



BECOMING A Family-Focused System

Strategies for Building a Culture of Service Collaboration



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

To protect and nurture their children, families need timely access to coordinated, culturally responsive, quality services, supports, and resources in their communities. Building a culture and climate that will encourage and sustain community-based, prevention-focused systems and services can help child welfare agencies develop a service array that will meet the needs of children, youth, and families.

This publication offers strategies and examples for promoting a culture and climate that support collaborative development of an effective service array, organized under three subdimensions of culture and climate (exhibit 1). These are part of a framework agencies can use to build their capacity to meet outcomes in five organizational areas: resources, infrastructure, knowledge and skills, culture and climate, and engagement and partnership.

These strategies can be used individually or in combination with each other to start a conversation about how child welfare agencies can improve their culture and climate after conducting an assessment (see "[Becoming a Family-Focused System: Assessing Culture and Climate](#)"). Teams or workgroups working on developing a service array can also use these strategies as a starting point to generate ideas and begin a conversation about culture and climate with families and community partners.

Exhibit 1. Subdimensions of Organizational Culture and Climate and Related Strategies¹

Leadership Vision and Commitment

The view provided from the top. This includes agency leaders' commitment to a new practice or program and their communication of intended change to stakeholders. How agency leaders prioritize a practice or program, align it with other ongoing initiatives, and dedicate resources to support it will also reflect leadership commitment and dedication to the practice or program.

- ◆ Prioritize collaboration with community partners.
- ◆ Model and repeat the changes you want to see.

Organizational Norms, Values, and Purpose

Written and unwritten guidance and expectations for how people behave and how things are done in the organization. This includes an agency's stated mission, values, and goals, as well as how a new program or innovation fits within the overall mission, values, and goals.

- ◆ Become a learning organization.
- ◆ Focus on family engagement and communication.

Workforce Attitudes, Morale, Motivation, and Buy-in

Staff perceptions of the agency environment, programs, and practices. This includes workers' commitment to the organization, their motivation and buy-in for desired practices, and their perception of the importance and sustainability of a practice or an innovation. This subdimension also reflects staff clarity on their expected roles and responsibilities and their openness to change.

- ◆ Support your workforce.

1. These subdimensions of organizational capacity (not the strategies) come from the Capacity Building Center for States (Center for States, 2017b), based on work done by James Bell Associates, Inc., and ICF International (2015). For more information see Subdimensions of Organizational Culture and Climate at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/cqi/organizational-capacity-guide/organizational-culture-and-climate/subdimensions/>

How to Build Culture and Climate for an Effective Service Array

The following strategies and examples provide some ideas on how the qualities described above can be put into practice to help agencies create a culture and climate that will help them develop an effective service array.

Leadership Vision and Commitment

Change starts at the top, and reorienting an agency culture and climate to support collaborative service array development is no exception. For example, agency leadership has the ability to prioritize an agency's commitment to collaborating with families and community providers in service array development, as well as to support workforce development so staff can build the skills necessary for such collaboration. Agency leaders also have the power to allocate resources and align policies and practices with such initiatives.

By modeling and supporting the cultural changes they want to see in their agencies and communities, agency leaders can support and sustain a culture and climate for collaborative service array.

Prioritize Collaboration With Community Partners

Community partnerships involve child welfare agencies working together with community organizations, service providers, and other stakeholders to help prevent children from entering the child welfare system and to provide families, at risk or in crisis, with access to services and supports. Such partnerships can work to strengthen families, improve service access and delivery, enhance relationships among public and private service providers, and create a positive community climate (Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2010). The following strategies can help create a culture to better collaborate with community partners:

- ◆ **Confirm leadership commitment** for establishing deep community partnerships and identify a "champion" for the initiative among agency and other leaders.
- ◆ **Obtain both agency staff and community buy-in** for community collaborations to keep them productive and useful for families, youth, and children. It's important for staff to communicate openly and regularly with community partners about the needs of families, youth, and children as well as to solicit honest feedback about the kinds of services that families, youth, and children need.
- ◆ **Assess existing internal and affiliated organization resources** with community partners to see how resources can be used to complement community collaborations.

Model and Repeat the Changes You Want to See

Successfully creating change at any organization depends on having strong leaders who can build the capacity for change and innovation. Leaders who supervise and can positively influence those providing direct services are especially important in this effort (Aarons, Ehrhart, Farahnak, & Hurlburt, 2015). Leaders at all levels of an organization can set the tone for the organizational culture and climate by acting in ways consistent with what they would like to see from others. In other words, leaders need to "walk the talk" if they expect others to do the same.

For example, if developing an effective service array requires intensive collaboration with staff, families, and community partners, as well as open communication around difficult issues, agency leaders can model these qualities (e.g., collaboration, transparency) through their own behavior. In turn, agency staff can model these qualities in their work with families and community partners.

Definitions

Culture – shared behavioral expectations and norms in a work environment, or the collective view of "the way work is done" (Glisson, 2015). Indicators of culture include policies, priorities, mission and vision, and practice model.

(Organizational) climate – staff perceptions of the impact of the work environment on the individual, or "how it feels" to work at the agency (e.g., supportive versus stressful) (Glisson, 2015). Examples of organizational climate include perceptions, beliefs, and prevailing attitudes among staff.

Engagement – active, ongoing collaboration of families, youth, and other stakeholders with child welfare agencies and community partners in a way that recognizes them as equal partners in effecting practice and system change.

Service array – comprehensive and responsive supports and services available in the community to assist families in meeting their specific needs.

◆ Model a positive organizational climate at all levels of the agency (not just the top) that values:

- ◆ Trust
- ◆ Equality (regardless of status or circumstances)
- ◆ The quality of social relationships within an organization
- ◆ Collaboration
- ◆ Transparent communication
- ◆ Staff having influence or autonomy over some of their work
- ◆ Organizational fairness

In a climate that values these qualities, all stakeholders are more likely to commit their time, energy, and creativity to the work of developing an effective service array and other agency initiatives (Milhauser, 2015).

◆ Build the culture and climate the agency needs to do its work explicitly into the organization's policies and practices. Make sure leadership visibly supports this effort (Glisson, 2015).



Jurisdictional Spotlight: Transforming the Culture of Child Welfare in Kentucky

In April 2018, the Kentucky Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) began its Child Welfare Transformation, an overarching framework to comprehensively change agency culture, climate, and practice to help achieve better outcomes for children, youth, and families. It included the following elements:

- ◆ A new project management structure with nine workgroups that covered all aspects of agency work
- ◆ Ongoing risk assessment and review
- ◆ Internal and external communication plans
- ◆ Project performance monitoring
- ◆ Continuous stakeholder engagement
- ◆ Deliverable verifications
- ◆ Development of a new practice model, Cultures of Safety, to move the agency from a reactive culture of fear, blame, and intimidation to a responsive culture that evaluates systems and operations through a trauma-informed lens

In structuring the Child Welfare Transformation framework, Kentucky DCBS took into account the voices and the opinions that mattered to make transformational changes, including working with children, youth, and families formerly and currently receiving child welfare services to make sure youth voice was being incorporated. Leadership support was recognized as crucial early on, and the workgroups have the support and involvement of the DCBS commissioner and the state governor's office. As a key implementation strategy, the agency continues to work hard to make sure staff and stakeholders are on board by providing training at all staff levels and integrating the new practices with existing frameworks to support staff throughout the process.

As agency leaders studied the provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Family First), they realized that being an early implementer of Family First would serve as a lever for the child welfare transformation efforts already underway.

In describing the agency's journey, one Kentucky DCBS administrator framed it this way: "We've been looking at the maps a lot, we've been talking about all the stops we're going to make, we finally got in the car, and the rubber is getting ready to hit the road!" (Personal communication, April 9, 2019).

Organizational Norms, Values, and Purpose

To collaborate with families and community service providers in developing an effective, prevention-focused service array, agencies need to understand the underlying assumptions, norms, and values of their organizational culture (Milhauser, 2015). With that understanding in place, agencies can then develop and reinforce those norms and values that help them advance toward their goal. Two steps agencies can take include becoming a learning organization and focusing on engaging and collaborating with families to assess and develop the service array.

Become a Learning Organization

A culture and climate that encourage organizations to continually learn and grow can support innovation and improve service effectiveness (Glisson, 2015). An organization with a growth mindset (Schwartz, 2018):

1. Has an environment where staff at all levels feel free to take calculated risks and make mistakes
2. Supports continuous learning
3. Provides continuous feedback, across all levels of the organization, that is grounded in a shared commitment to growth

An agency that values learning and growth has a commitment to supporting continuous quality improvement (CQI) and using data and evidence to improve practice. Using data and direct input from families to assess and improve the service array can help an agency make sure that it has selected the right services for the families it serves and that those services are effective (Center for States, 2018b). It can also help encourage staff and community buy-in for the services offered. The following strategies can help sustain a growth-focused organizational culture for service array development:

- ◆ **Collaborate with staff at all levels of the agency** especially frontline staff, community providers, and families to gather information, assess readiness for change, and find the right solutions for your agency (Center for States, 2018a). If challenges arise, avoid a culture of scapegoating; instead, focus on moving forward to address any issues (Glisson, 2015).
- ◆ **Research many possible options** before committing to an option (Center for States, 2018b). Before deciding on particular services or service models, make sure a solid research base shows their effectiveness.
- ◆ **Institute a regular CQI process** to evaluate whether services are working as intended. If not, evaluate why. Then make changes based on the information.
- ◆ **Work with community service providers** to regularly monitor and evaluate the services they provide to ensure they meet the standards set by the agency regarding use of data and evidence in service development. Consider requiring client satisfaction surveys to demonstrate responsiveness to the families served.

Focus on Family Engagement and Communication

Families are the experts in their own care. Engaging families in making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes for themselves and their children encourages and empowers families to be their own champions (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Understanding the needs of individual families can, in turn, help agencies understand the types of services that need to be offered. Families can also be involved in agencywide or local projects to assess and improve service array. The following strategies can help agencies engage and work with families to develop a more useful service array:

- ◆ **Use a family-centered, strengths-based approach** that focuses on the needs of the whole family and uses family strengths to generate solutions and help solve challenges the family is facing. Building trust-based relationships between families and caseworkers is a key first step to an effective working partnership (National Resource Center for In-Home Services, n.d.). The Center for States' [Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families series](#) contains more information and resources on building family-caseworker relationships.
- ◆ **Practice cultural awareness and competency when working with families.** This is defined as the ability to understand, communicate with, and interact with people across cultures (National Resource Center for In-Home Services, n.d.). Agencies should work on creating an organizational culture that prioritizes providing culturally relevant services that take into account cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs when collaborating with families. The following collection of resources has additional information on developing a culture that values cultural competence: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/cultural/>
- ◆ **Train staff on the most effective ways of approaching and engaging families, and ensure they are practicing those skills in their work** (e.g., working with families with a variety of perspectives, making resources available to support their full participation in the processes, providing coaching to staff to support dialogue around potentially challenging topics). Make sure families have the tools they need to be part of the discussion.

- ◆ **Obtain families' input on the services they need and barriers they face.** Families are the main experts in their own care. If a policy, practice, or service is not working for families, it is not working at all.
- ◆ **Throughout the process, keep families informed about how the information they provide will be used and the outcomes of any projects for which they provided input.** Open, transparent, and regular communication with all involved is key—without it, family engagement in service array development has no possibility of success (Center for States, 2018d).



Jurisdictional Spotlight: Building a Culture of Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration in Allegheny County, PA

In an effort to support a collaborative culture and engage stakeholders in service array development, Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) has developed a comprehensive and intentional process for seeking feedback from local communities and countywide stakeholders about the service array.

Allegheny County DHS regularly solicits feedback from various constituencies and advocates through its advisory groups, including a children's council, and regular town hall meetings to shape the direction of future activities and identify which services have been helpful, unhelpful, or missing from the current array. The agency further demonstrates its commitment to engaging and involving its community in many different aspects of its programming by asking community groups about what they feel is missing from the existing service array. In making decisions about changes to its service array, the agency uses this qualitative data combined with information from its analytic systems, as well as employs technology to solicit feedback via surveys and mining social media to gauge community opinions.

By combining direct feedback with sophisticated data analytics, Allegheny County DHS is able to optimize its services to meet population needs. By regularly and frequently listening to stakeholders, the agency has been able to establish and deepen numerous community partnerships that bolster the agency's work in multiple ways and allow it to operate with a deep level of community support.

Workforce Attitudes, Morale, Motivation, and Buy-in

Many studies link workforce recruitment and retention to organizational culture and climate (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Claiborne et al., 2011; Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010; Glisson & Green, 2006; Social Work Policy Institute, 2010; Williams & Glisson, 2014). In addition, staff perceptions of the agency environment, programs, and practices are one of the most important factors in achieving better outcomes for children, youth, and families (Goering, 2017).

Research has shown that staff at organizations that value staff motivation, morale, and buy-in are much more likely to engage with stakeholders in productive ways (Goering, 2017). Without such committed engagement, child welfare staff are unlikely to devote the effort necessary to collaborate with families and community providers in developing an accessible, prevention-focused service array (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

Support Your Workforce

The following strategies can help build and sustain the motivation and morale of the child welfare agency workforce:

- ◆ **Invest in supervisor training and the development of positive supervisor-supervisee relationships.** Supervisors are key to helping child welfare workers develop knowledge and skills they use on the job, as well as providing organizational support and recognition for their work (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Landsman, 2007). Supervisory support also works to sustain and reinforce staff morale and encourage a professional sense of worth among staff (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Finally, strong supervisory support is a positive factor in facilitating agency collaboration with families (Haksoon, Keyser, & Hayward-Everson, 2016).
- ◆ **Ensure that staff can access the education they need to do their work effectively,** including the work of collaborating with families and community providers to develop service array. Where appropriate, invest in or seek funding for stipends, tuition reimbursement, and time off for staff to pursue training (Center for States, 2018c). Managers and leaders will then need to work to make sure that the skills learned in training are being implemented in the agency's work with families and community stakeholders.

- ◆ **Address the factors that contribute to or inhibit staff motivation** to collaborate with families and community partners on service array development. For example, agencies can communicate about why a new mode of collaboration is needed (prioritization); offer clear, easy-to-follow steps to increase collaboration around service array (manageability); embed collaboration into existing structures or practices to make it easier for staff (compatibility); and share data and initial successes (visibility of outcomes) to build buy-in and encourage motivation (Aarons & Palinkas, 2007; Center for States, 2018a).
- ◆ **Take the time to train staff to collaborate with families effectively**, including sharing information about how staff can learn to recognize and manage any implicit biases about the families they serve. How staff collaborate with families—the words they use and the attitudes they bring to the table—sets the tone for all interactions.

Strategies: A Culture and Climate That Champion the Child Welfare Workforce

To make organizational culture and climate more supportive of child welfare workers, several jurisdictions have spearheaded initiatives around boosting staff morale and buy-in, as well as reframing the role of child welfare workers in public awareness (Center for States, 2017a).

- ◆ When an agency observed that lack of public engagement in child welfare limited the public’s understanding, trust, and support of the agency, leaders implemented a campaign to engage the public and improve both the agency’s reputation and its services. The following questions helped agency leaders and staff plan the initiative:
 - ◆ Where should we focus our energy and resources to improve public engagement (e.g., partner with local universities, engage constituents, etc.)?
 - ◆ How can we access the community’s perspective on the work we are doing (e.g., reach out to the media, survey community stakeholders)?
 - ◆ What are some ways we can use community feedback to substantively inform agency improvements?
- ◆ Several jurisdictions are using outreach activities and social media to improve the public’s perception of child welfare and build awareness and partnerships between child welfare systems and community stakeholders. When working to improve their culture and climate around building awareness, agency leaders asked:
 - ◆ How can our agency use social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, to disseminate information about agency work and “tell a story” about what we do? This can include things like parenting tips to families, as well as “good news” stories to build the community’s understanding of the child welfare system.
 - ◆ How can we reach out to the community to build productive partnerships that can boost the public’s awareness of child welfare initiatives (e.g., schedule stakeholder forums, attend meetings of existing community groups)?
 - ◆ How can we work with media outlets in a proactive and transparent way (e.g., participate in regular briefings, provide press releases about agency initiatives and successes, etc.)?

Conclusion: Getting Started

Addressing culture and climate around service array development may seem daunting—the topic may seem too large or unrelated to more urgent work, perhaps. However, agencies can start small by working on one aspect of culture and climate at a time. Often, by starting work on just one aspect of agency culture and climate that has an impact on service array development, agencies can begin to see how culture and climate affect every aspect of agency practice.

First steps agencies can take to begin working on culture and climate for collaborative service array development include:

- ◆ Ask leadership to convene a workgroup to begin working on a culture and climate assessment to evaluate service array at your agency.
- ◆ Working with agency leaders, begin planning a meeting with community service providers and organizations that currently work with your agency, as well as those you would like to bring on board, to discuss service array development.
- ◆ Reach out to existing partner organizations, such as youth advisory councils, family groups, and parent partner groups, to begin discussing service array development.
- ◆ Begin thinking about ways to increase staff motivation and morale. One good way to start is to begin recognizing and celebrating agency achievements and milestones, both individual and team based.

Becoming a Family-Focused System Series

Culture and climate affect the way child welfare practice is carried out in an agency.

Becoming a Family-Focused System is a series of resources designed to support program managers, child welfare leaders, CQI and evaluation staff, training managers, and other agency staff in assessing, building, and sustaining positive organizational culture and climate change. Resources include publications, digital products, and events focusing on culture and climate affecting family engagement, continuity of relationships, and service array development. Additional series resources can be accessed at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/family-focused-system/>.

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