

## Collaboration between State Welfare and Child Welfare Agencies

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*PRWORA spurred state efforts to improve collaboration between TANF and child welfare agencies, and gave them the flexibility to develop programs suited to their populations.*

Welfare agencies provide income assistance or services to needy families, while child welfare agencies seek to protect children from abuse and neglect. Not surprisingly, these two agencies have a large set of clients in common, often referred to as “dual-system” clients. More than half of all foster children come from families that are eligible for welfare (Committee on Ways and Means 2000) and 70 to 90 percent of families that receive in-home support services through the child welfare system are on welfare (Geen et al. 2001). Moreover, recent studies have documented a link between welfare receipt and future child welfare involvement (DHHS ASPE 2000; Shook 1999; Needell et al. 1999; Geen, Kortenkamp, and Stagner forthcoming). For example, in 1990, one in four new child entrants to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in California had some contact with child welfare agencies within the past five years (Needell et al. 1999).

Welfare and child welfare agencies can undertake various collaborative efforts to ease client burden and promote both child protection and self-sufficiency. This brief explores collaborations at the state level that resulted from federal changes in welfare and child welfare policy. We found that collaboration between TANF and child welfare agencies in many states has

altered how the agencies structure their organization and develop programs for targeted populations, such as relative caregivers. To encourage further collaboration, state policymakers may consider helping TANF and child welfare agencies develop better ways to share information, delineate responsibility, identify priorities, and target those at risk of becoming dual-system clients.

Despite overlapping clientele, welfare and child welfare agencies made few formal attempts to collaborate before welfare reform in 1996, and dual-system families have suffered as a result (Ehrle et al. 2001). In qualitative research conducted by the Urban Institute, child welfare workers noted that dual-system families were often overwhelmed by the multiple, competing requirements of the two systems (Geen et al. 2001). For example, work requirements often conflicted with services mandated by child welfare, attendance at court hearings, or visitation of children placed in foster care.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed into law in 1996, replaced AFDC with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and opened the doors for greater collaboration between welfare and child welfare agencies. The legislation required states to

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allow local governments and private sector organizations to consult regarding the plan and design of welfare services. Furthermore, the legislation folded funding for several programs into a block grant to states, giving states the flexibility to develop programs suited to their populations.

The tone of PRWORA set the stage for collaborative efforts. Case studies conducted by the Urban Institute in 1999 to assess collaboration between TANF and child welfare agencies found a wide variety of collaborative efforts occurring at the local level as a result of welfare reform (Ehrle et al. 2001). To follow up on the case studies and get a national perspective of state efforts to promote collaboration between child welfare and TANF agencies, the Urban Institute sent a survey to the TANF director in each state and the District of Columbia in September 2001 to determine what, if any, collaborative efforts were being implemented at the state level.<sup>1</sup> Collaboration, for the purpose of this brief, includes all efforts to improve service delivery that are based on input from both the TANF and child welfare agencies. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey.<sup>2</sup> We found collaboration activities at this level occurring within two categories: organizational infrastructure activities and program development for targeted populations.

### **Organizational Infrastructure**

Welfare reform has prompted many states to change frontline practices to enhance collaboration between TANF and child welfare agencies. Such changes include, but are not limited to, coordinating case plans, improving information sharing between agencies, and colocating offices or creating new staff positions.

#### **Coordinating Case Plans**

Dual-system families are required to meet the demands of two case plans—a child welfare case plan and a TANF work service plan. Child welfare case plans typically involve activities designed to improve parenting, while TANF plans generally involve work-related activities such as job

search or paid work. Because many of the barriers that individuals face in securing employment (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, low levels of education) may also be barriers to effective parenting, many child welfare activities could be considered allowable activities within TANF work plan requirements.

TANF agencies can set three different work requirement standards for dual-system clients. First, TANF agencies can accept the client's child welfare activities as sufficiently meeting TANF requirements. Second, the TANF agency could supplement the child welfare case plan with additional required activities. Finally, the TANF agency could develop an entirely separate plan that must be met in addition to the child welfare plan.

Most state TANF agencies (31) have provided either written or verbal guidance to local TANF agencies on coordinating TANF work plans with child welfare plans. Nearly half (19) of the state TANF agencies that responded identified child welfare case plan activities that can be used to fulfill TANF work requirements. Six of those states reported that dual-system clients may participate only in their child welfare activities and still meet work requirements. Conversely, six states reported that child welfare activities must be combined with work-related activities in order to meet work requirements. Seven of the surveyed states reported that participation is determined on a case-by-case basis. In these states the dual-system client participates in other work-related activities if the client is capable of supplementing the child welfare activities. If additional work-related activities are thought to be detrimental to the client's child welfare plan, the client is deferred from participating in work-related activities and the child welfare activities meet the work participation requirements.

#### **Information Sharing**

Welfare reform prompted the need for greater information sharing between systems. At the most basic level, if case

workers are aware of what another agency is doing with a client, they can use this information in case planning. Earlier research found that when child welfare workers had information, they could at least advocate for their clients (Ehrle et al. 2001). Moreover, information sharing from TANF to child welfare can help identify clients who are not child welfare clients but may need child abuse and neglect prevention services.

Yet sharing information across agencies is problematic. Disclosure and mandated reporting can be barriers to sharing information. In many states, for example, incidents of domestic violence in homes with children result in a report to child welfare of neglect based on a failure to protect the children. As a result, parents may hesitate to disclose domestic violence to a welfare worker because they fear they will lose their children. Confidentiality is another barrier to sharing information. Often, child welfare agencies are reluctant to share information with TANF for fear that they are breaching their clients' confidentiality rights. Because of these barriers it is important that agencies have specific policies regarding sharing information about these types of clients.

Twenty of the TANF agencies surveyed have documented policies for sharing information with the child welfare agencies. These policies address a variety of populations who are at risk for child welfare involvement. Thirteen states have policies for sharing information about families with substance abuse issues. Seventeen states have policies on sharing information for at least one of the following populations: families experiencing domestic violence, families with mental health issues, teenage parents not living at home, families approaching time limits, and sanctioned families.

While many states do not have policies regarding information sharing specific to certain populations, they do have a general written policy that encompasses all of these populations. These types of policies tended to occur when the TANF and child

welfare agencies were housed under one umbrella agency. For example, written policy in Nevada states, "the divisions within the Department of Human Resources may share confidential information without a formal release" (Nevada State Welfare Division Administrative Manual 1996).

Of the 22 states that do not have written policies for sharing information, more than half (12) have given some type of guidance to local TANF agencies regarding communication with child welfare. The guidance ranges from formal memorandums of agreement to informal verbal guidance.

### ***Colocation and New Positions***

Locating the TANF and child welfare agencies in the same office is one way agencies prompt collaboration. Having workers accessible to each other can promote information sharing and joint planning. Since federal welfare reform, 13 states have colocated TANF and child welfare staff. Oregon has taken colocation a step further and is in the process of reorganizing their Adult and Family Services Division (which administers TANF) and their Children and Families Division into one integrated agency.

States are also creating positions and participating in joint planning sessions to promote collaboration. Over half of the states surveyed (25) created joint planning or steering committees. Eight of the states have created a new liaison position in the TANF agency to work with the child welfare agency. Similarly, four states created a liaison position in the child welfare agency to work with the TANF agency. Liaisons provide information about the policies and procedures of each agency and technical assistance to local agencies on working with dual-system clients. In another approach to collaboration, seven states created a combined unit of TANF and child welfare staff to work with dual-system families. Finally, a few states (3) now require different skills for existing TANF positions to assist staff in identifying possible child abuse or neglect.

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*Information sharing can help identify TANF clients who may need child abuse and neglect prevention services.*

## Targeted Populations

By identifying clients' barriers to employment, many TANF agencies are also identifying clients that may already be served by or are in need of services from child welfare agencies. For example, TANF agencies are identifying relatives caring for children, sanctioned clients, and clients with domestic violence issues. Addressing these various client needs has been the impetus for a number of unique programs.

### *Relative Caregivers*

As welfare caseloads dropped in recent years, the proportion of the caseload made up of child-only cases, cases in which no adult is in the assistance unit, grew significantly (DHHS ASPE 2001). In addition, the number of TANF child-only cases with no parents in the household (e.g., relative caregivers) has increased since 1996 to more than half of all TANF child-only cases (DHHS ACF 2002). At the same time, child welfare agencies have become increasingly reliant on relatives to care for children in the foster care system (DHHS ACF 2000). These relatives often are unable or choose not to meet foster care standards for licensing, preventing them from receiving a federal foster care payment. Instead, such relatives often receive TANF child-only payments, which are significantly less than federal foster care payments.

Given the discrepancy in payments, policymakers have expressed two main concerns. First, relatives caring for children not currently involved in the child welfare system may seek out child welfare involvement to attain more services and a higher payment. Second, relatives caring for children who are involved with child welfare but who receive the child-only payment instead of a foster care payment may not be able to provide adequate care for the child with the lesser payment, and the child may be returned for placement in traditional non-kin foster care. Thus to stabilize kin placements and prevent greater child welfare involvement, some TANF agencies are collaborating with child welfare agencies to provide more comprehensive services.

Some states offer additional payments to relative caregivers to supplement the child-only benefits. Eight states reported that they offer monthly supplemental payments to caregivers receiving child-only payments. Seven states do this at a statewide level, and one reported that some counties provide supplemental payments. Some states noted that although they do not provide supplemental payments, they do provide services for the needs of relative caregivers. For example, in Oklahoma supportive service funds are available for relative caregivers to assist with clothing, legal issues, shelter-related expenses, school supplies and activities, and counseling for the relative or child.

A number of states have implemented kinship programs to prevent children from being placed in foster homes. Alabama has implemented a pilot program in six of its counties with TANF funding to serve low-income, vulnerable families who are caring for a related child. The program provides financial and supportive services to relative caregivers to prevent at-risk children from entering a foster care placement. Services through this program include counseling, child care, food assistance, respite care, special needs payments, and emergency intervention services.

In addition, two states have created a combined unit of TANF and child welfare staff to work with relative caregivers. Some states are offering relative caregivers a variety of services. For example, the New Jersey TANF agency provides in-home services to relative caregivers. Six states provide respite care services, while six states give one-time payments to help relative caregivers care for related children. Four states reported creating support groups for relative caregivers.

### *Sanctioned Families and Families Approaching Time Limits*

When welfare reform was debated, many policymakers expressed concern about low-income parents' abilities to care for their children if their TANF payments were reduced by a sanction or because they reached interim or lifetime time

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limits. Several TANF agencies presently coordinate with child welfare to monitor sanctioned families or families who reach time limits.

TANF and child welfare agencies in four states jointly contracted with community-based organizations to serve sanctioned families and prevent involvement with the child welfare system. In addition, four states reported providing in-home services to sanctioned families on a statewide level. Similarly, three states reported that their TANF and child welfare agencies jointly contracted with community-based organizations to serve families approaching time limits in an effort to prevent involvement in the child welfare system. Finally, four states reported that they provide in-home services statewide to families approaching time limits.

There are two approaches to working with these families. In one approach the agency works with the families intensively while they are still receiving benefits to ensure that they will not be sanctioned and will be successful upon reaching their time limits. For example, Kentucky's Parental Responsibility Opportunities (PRO) Team works with families to address their barriers to TANF participation and self-sufficiency before they are sanctioned or reach their time limits. The team is made up of community members, Department of Community Based Services staff, and Family Resource and Youth Services Center staff. The purpose of this program is to prevent the loss of assistance and protect the children of TANF families.

Another approach is to provide services to the family after they have been sanctioned or have reached their time limit. Georgia's Safety Net for Children program is an example of this approach. Its purpose is to provide services to families that have been sanctioned or have reached their time limits to ensure the health, safety, and welfare of children. The program provides services for the provision of food, clothing, shelter/utilities, child care, child support, medical coverage, and home visits to ensure safety.

### **Domestic Violence**

Based on a summary of the research, Rapheal and Haennicke (1999) found that 20 to 30 percent of welfare recipients are suffering from domestic violence, which can be both a work impediment to TANF clients and a risk to the safety of the client and her children. State TANF agencies are developing domestic violence programs and partnering with child welfare agencies to address the needs of clients and their children.

Over half (25) of the state TANF agencies surveyed provide domestic violence services statewide. Six states use child welfare workers to assess TANF participants that may be experiencing domestic violence. Eleven states reported that they jointly contracted with the child welfare agency to use domestic violence advocates to assess or serve TANF and child welfare clients who may be experiencing domestic violence.

### **Other Populations**

The survey also captured information about services for other vulnerable populations that may become involved with child welfare. Teen parents, substance abusers, those with mental health conditions, and long-term welfare recipients are each at risk of involvement with child welfare. Directly or through contracted providers, TANF agencies are providing services to these populations as well.

Under welfare reform, teen parents are required to live with their parents in order to receive assistance for their child.<sup>3</sup> If the teen's parents are abusive, however, the teen must live with another guardian or in a group home to receive TANF assistance. Eight state TANF agencies created group homes or "second chance" homes for teenage parents who cannot live with their parents or guardians because of abuse or neglect. Four states provided housing or shelters for teenage parents.

Substance abuse is a major issue for both TANF and child welfare agencies. It can be a work impediment, and contributes to the abuse and neglect of children. Half

(21) of the TANF agencies surveyed provide substance abuse services statewide directly or through contracted providers. Twelve states have jointly contracted with the child welfare agency to use substance abuse counselors or treatment facilities to serve TANF and child welfare clients.

Mental health problems may also be a barrier to self-sufficiency for TANF clients. Fourteen states provide mental health services statewide directly or through contracted providers. In addition, eight states have jointly contracted with the child welfare agency to use mental health professionals to serve TANF and child welfare clients.

Many states are providing services to a number of populations they feel are at risk for involvement with the child welfare agency. In five states, TANF and child welfare agencies jointly contracted with community-based organizations to serve long-term recipients in an effort to prevent involvement in the child welfare system. In addition, 19 of the 42 state TANF agencies provide parenting skills classes to their clients. Finally, 17 states provide a one-time payment to help prevent an eviction that might bring children into foster care.

### Discussion

Our survey shows that the PRWORA legislation spurred state efforts to improve collaboration between TANF and child welfare agencies.<sup>4</sup> Welfare reform has prompted TANF agencies to identify and address barriers to employment that clients face. And because many of these barriers may also prevent effective parenting, TANF agencies are working with many families served by child welfare agencies. Moreover, PRWORA provided the flexibility necessary for state TANF agencies to address these problems. There are a number of steps state policymakers might take to ensure current collaboration efforts continue and future efforts are undertaken.

State policymakers may consider providing guidelines in their state policies or technical assistance in the following areas to resolve any conflicts that stand in the way of collaboration:

- **Information sharing mechanisms.** There needs to be a mechanism for agencies to identify dual-system clients and share information regarding these clients. Policies should concentrate on the various issues that arise from sharing information, such as disclosure and confidentiality rights.
- **Delineating responsibility.** Agencies need to be clear about whose responsibility it is to initiate collaboration and, once collaboration is initiated, how workers will make decisions regarding the client.
- **Identifying priorities.** When working with dual-system clients, agencies should be clear about how case plan goals should be prioritized.
- **Risk assessment training.** While the previous strategies address dual-system clients, there are also actions that state policymakers may take for those clients that are not yet involved with child welfare but are at risk of involvement. State policymakers may want to consider training child welfare and TANF workers about the various risks faced by sanctioned families or families approaching time limits. Risk assessment training would allow workers to identify potential problems and prevent them before they become an issue.

The collaboration that is occurring is a great accomplishment when compared with the limited efforts before welfare reform. And many policymakers and agencies are just beginning to realize the possibilities of collaboration. If TANF funding continues for these efforts we will likely see many more unique and collaborative programs.

### Notes

1. For more information on local-level collaboration see Ehrle et al. (2001).
2. For the purpose of this brief, we will refer to the District of Columbia as a state.

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3. Circumstances other than abuse may justify alternative living arrangements for teens. Teens may also live with relatives and receive TANF assistance.
4. In addition to the statewide efforts described in this brief, there are a number of collaboration efforts that occur as a result of personal relationships and local-level efforts. These efforts are not captured in this brief, yet they have an important impact on the well-being of dual-system clients. Future research should focus on the numerous collaborative efforts occurring at the local level between TANF and child welfare agencies.

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