

# strengthening families

a look at strengthening  
families in the states

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## A LOOK AT STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN THE STATES

The Center for the Study of Social Policy is a nonprofit (501(c)3) organization based in Washington, DC, that helps states and localities implement creative and effective strategies that strengthen disadvantaged communities and families and ensure that children grow up healthy, safe, successful in school, and ready for productive adulthood.

Strengthening Families™ is an approach to work with children and families that build five research-based Protective Factors with families to prevent child abuse and neglect and promote optimal child development. Strengthening Families is an initiative of the Center for the Study of Social Policy and is supported by the generous support of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

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## background for this report

The simple, powerful ideas behind Strengthening Families have led to rapid implementation and eager adaptation in across the country, creating a wealth of diverse practice and policy action under the banner of Strengthening Families. State leadership teams and task forces have developed exciting new resources, training and tools to support their Strengthening Families implementation. They have brought diverse partners across disciplines and a broad network of parents into the conversation. They have created a variety of ways to integrate the ideas into sustainable structures across their states. Everyone is eager for technical assistance, information from peers and other kinds of support to continue to expand their Strengthening Families work. In many ways, the Strengthening Families work is being led by states, with several key counties beginning to make a mark with their own approach. The partnership among participating states is critical to continued growth and expansion of the Strengthening Families National Network.

This report offers a snapshot of the overall implementation of Strengthening Families at this point in time and offers an analysis of successes, challenges and focus for next steps. Sustaining and enhancing the work nationally will depend on continued evolution of the network among states, an effective platform for sharing tools and resources, attention to ensure that evolving practice continues to be grounded in research, and methods for sharing the evolving knowledge base about the approach.

## a brief history of strengthening families

In 2001 the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation funded the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to develop a broad new strategy for child abuse and neglect prevention. Based on their research and board discussion, the foundation decided to focus on young children 0-5 with strategies aimed at intervening before abuse or neglect occurred. They aimed to reach a national audience impact very large numbers of children and families.

CSSP proposed engaging early care and education (ECE) providers in child abuse and neglect prevention for several reasons:

- Early care and education was a systematic way to reach out and engage the majority of families with young children;

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- ECE providers see families on a daily basis;
- An early childhood program is a non-stigmatizing environment which families enter by choice; and
- Families already turn to ECE providers for information and guidance about their child.

### PHASE I: DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK

The first phase of the initiative included research and information gathering.

A distinguished national advisory committee was formed with members from the fields of early care and education, children’s mental health, child abuse prevention, family support, state and federal policy, and child welfare. Several meetings were held to review research findings, evaluate different approaches to child abuse and neglect prevention, and discuss the potential of alternate strategies.

Deborah Daro of Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago provided an overview of current child abuse prevention strategies; Sharon Lynn Kagan of Teachers College at Columbia University provided an analysis of the implications of implementing a child maltreatment prevention approach in early care and education programs. Carol Horton of the Erickson Institute in Chicago was commissioned to review existing research literature to identify protective factors that were correlated with a reduction in child abuse and neglect.

Dialogue sessions were held around the country with leaders of national organizations and practitioners in the early childhood, CAN prevention, and child welfare. Hundreds of practitioners and organizational leaders participated.

### STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PROTECTIVE FACTORS

- Parental Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Social and Emotional Competence of Children

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The literature review and wisdom gathered from the advisory committee and the field was used to develop the five Protective Factors that are at the heart of Strengthening Families. The Protective Factors cluster findings from many research studies into a simple framework designed to help all programs identify the outcomes they need to pursue with all families to avoid child maltreatment and promote healthy child development.

An in-depth study of exemplary practice in 21 early care and education programs across the country identified common strategies across very different programs. All research tools were aligned with the Protective Factors, and the study protocol included:

- Expert nomination of programs to study in all states,
- An initial survey and review of program materials from nominated programs, and
- Site visits that included structured observation, interviews with parents and staff, and focus groups with parents, staff and community partners.

Out of this initial research, practice tools were developed from an extensive analysis of the implications of implementing such a strategy in early childhood programs:

- A self-assessment to help early care and education programs identify specific changes to enhance their ability to support and strengthen families,
- A program guidebook for early care and education programs,
- Summaries of all the exemplary programs, and
- A number of practice monographs describing specific aspects of programs that were essential to excellent practice.

Everything was made available via the CSSP website, and could be downloaded for free.

### PHASE 2: STATE PILOTS

In phase two, CSSP tested application of the framework through state governments, seeking to understand the action needed at a state level to engage many early care and education programs in Strengthening Families practice. All states and territories were invited to partner with CSSP in a two-year pilot where they would receive technical assistance and support as they implemented Strengthening Families in their state. No funding was provided to pilot states. Twenty-seven states applied to be a part of this initial pilot, and seven were chosen. After two years of intensive work with the pilot states, significant knowledge was gained about the types of policy and practice changes that would support Strengthening Families initiatives at a state level. Key

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Levers for Change were identified from the states as opportunities for successful implementation.

### PHASE 3: BUILDING THE NATIONAL NETWORK

In 2006, with support from CSSP, the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds launched its Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. The ECI provided grants to Children's Trust Funds in nine states to bring Strengthening Families and the Protective Factors into their work and prevention approaches. Another ten states joined the nine grantees in a learning community to share information about implementation as it emerged. This initiative engaged the Children's Trust Funds in many states in making Strengthening Families and the five Protective Factors a cornerstone of child abuse and neglect prevention.

In 2007, CSSP launched the Strengthening Families National Network for all states interested in Strengthening Families implementation. Twenty-six states joined in the first year, and currently 30 states are adopting or adapting Strengthening Families with assistance from CSSP and several national partner organizations. Significantly, Strengthening Families is going beyond state implementation to change the approach to child abuse and neglect prevention and the engagement of families in early childhood education across the country. Some indicators of the impact of the work include:

- A recent Rand Corporation study of child abuse prevention strategies, commissioned by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, asked respondents which prevention strategies they had heard of—82% of the close to 2,000 respondents had heard of Strengthening Families. The next highest response was 44% for the Nurse Family Partnership. All other strategies had less than a 25% response rate.<sup>i</sup>

### KEY ATTRIBUTES OF STATE PILOT EFFORTS

The focus of state Strengthening Families pilots was to help many more early childhood programs learn how to build Protective Factors with children and families.

States were encouraged to build cross-system, multi disciplinary leadership teams to guide their efforts.

They were encouraged to organize their state-level Strengthening Families work around key Levers for Change: parent engagement and leadership; systems integration; professional development.

CSSP offered strategic technical assistance, cross-state networking, development of common tools, and dissemination of information across participating states to support pilot efforts.

States were provided no external funding.

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- The agency responsible for the Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention program that provides federal funding to all states convened a working group of states to develop a response to requirements for enhanced data tracking of child abuse and neglect prevention efforts. The working group concluded that an adapted version of the Protective Factors were important outcome elements to be used to assess the effectiveness of child abuse and neglect prevention efforts (See page 11).
- In seventeen states, Strengthening Families planning efforts are linked with the planning for Early Childhood Comprehensive Services (ECCS) within the state.
- Several state Strengthening Families initiatives are working to align funding from certain state agencies with the Protective Factors framework. Some are re-writing the proposal requests for their Community-based Prevention Grants (CBCAP) to encourage funded programs to build Protective Factors as a part of their work.

Many states have taken leadership in pushing Strengthening Families even further, developing training materials and tools that bring the concepts to life for early care and education practitioners and adapting the concepts and tools to child and family-serving programs beyond the early childhood sector. Some state Strengthening Families efforts have built the Protective Factors framework into key infrastructure aspects of state government, including Requests for Proposals, contracts, and quality rating and improvement systems being designed for early childhood programs.

The most recent work around Strengthening Families has been developed in the context of one of the most challenging budgetary periods for state governments in history. Fiscal climates for programming are changing on a daily basis in some states, staffing is being interrupted, long range planning is uncertain, and, in some cases, the entire infrastructure for early childhood services is being undermined. It is difficult to determine where the next steps will lead.

### the implementation study

In 2009, CSSP engaged in a structured study of Strengthening Families work across the country. The goal was to learn more about:

- The depth and spread of implementation

- What has contributed to the success of Strengthening Families
- Challenges in implementation
- Impacts that can be documented
- Status of evaluation efforts

This study is not intended to be an evaluation. A true evaluation of outcomes of state Strengthening Families work would require a degree of rigor and depth that is not within the scope of this inquiry. This study is intended to examine the continued evolution of the work and to determine how to be responsive to emerging needs in the field. Assessing progress in this structured way reflects the ongoing commitment among the many partners in the initiative to continuous learning and to support more effective support for the initiative.

## finding key successes

### THE POWER OF THE PROTECTIVE FACTORS IN CROSS-SYSTEMS PLANNING

One surprise emerged early in the study: cross-systems planning for comprehensive early childhood services has become a primary role for Strengthening Families Leadership Teams, with the Protective Factors being used in many states as a framework for describing desired outcomes for families across systems.

Collaboration across multiple service systems has always been central to the Strengthening Families approach, but it was originally seen as a means for expanding implementation in early childhood programs. Applicants to be chosen as initial state pilots were required to demonstrate that key leadership in the early childhood, child abuse and neglect, and child welfare sectors in the

### GATHERING INFORMATION

Four states—Georgia, Kansas, Minnesota, and Washington—participated in in-depth conversations with leadership teams and CSSP staff in their states.

Structured 90-minute telephone interviews were held with every state in the Strengthening Families National Network.

Regular technical assistance and support providers from several organizations offered additional information on state efforts.

Quarterly meetings with national partners provided opportunities to enrich CSSP’s analysis with partners’ knowledge of the work in states.

Peer learning webinars for the network provided opportunities to showcase the work of states in their areas of strength.

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state had all participated in the development of their proposal. State leadership teams were encouraged to include multiple agencies and partners from the beginning. The shift in emphasis subsequent to the pilots phase has been in the widespread use of the framework far beyond program implementation.

The synergy between Strengthening Families and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) planning grants is evident in many states. These grants, funded by the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau, are provided to states and territories to support planning and implementation of a comprehensive system for early childhood through aligning and coordinating services for families with young children. State ECCS plans address five "critical components:" Access to Health Insurance and Medical Homes, Mental Health and Social-Emotional Development, Early Care and Education/Child Care, Parenting Education, and Family Support. ECCS efforts were initially linked to Strengthening Families because the Protective Factors helped give specificity to the family support component of the ECCS plans. In a number of states, such as Arkansas and Wisconsin, the Strengthening Families Leadership Team spearheaded the family support component of the ECCS grant. As states started to combine their Strengthening Families and ECCS planning efforts, they saw the power of the Protective Factors to support the cross-systems goals of ECCS beyond the family support components of the plan. The Protective Factors were able to provide an overarching frame for outcomes for the cross-systems collaboration. Currently 17 states have connected their Strengthening Families and ECCS efforts at some level, with a few merging their work entirely so that the ECCS coordinator may also be the state Strengthening Families coordinator.

One intriguing theory of why Strengthening Families has been able to engage many partners in cross-systems collaboration is that it did not come into the state through large grants or assignment to specific agencies. CSSP has provided no funding to state, and funds from national partners have been relatively small and tied to collaborative efforts. Many states reported that the power dynamic among the state partners supported joint ownership of the initiative, since no one agency "owned" Strengthening Families through funding. The framework itself had to prove it could serve the needs of partner agencies in order to secure their support and resources. From the beginning, Strengthening Families was implemented by states leveraging their existing infrastructure rather than adding a new program, and using training capacity, funding sources, and quality control mechanisms that were already in place.

The use of Strengthening Families as a platform for cross-systems work has contributed to the success of state Strengthening Families efforts. It has supported:

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- **A broad range of funding sources for state Strengthening Families efforts:** Because multiple partners are at the table, funding and support for state Strengthening Families efforts rarely comes from a single agency or funding source. This has been especially important in the current fiscal crisis as it has meant that even when one Strengthening Families agency was facing sharp fiscal constraints, others found ways to continue their work.
- **A focus on systems changes rather than on funding streams:** Because money has been very tight, collaboration across agencies in the state Leadership Team level has been the most available resource. As a result, much of the focus has been on low-cost and no-cost changes that can support implementation. In some ways this has been very productive for the initiative. States with no new dollars to spend have built the Protective Factors into existing contracts, Requests for Proposals, trainings, or other vehicles already in place to shape and support practice on the ground. This approach has served to leverage many more resources across multiple agencies than would have been dedicated to a fledgling initiative.
- **Impact on many programs that serve children and families:** As states focused on building their Leadership Teams and exploring the cross-systems aspects of Strengthening Families, they often brought a very diverse array of partners to the table—and often found a surprising number of partners seeking them out. In state after state, Strengthening Families sometimes was “getting out ahead” of the lead agency, with partners (such as parent groups or community organizations) integrating the Protective Factors as a framework for their own work with families and the lead agency struggling to keep up with what was happening on the ground. In many cases,

*“[The success of Strengthening Families in Georgia] has a lot to do with the fact that there’s no money connected to the initiative. There’s no fighting over funding. Everyone who is participating is doing it because they believe in Strengthening Families. It creates a different atmosphere. We’re all in this together. It’s almost a more constructive way to start something. After that, you have relationships in the group, and then you can start looking for funding and having action plans for implementation.”*

- Member of  
Strengthening Families  
Georgia Leadership Team

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programs and agencies have begun to include or feature the Protective Factors in training and other professional development opportunities that already exist without necessarily informing state teams about their work.

### IMPACT ON STATE APPROACHES TO CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT PREVENTION

One of the key successes of Strengthening Families has been the rapid uptake and support from child abuse and neglect prevention leaders in all states. In half of the Strengthening Families National Network states, the Children's Trust Fund is either taking leadership or plays a strong role in the state's Strengthening Families efforts. The state Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) leader is actively engaged in Strengthening Families in another third of the states. The role of national partners, particularly the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds (the Alliance) has been essential to implementing Strengthening Families with leadership from local prevention advocates. By adopting Strengthening Families as a signature initiative, the Alliance was able to quickly build broad awareness among Trust Funds and to support the leadership of Trust Fund directors in the Strengthening Families work.

In many states, the Children's Trust Fund serves as the lead agency for the federal CBCAP funds. The federal CBCAP program provides more than \$41M to states, a primary source of funds and influence for child abuse and neglect prevention programming in states. As state CBCAP leaders took on Strengthening Families, they brought to the national table two new federal partners with key roles in supporting state child abuse and neglect prevention efforts throughout the states: the FRIENDS National Resource Center for CBCAP (FRIENDS), which provides support to all fifty states on their CBCAP programs, and the National Child Welfare Information Gateway (the Gateway), which serves as a clearinghouse for new information in the field of child abuse and neglect, including prevention efforts. These two organizations have a national reach across the child abuse prevention field and through their connection to the federal CBCAP program are widely respected in the field of CAN prevention. The annual federal child abuse and neglect prevention resource Packet sent to all child abuse prevention programs in the nation during Child Abuse Prevention Month has been based on the Strengthening Families framework since 2007.

Through Alliance, FRIENDS and the Gateway, Strengthening Families has become a foundational part of the child abuse prevention field, as indicated in a recent RAND survey showing that it is recognized by professionals in the field more than twice as

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much as the next recognized approach. More importantly, Strengthening Families has been able to shape prevention approaches in states in several important ways:

- **Aligning prevention funding to the Protective Factors:** Many states are now aligning their CBCAP Requests for Proposals with the Strengthening Families Protective Factors. This means that CBCAP funds that flow to states go to programs that build Protective Factors and that the strengths based Protective Factors approach to prevention is gaining ground. Asking programs applying for state CBCAP funding to demonstrate how they are building Protective Factors in their proposed work has not radically changed the allocation of CBCAP dollars, as many programs were already building some aspects of the Protective Factors through their work. However, framing work around the research-based factors has raised the level of intentionality about building them and broadened the focus of programs. For example, the framework can supporting helping a strong parent education program in adding social networking and service connections to the work they already do with families.
- **Using the Protective Factors to frame public messages around prevention:** Public awareness has always been an important part of state child abuse and neglect prevention efforts. Communications campaigns, blue ribbon programs, public service announcements, and other tools have long been building awareness and influencing cultural norms around child abuse and neglect. A few states today are linking their public awareness efforts to their Strengthening Families work. For example, New Hampshire renamed its Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention month to Strengthening Families Month. West Virginia's Children's Trust Fund has funded a public media campaign with video spots organized around the Protective Factors. In Minnesota all of the CBCAP grantees, including those focused on public awareness, are being asked to use Protective Factors in their work. Wilder Research, the evaluator for Minnesota's Strengthening Families work, is developing new tools to test the impact of these new public awareness efforts built around the Protective Factors. At the national level, CSSP is working with the Child Welfare Information Gateway to produce a Family Strengthening Calendar to go out to prevention programs across the country next April.
- **Creating more support for a strengths-based approach:** The tenets of primary prevention and strengths-based work have been at the heart of state child abuse and neglect prevention efforts for a number of years. According to a number of states, Strengthening Families provided new evidence, language and many

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necessary tools to take these ideas from conceptual frameworks to more robust practice on the ground. These ideas have begun to be integrated into professional development opportunities across multiple systems to embed them into everyday practice.

- **Creating a new framework for measuring the impact of prevention efforts:** As the pilot phase for Strengthening Families was coming to a close, the federal Office of Management and Budget asked every federal program to address a new accountability measure: PART (the Program Assessment Rating Tool). PART was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of federal funding based on outcomes. The designated PART outcome for the CBCAP program was declining rates of child maltreatment. In response to the new PART requirements, a working group of state CBCAP leaders came together to respond to the new requirements and offer additional indicators that could be used to show impact of prevention efforts. This working group offered a slightly adapted version of the Protective Factors as an additional outcome framework. The federal Office on Child Abuse and Neglect then initiated development of an instrument to measure change in parent Protective Factors to go along with the new outcome measures. The instrument, the Protective Factors Survey, has been through four rounds of reliability and validity testing and is ready for use in the field. This is a vital step forward in being able to show the impact of strengths based primary prevention programs.
- **Infusion into existing professional development and training programs:** States have been very creative in finding ways to insert training on the Protective Factors and how they reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect into many places, including curricula for two- and four-year college classes required for child development credentials; training for family development workers through adaptation of the Family Development Credential training; and trainings regularly offered by Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, Head Start, and other child care programs. One interesting approach in two states has been to base the legally-required training for mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect on the Protective Factors and offer many options for reducing family stress long before a child abuse report might be necessary.

### A HIGH-PERFORMING NATIONAL NETWORK

The many states engaged in Strengthening Families serve as the critical learning laboratory for the initiative, developing implementation tools, adapting the framework

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to different practice modalities, and shaping the larger understanding of “what works” based on many diverse contexts. The underlying network structure behind Strengthening Families has been an important vehicle for the initiative’s success. It provides not only for broad dissemination of information about the initiative, but is the essential source of new knowledge and tools for the initiative. States reported on the high value of the collaborative process fostered by the national network and the willingness of members to share their experiences, tools and ideas.

The network has created significant ownership of Strengthening Families by encouraging innovation and participation that is more than just friendly sharing of information. In contrast to the development of a single program model, Strengthening Families was intentionally structured to be “an approach and *not* a model”. Implementation has been guided by a framework and set of practice tools based on in-depth reviews of the research literature and a structured field research process. But Strengthening Families is also intended to be adaptive and evolutionary, continuously strengthened and informed by ongoing learning from implementation in the field, supported by a national group of partner organizations, some with state and local chapters.

This approach can be described as a distributive network model. There is a shared goal and a central source of information, but no centralized *control*. Participants act, sometimes jointly, sometimes independently – to make progress towards common goals, doing what they can when they can.

The Strengthening Families National Network has successfully built key elements of a distributive network:

- The opportunity (and encouragement) of adaptation to suit local context, needs and resources
- An emphasis on opportunism; that is, the ability to take advantage of key events, resources and strengths within the context of local implementation
- Information disseminated from a centralized source as well as innovation developed within one part of the network to rapidly reach other implementers
- A collaborative structure across states so that evolving practice can be tested and fine-tuned within multiple state environments and results quickly shared with others

### DEEPENING AND BROADENING PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Parent partnerships help ensure that prevention strategies are responsive and relevant to all kinds of family needs and choices, and model the relationships between families, service providers, and community resources that can promote the best possible environment for children’s development. During the state pilot phase of Strengthening Families, each state was asked to incorporate five hallmarks of effective Strengthening Families practice into their initiative design. One of these hallmarks was parent engagement, focused on inviting and supporting parents to play decision-making roles on state Leadership Teams and within programs that were implementing Strengthening Families. All seven states struggled with this hallmark, but their work in this area helped to shape the next steps for parent partnerships within the initiative.

- States reported far greater success in engaging parents in decision-making roles within individual programs that were implementing Strengthening Families. In contrast, sustaining the engagement of parent leaders on state Leadership Teams was challenging.
- Sustained engagement of parents in leadership roles started with a broad effort to engage parents to start dialogues within communities about Protective Factors and family strengthening, then progressed to development of a cadre of leaders.
- When parents were engaged in sustained ways, there were significant contributions to the initiative. Specifically, in one state, parents played a critical role in spurring an effort to develop a family-friendly version of the Protective Factors language. Parents also played a crucial role in leading families to engage other families in peer-based strategies for building Protective Factors.

The experience in the pilot states underlined the importance of parent partnerships to the work as well as the challenge of building effective parent partnerships. Based on this experience, parent partnerships were identified as a key Lever for Change, one of the specific areas recommended to states beginning their Strengthening Families work and tracked in all the states on an annual basis. Many states still struggle in this area, but the focus on parent partnerships as much more than just representation on the state Leadership Team has also created a number of innovative new strategies within states:

- **Deepening knowledge about what it means to partner with parents:** States now know that engaging parent representatives on State Leadership teams is not sufficient for demonstrating parent partnerships, and states are beginning to grapple with what it really means to partner with parents. In 2009, Strengthening Families Kansas launched its Parent Involvement Research Initiative to create a better understanding of how parents understand parent involvement to learn how they access the supports they need to nurture their children, and how agencies use parent input to inform program changes.
- **Building an infrastructure to support parents in playing a direct leadership role in building Protective Factors.** A number of states have used a parent or community café approach to engage parents directly in dialogue with peers around the Protective Factors and family strengthening. The states that pioneered this approach, Illinois and Washington, both invested heavily in developing their café models as well as in supporting a core group of parent leaders who are leading these efforts. In these states and many more, cafés have become a larger platform for parents to lead in areas where they are, in fact, the experts.

## challenges in implementation

### ENGAGING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Even though participation of child welfare partners has always been a goal of the Strengthening Families approach, engaging child welfare departments has often been a challenge in the states. In general, it appears that state child welfare departments, often overwhelmed with caring for the children with active child welfare cases, have little energy, or funding, to invest in prevention efforts. In 2005, CSSP received funding from the A.L Mailman foundation to focus specifically on engaging state child welfare systems in Strengthening Families. Three states—Illinois, New Jersey and Wisconsin—were selected. CSSP provided technical assistance to these three states over three years, with exciting results. Breakthroughs with child welfare systems in these states include:

- Using the Protective Factors as a framework for collaboration with community-based agencies responsible for differential response for families where there was a child welfare report, but the case was not opened.

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- Using the Protective Factors as a framework a more family supportive case practice model, and/or training and support for child welfare workers to shift the way they work with families in a more positive direction.
- Building collaborative relationships with the early childhood sector to meet the developmental needs of the youngest children entering the system.

These early linkages are yielding information about working effectively with child welfare agencies, but the connections in most states are still in the early phases. Additional states in the Network are making strides in engaging their child welfare departments in the work, new tools have been developed based on the work to date, and new national partnerships are being built with organizations whose constituency lies within the field of child welfare.

In 2009, CSSP, under the banner of Strengthening Families, released a paper on the importance of family-strengthening child welfare practice and collaborations between child welfare and early childhood systems. The paper and accompanying tools are available online.

### DEEPENING IMPLEMENTATION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

While there has been significant success in engaging multiple state partners in Strengthening Families around cross-system work, states report that it has been more challenging to engage large numbers of early care and education programs to implement Strengthening Families. There are significant exceptions such as Georgia and New Jersey where Strengthening Families is an important part of their state-funded Pre-K programs. Similarly in other states -- like Missouri-- Strengthening Families is an integrated part of the funding and support structure for early childhood education. In many states, however, engaging early childhood advocates and leaders has been challenging, and Strengthening Families is only sporadically included in discussion and planning for expansion of early childhood education in the state.

One observation is that in most states early childhood is not so much a system as a patchwork of programs, providers, and funding streams, meaning there is often great complexity and difficult collaborations characterizing the early childhood field, which creates a barrier to collaborations between early childhood and other sectors. Yet effective collaboration with state level early childhood partners is crucial to implementing Strengthening Families in large numbers of early childhood programs. The importance of these collaborations is evident in states where Strengthening

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Families lead agencies provided small grants for early childhood programs to complete the Self Assessment and develop action plans. Where the Strengthening Families lead agency collaborated with a state early childhood agency the small grants were effective in gaining broad participation among early childhood programs. In Wisconsin, where the Strengthening Families lead agency, a Children's Trust Fund, collaborated with the Department of Workforce Development, which funds child care, and the Child Care Resource and Referral infrastructure using mini-grants, more than 122 early childhood programs completed the Self Assessment and action plans. In other states where mini-grants were offered by a non-ECE agency, such as a Children's Trust Fund, without an early childhood partner, the process failed to garner much interest from early childhood programs. One state embarked on a similar mini-grant process twice: once without an early childhood partner, and again, with much better effect, after a strong early childhood partnership had been established.

Successful partnerships with early childhood leaders have revolved around:

- **Partnerships focused on changes in the ECE sector.** Over the past year the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds has been working with several states to integrate Strengthening Families into emerging quality rating and improvement systems. Many states around the country are working to develop QRIS systems which impact a large proportion of early childhood programs within the state. Connecting Strengthening Families to state QRIS efforts has the opportunity to effectively engage the early childhood sector.
- **Taking advantage of new efforts to support cross-system planning for services for young children, where there is growing focus and attention.** As the new federal administration helps to develop State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care<sup>ii</sup> and more cross-systems coordination in every state, there is an important opportunity for state Strengthening Families efforts to engage key early childhood partners.

### **SUSTAINABLE PROGRAM AND PRACTICE SHIFTS THROUGH AN ENHANCED FOCUS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Many of the efforts to increase the use of Strengthening Families have relied on systemic changes, such as integrating the Protective Factors into Quality Rating and Improvement Scales or CBCAP Requests for Proposals. This has allowed states to impact a number of programs with a relatively low investment or by leveraging investments that are already being made. There is a concern among states, however,

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that the depth and quality of implementation gained through these systems changes may not be sufficient to change program practices at the front line level. While using the framework creates an effective platform for programs to align their work with the protective factors, this is not necessarily strong enough to help programs successfully build Protective Factors with families. In some states, program representatives who were implementing Strengthening Families spoke with enthusiasm about Strengthening Families but had difficulty describing how they had changed their practice since they had become part of the initiative.

A few states have taken the approach of funding programs to implement their Strengthening Families action plan developed after using the Self Assessment. This approach created concrete changes in programs, but they were often limited (e.g., putting up a parent bulletin board, creating a parent resource room, etc.) and did not have an overall impact on the environment of the program. Some states created pilot programs that received funding for a specified period of time, with technical assistance, training, and peer support built into the support for pilots. These states felt that the pilots had been effective, and in some cases evaluations of the pilots showed a significant impact on how a program operated. Unfortunately, these pilots often received only short-term funding and there was no follow-up to determine if the changes in the programs were being continued after the pilot period.

The underlying question for the future is: what combination of program approaches, incentives, professional development, and capacity-building can create both deep and broad changes in a program so that many more programs can effectively build Protective Factors with families? While a deeper analysis that focuses primarily on this question is needed, some evidence is emerging from evaluations in a few states:

- To change the experience for families on the ground, there needs to be focus not only on program structure, but also on the practice of individual workers. Changing program structure without changing the way individual workers practice with families will not change the day-to-day experience of families or be sufficient to build Protective Factors. Focusing on worker practice without changing program structure will not give workers the support they need to operate differently.
- A critical mass of staff members trained in Strengthening Families is essential for success in any individual program implementing Strengthening Families. For example, Alaska reports that a third of all workers within a program need to

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receive Strengthening Families training. Rhode Island reports the most robust impact when over half of all workers in a program participate in training.

- At the state level, “layering” strategies are necessary for sufficient impact on programs and practice. Broad systems strategies such as requiring programs to use the Protective Factors need to be combined with efforts to make training, ongoing technical assistance and support, funding, and incentives available to gain specific changes in programs and practice.
- Training efforts must be integrated with the larger infrastructure for training and professional development for all people who work with children and families. States have shown most impact where they were able to leverage their existing professional development systems—for example, using the training capacity of their Child Care Resource and Referral infrastructure within the child care context, or their child welfare training academies within the child welfare context. The continuing focus on professional development as a key Lever for Change will be an important part of addressing this issue as states continue their Strengthening Families work.

### ENHANCING STATE LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION

While state teams often have great enthusiasm for Strengthening Families, it can sometimes take a long time to engage in strategic implementation. Occasionally a state hosts a public Strengthening Families kick-off event with many partners, after which the real work is dormant for a year or more. Because there isn’t a simple manual for how to “do Strengthening Families,” it is incumbent on state teams to identify key opportunities for integrating Strengthening Families and act upon them. This can be daunting for partners already stretched thin in terms of responsibilities and little funding. In many states, the work has not progressed without interactions with other states or contact and technical assistance from CSSP or one of the national partner organizations. These interactions may be quite limited, but they serve to help the leading organization within the state see the opportunities they can capitalize on to start the work within the state.

One of the most effective ways to support a new state is to connect them to other states further along in implementation. Currently this happens informally when someone staffing the Strengthening Families work in a state calls CSSP or another partner for technical assistance and support. National staff are usually able to connect them with a number of their peers. A more intentional way to support peer sharing

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could be useful in the form of a more formal mentoring program between states, orientations or connections on specific topics.

At national level, the national partners have found it challenging to ensure that states launching Strengthening Families receive adequate guidance and support during the early phases of their work. Significant investments were made by CSSP to create technological support to facilitate information exchanges and peer technical assistance. A website was developed with the appropriate programming to support collaborative tool development, information sharing, and continuous dialogue among network members, but the network's actual use of the website was low. As a result, CSSP has examined other ways to enhance support to states:

- **Start with existing networks as the building blocks:** Relationships are at the core of all networking activities. With multiple demands on the time of Strengthening Families leaders, networking happens primarily with people and organizations they already feel a sense of affiliation with. The Strengthening Families national partners have been key to the success of the Strengthening Families National Network. Their existing relationships with their constituencies have created a strong network for Strengthening Families with long standing relationships at its base.
- **Network the networkers:** Because of the significant role that national partners play in supporting the national network, connecting the key partner organizations is critical. All partners come together for three annual meetings to discuss trends, challenges, successes, and strategies in the states where they are working to support Strengthening Families. Frequent contact among staff of the partner organizations further supports ongoing coordination and information sharing for the common work across the states.
- **Invest in one-on-one contact:** While technology can be an important tool for sharing materials, the underlying glue remains phone and in person contact. Relationships motivate people to put the time and energy into using technology and other tools to support interaction. The national partners provide the one-on-one connections to support state networking and regularly coordinate their work at the national level.
- **Staff the website functions:** Even with a relatively well-functioning network, there is low usage of technological tools to support information sharing. States turn to the on-line resources when they need to search for information—but

rarely can find the time to upload the good work that they've done. In the short term it has been essential for national staff to identify the new tools and resources being developed and facilitate sharing them with the network. The Alliance's Early Childhood Initiative has had more success in getting members (many of whom are members of the Strengthening Families National Network) to use its online platform, and there are lessons to be learned from its efforts.

### moving forward

Studying Strengthening Families implementation in 2009 has served to identify what is going well and give direction for areas that need growth and attention to sustain and deepen the excellent work that has been started. As in the past, the success will depend on the creative, committed work of leaders in each state, taking advantage of opportunities that emerge to integrate the Strengthening Families approach throughout communities and in child and family serving systems. Working together and learning together along with the national partners, it appears that states will be focusing on these three key areas of work in the coming year or two:

- Broader, deeper implementation of Strengthening Families in programs and practices,
- Stronger state level action to support and sustain Strengthening Families, and
- More effective methods for measuring impact.

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<sup>i</sup> Shaw, R. & Kilburn, R. M. (2009) *Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention: Reports from the Field and Ideas for the Future*. RAND Corporation, working paper prepared for the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. [http://www.rand.org/pubs/working\\_papers/WR632/#](http://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR632/#)

<sup>ii</sup> American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (2009).