishing shared goals, listening to the community, planning services together, and co-locating staff. You heard about Kentucky's initial steps to redefine who they are to the community with a thoughtful communication plan and through open and regular communication. With input from partners working closely with the members of the communities you serve, your agency can better understand these members' needs and work together to build a system that strengthens families.

[17:42]: Thanks for listening to the second episode of the podcast series How We Partner With the Community to Improve Service Options. I hope it's left you inspired and sparked ideas that you can put into practice at your agency.

[17:55]: Listen on for a brief snippet from the next episode: Including Family, Youth and community Voice at the System Level. Until next time.

[18:07]: It doesn't just take youth who were in foster care. Everybody should care, as Commissioner Clark says all the time. Everybody should care about our youth. Everybody should care about that.

Because they're the ones that are going to be moving on. They're going to become adults. They are going to become parts of, members, of society. So, they are the future. So, everybody should be involved with the positive changes and the lives of our youth.

[18:27]: [Music]:

Narrator [18:29]: 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 HHSP233201400033C.