

## STATE STRATEGIES FOR PARTNERING WITH CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

### Alaska

Alaska's Strengthening Families™ initiative is located in DHSS' Office of Children's Services. With the OCS Deputy Commissioner supporting the initiative, child protection services managers have begun discussing prevention and engaged in planning to improve partnerships with the early care and learning community. The initiative is having an impact on child protective services (CPS) policies and procedures, their partnerships with early care and learning programs, and their relationship with the state child care program. Next steps include working to ensure that all children in custody are placed in high quality early childhood programs, continuing to develop a system for determining quality, and formulating strategies for moving Strengthening Families information through the CPS organizational structure to the local level.

### Arkansas

Although the child welfare agency supported the Arkansas application to become a pilot state, the department did not become involved until the later part of the initiative. The two child welfare staff positions on the state leadership team were occupied by a rotation of staff rather than consistent members. At the end of the pilot period, however, the new division director for children and family services committed to embedding Strengthening Families into child welfare services in the state. A key breakthrough has been in the area of cross training. Both state and local DCFS staff participate in a cross-training event involving the Promising Practice Programs — the early childhood programs selected by the state to pilot Strengthening Families. This training will offer lessons on how quality care contributes to the response to a family in crisis. DCFS staff will offer information on how to recognize families in trouble, how to make an effective report to CPS, what happens to a child during a protective services case, and the family services that DCFS provides.

### Illinois

Illinois was one of three Strengthening Families pilot states where the child welfare agency served as the host agency for the initiative. The state began by raising awareness among caseworkers of the benefits of partnering with early childhood programs. The state Strengthening Families team worked directly with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) communications department to create internal communication vehicles targeting DCFS staff, contracted agencies and foster parents. Strengthening Families Illinois staff appeared on "DCFS Dialogue", the department's weekly television program on CAN TV, and also produced *10 Reasons to Partner with Preschool Programs*, a tip sheet for caseworkers; *How to Find a Quality Preschool*, a brochure for caseworkers and foster parents; a desk aid on Strengthening Families protective factors for DCFS staff; and a cross-

### strengthening families

THROUGH EARLY CARE & EDUCATION

is a research-based, cost-effective strategy to increase family stability, enhance child development, and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds five protective factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children's healthy social and emotional development

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help early childhood providers build protective factors with families. Many states are also using the Strengthening Families approach to integrate state prevention strategies, strengthen families in the child welfare system, and engage parents and communities in building protective factors. For more information, visit [cssp.org/doris\\_duke](http://cssp.org/doris_duke)

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walk handout that shows what DCFS needs to meet the educational requirements of wards and what Head Start programs provide. Bryan Samuels, Director of the Illinois DCFS when the Strengthening Families pilot began, wrote and disseminated to department staff a brief [paper](#) describing the importance of early care and education in child welfare practice. Partly as a result of these education efforts, Illinois DCFS regional administrators have been very enthusiastic about collaborating in Strengthening Families Illinois learning networks. Most are participating in and/or convening learning network meetings and local program events, and providing technical assistance and information to network members in their regions.

Linked to its Strengthening Families efforts, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services changed educational policy to require that wards of the state have educational plans beginning at age 3. This change has been written into performance contracts and educational protocols for contract child welfare agencies as well as practice guidance for state caseworkers. A more detailed description of Illinois' work in this area is captured in a paper about the [Illinois School Readiness Initiative](#). The protective factors also were built into the agency-wide assessment tool CANS, which supports case worker decision making by providing a structured way to assess risk and make case plans. Integrating the protective factors into CANS strengthens the department's ability to assess a family based not only on risks, but also on strengths and protective factors.

Collaboration with the DCFS training office has been very successful. Strengthening Families has been built into foundation and ongoing training for caseworkers. The office is developing on-line training for its virtual training center and is revising the trauma curriculum — initially designed for caseworkers — to target early childhood providers. This trauma curriculum looks at the impact of trauma on children's development and behavior and helps child care providers learn how to interact with children in a way that promotes resiliency and healing.

## Missouri

Early Childhood and Protection Services, housed in Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division, holds the convening role in implementing Strengthening Families in the state. This has helped the state embed Strengthening Families into child welfare practice. A basic child abuse and neglect prevention module and an advanced module on the Strengthening Families protective factors have been developed by the Department of Health and Social Services, Child Care Licensing Section and Parents as Teachers, with funding from Missouri Children's Trust Fund. These modules are now part of regular training for child abuse and neglect mandated reporters. Training staff from DSS' Children's Division have also embedded Strengthening Families protective factors into child welfare practice basic orientation, foster parent training and the family-centered in-service core curriculum for new staff. A pilot project was initiated by partners from the Department of Education, DSS, and Washington University to ensure uninterrupted support in

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the form of a Nurses-for-Newborns home visitor or a Parents As Teachers parent educator for children 0-5 in the foster care system. This means that the same home visitor can work with a foster child and his or her caretakers on meeting the child's developmental needs, regardless of the child's home setting.

### New Hampshire

The state-level Child Development Bureau, which leads the state's Strengthening Families Initiative, and the Child Protection Bureau have a collaborative relationship, with the Child Protection Bureau providing continuous input into all planning and implementation activities. This has allowed New Hampshire to incorporate Strengthening Families principles and protective factors into its federally mandated child welfare program improvement plan, which each state is required to develop after submitting to the federal quality service review process. A link is forming between the bureaus of child development and child welfare to provide cross-training opportunities.

### Rhode Island

As in several pilot states, formal integration of Strengthening Families ideas into child protective services is just beginning. A number of informational discussions have been held with various parts of the child welfare system regarding:

- Cross training with the child abuse and neglect tracking systems (CANTS) unit and the DCYF licensing unit
- Integrating the Strengthening Families protective factors framework into new DCYF licensing regulations

In addition, children placed in out-of-home care in Rhode Island are now automatically eligible for placement at least part-time in a DHS comprehensive services program. These comprehensive services programs provide developmentally appropriate early care and education for children 3 to 4 as well as health, nutrition, safety and mental health services; support for children with disabilities; and family education and empowerment programs — none of which generally are available in traditional child care settings. Strengthening Families Rhode Island is helping to promote children's placement at participating sites.

### Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, which has a county-administered child welfare system, five county-level pilot programs were asked to experiment with strengthening the linkages between early childhood education and child welfare programs rather than starting with a state effort. In each pilot county, an initial meeting was held with county child welfare offices and early care and education providers to introduce the initiative and begin planning. Pilot counties hosted training on protective factors for early

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care and education providers and child welfare staff. Counties developed individual brochures and cross-training conferences, and reached out to university teacher education programs. There is considerable state-level momentum now for providing the pilot counties with opportunities to network and develop strategies to enhance relationships, including cross-training events in which county child welfare staff serve as co-facilitators. DHFS' Child Welfare Training Partnership and DCFS' Director of the Bureau of Programs and Policies are actively engaged in the work with the pilot counties. Informal relationships between county-level early childhood education and child welfare professionals have proven to be an asset in planning, and the high level of commitment by county directors of human services and child welfare staff in these pilot counties also has been a significant factor in the effort.

Moving forward, the state is linking continued work with the pilots to create state level policy change in partnership with DCFS. A team including state DCFS staff, members of the Strengthening Families state leadership team and the pilot work group is integrating the initiative into existing child welfare activities. Several targets being considered include:

- Collaborative services teams — community-based interdisciplinary teams that coordinate services for child welfare families
- Federal quality service reviews
- The protective capacities framework — another effort taking place in Wisconsin and other states to assess child welfare families based not only on risk, but also on protective capacities
- The Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund piloted community response initiatives — an effort to engage a host of community partners in providing supportive services to families coming into contact with the child welfare system

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