Community-Based Accountability In the Child Welfare System

The Promise of Partnership:
Communities, Family Support, and Child Protection

A Conference Sponsored by
Family Support America

Lynn Usher

Jordan Institute for Families
School of Social Work
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

May 22, 2001
Be Clear About Underlying Values and Their Implications

- **Every child deserves a family.**
  - Family to Family

- **Kids do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in neighborhoods connected to strong economic opportunities, services and supports, and social networks.**
  - Making Connections
Be Specific About Key Outcomes

- Keep children safe while avoiding out-of-home placement
- Use the least restrictive placement appropriate to the child’s needs, the interests and capabilities of the family, and community resources —
  - Maintain attachments to family, friends, and schoolmates
  - Maintain neighborhood and/or community attachments
  - Place with families
- Provide stable care while in custody
- Require the shortest length of stay appropriate to the strengths and needs of the child and family, and resources in the community
- Achieve permanency for all children and youth through reunification, adoption, guardianship, or other legally secure relationships
- Maintain safety and well-being of children after permanent placement
Be Aware of the Broader Context of Performance Measurement in Child Welfare

- “Report card” comparisons of states based on federal Child and Family Service Reviews

- An emerging consensus on key outcomes is undermined by outmoded federal reporting requirements

  Safety, Permanence, and Well-being

- Federal reporting requirements focus mostly on the children who have the worst experiences in the system

- Something done to communities rather than with them or by them
Some Premises of Community-Based Accountability in Child Welfare

- Community-based governance is more responsive and responsible.
- The child welfare agency shares authority and responsibility with the community.
- Must concern outcomes, not merely procedural compliance.
- New “bottom lines”
  - Child safety, permanence, & well-being
  - Family outcomes
  - Community outcomes
Accountability Grounded in Self-Evaluation

• Seeks to create a flow of information to support mid-course corrections and continuous improvements in outcomes
  
  Evaluation is a process, not a report.

• Without authority over policy and control of resources, producers and consumers of evaluative information merely engage in academic exercises.

  • Evaluation is not auditing.

  You can be honest . . . but ineffective.
Data Requirements in Self-Evaluation

• Use longitudinal data to track every child’s experiences

• Present data in ways that highlight changes in performance

• Link placement data with abuse & neglect reports to address pre- and post-placement safety issues

• Use GIS technology to monitor neighborhood impact
Obstacles to Self-Evaluation

- Child welfare managers’ failure to assert that self-evaluation is part of the “real work” of the agency.

- Shifting the focus to reports or monitoring systems rather than maintaining a commitment to an ongoing interactive process among diverse participants.

- Difficulty hiring and retaining staff who have analytic and data management skills.