

## Illinois: State Initiative Profile



### Overview

Under the auspices of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) and the leadership of Director Erwin McEwen, Strengthening Families Illinois (SFI) is a national leader in embedding the research-based Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors into early childhood and child welfare practice. Since 2004, SFI has pioneered innovative strategies for engaging parents, focusing on building family and community resilience and effective partnerships between parents and the systems that serve them and their children. In 2006, SFI added a Protective Factor on nurturing and attachment which has been adopted by the Federal Children's Bureau and Office of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention. SFI's Leadership Team is comprised of individuals representing more than 40 state agencies, nonprofit policy, advocacy, and family-serving organizations and community-serving programs.

### Building Strengthening Families Practice on the Ground

More than 100 early childhood programs statewide participate in one of fourteen peer to peer SFI Learning Networks to embed the Strengthening Families approach in their work. The Learning Networks have four priorities: 1) increase quality parent engagement, 2) enhance collaboration with child welfare agencies; 3) fully integrate SFI practice shift in their school or center; 4) build a strong network. For example, One Hope United, a contracted child welfare agency, is implementing Strengthening Families in both its child welfare and early childhood services and is convening a learning network of other child welfare agencies to do the same. Through child welfare/early childhood forums and other activities, the eight SFI Learning Networks are developing stronger relationships with child welfare at the local level.

### Key Aspects of the State's work

#### Policy / Systems Change

Collaboration between early childhood and child welfare is a major SFI area of focus. The state's child welfare workforce is implementing Strengthening Families as a foundation for practice. In 2010, IDCFS launched a differential response initiative called *Pathways to Strengthening and Supporting Families*, to offer an alternative to investigation for qualifying families that are reported to the department. As a result, more than 5,000 families will receive up to three months of in-home service from workers whose training, assessment tools, and practice are grounded in the Protective Factors. IDCFS created the school readiness team within the department with the priority of facilitating collaboration between early childhood and child welfare professionals in their respective regions.

#### Parent Partnerships

SFI pioneered the translation of the Protective Factors into common language for parents and developed the Parent Café model, now being replicated across the

Strengthening Families 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

Social and emotional competence of children

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs working with children and families 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 [www.strengtheningfamilies.net](http://www.strengtheningfamilies.net)

Nationally, Strengthening Families is coordinated by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and supported by a number of national partner organizations including:

The National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds

The BUILD Initiative

United Way Worldwide

Zero to Three

The FRIENDS National Resource Center

## Illinois: State Initiative Profile



### **2009 QUICK FACTS**

Kathy Goetz Wolf  
Project Director  
Strengthening Families Illinois  
Phone: 312-421-5200  
Email:  
[Kathygw@strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org](mailto:Kathygw@strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org)  
Website:  
<http://www.strengtheningfamiliesillinois.org>

SF Investment:  
Total: \$1,943,276

Direct Investment:  
\$1,628,276 - IDCFS  
\$155,000 – IDCFS  
\$20,000 - IVPA  
\$140,000 – One Hope  
United

Programs reached: 205

Families reached: 50,000+

Professional Development:  
7,229

Protective Factors used in  
ECCS Planning: Yes

Protective Factors used in  
CBCAP RFP Process: Yes

Protective Factors integrated  
into state QRIS: Indirectly

CCR&R Network in state  
supporting program  
implementation in EC sector:  
Yes

country. In Illinois, more than 5,000 people have participated in cafés held in English or Spanish and 382 parents have been trained to facilitate or host cafés. Six regional parent engagement coordinators build local teams to support these activities. More than 2,000 parents are also engaged with SFI through quarterly in-person confabs, an online community and website. SFI's parent leaders developed and launched *Café Talk*, a bilingual "parent café in a box" to support conversations in informal venues. Parent Cafés are also being adapted for all child welfare audiences. More than 30 Chicago public elementary schools offer SFI parent activities and train parents to lead them.

### **Professional Development**

SFI collaborating partners led by the Midwest Learning Center for Family Support at Family Focus have developed training curricula based on the SFI Protective Factors. SFI has developed Memoranda of Understanding with Illinois' 16 childcare resource and referral agencies to ensure availability of Protective Factors training and other SFI programs and activities. Through collaborative agreements between IDCFS and Head Start grantee agencies, more than 2,000 early childhood and child welfare workers have participated in cross-trainings. More than 3,000 direct service child welfare employees have been trained in strength-based, family-centered, trauma-informed practice based on the Protective Factors. Also, the Ounce of Prevention Fund is delivering this trauma curriculum to all Healthy Families home visitors. SFI has shared these trainings with other states including Minnesota, Oregon, California, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Georgia, Texas, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

### **Evaluating Strengthening Families**

Results of SFI's Parent Café evaluations have shown that, among many positive findings, more than 87 percent of participants learned something at the cafe about each protective factor and intend to change their behavior as a result; 99 percent say the cafe was helpful. A 2009 [white paper](#) on the impact of SFI on child care programs is available on the SFI website. SFI is now monitoring SFI early childhood centers to assess the initiative's impact.

### **Evolving Work**

SFI seeks to "connect the dots" among its partners' efforts, expand its regional approach to parent engagement, embed SFI in Chicago elementary schools, train parents to deliver leadership training, and expand the SFI Learning Networks. SFI will also create resources for early childhood programs to understand how implementing Strengthening Families assists in achieving other quality standards, such as those for accreditation, Head Start, and the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System.