

Washington: State Initiative Profile



Overview

Washington's Strengthening Families (SFWA) initiative began in spring of 2006, with a grant funding from the National Alliance of Children's Trust Fund's Early Childhood Initiative. SFWA built on the collaboration established in support of the state's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan, and anticipated the establishment of the new state Department of Early Learning. An early focus on advancing the Strengthening Families approach and the protective factor framework in early childhood educational settings has broadened to include all those whose work touches the lives of families with young children. SFWA is led by the Council for Children & Families. Key partners include the Community Café Collaborative, United Ways of Washington, the Department of Early Learning, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Department of Health, the Head Start State Collaboration Office, the public-private partnership Thrive By Five and various community-based organizations.

Building Strengthening Families Practice on the Ground

SFWA strives for three on-the-ground outcomes for children and families:

- More children live in safe, stable and supportive families.
- Children experience healthy social emotional development.
- Children are healthy and ready for school.

Between Spring 2006 and Fall 2008, SFWA supported a diverse network of ten early care and education pilot sites as they worked to engage parents, build social networks and promote parent leadership to weave a strong web of protective factors around the children and families in their care. Because the perspective of parents is paramount, pilot site leadership teams consisted of a parent with a child in the program and a staff representative. Each site completed the Strengthening Families Self-Assessment and developed action plans to implement small, affordable, sustainable changes that would facilitate friendship and mutual support among parents, strengthen parenting skills, respond to family crises, link families to services they need, facilitate children's social and emotional development, and respond to early warning signs of abuse or neglect.

Key Aspects of the State's work

Policy / Systems Change

At the system level, the steering committee of statewide partners and parent leaders has focused on ways to embed the protective factor framework and Strengthening Families approaches in existing systems. Strengthening Families is incorporated into the state's new Early Learning Plan (ELP) as a specific strategy and crosswalks into many of the plan's other strategies. A SFWA charter is in place that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of SFWA partners and steering committee members, and

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

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

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2009 QUICK FACTS

State Coordinator:
Chris Jamieson
Acting Executive Director
Council for Children & Families
Phone: 206-464-5493
Fax: 206-464-6642
Email: chris@ccf.wa.gov

2009 SF Investment:

Total: \$4,652,776 through
12/2009

Direct Investment: \$1,808,830

Match: \$2,843,946

Programs reached:
11 center-based ECE
programs completing the self-
assessment

Children reached:
960 children reached through
the 11 center-based ECE
programs

Professional Development:
414 individuals trained
380 hours of training

Protective Factors used in
ECCS Planning: Yes

Protective Factors used in
CBCAP RFP Process: Yes

Protective Factors integrated
into state QRIS: Yes

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

a new business plan lays out key tasks, timelines and resource needs over the next three years.

Parent Partnerships

SFWA focuses on enhancing leadership of and partnership with parents, caregivers and other adults engaged in the lives of children. Parents are involved in all SFWA decisions.

Professional Development

SFWA has worked to incorporate the protective factors into professional development for child care providers, statewide intermediary organizations, family/friend/neighbor care, foster care and other caregivers, and others who work with families with children such as home visitors, family support center staff etc.

Evaluating Strengthening Families

SFWA and Community Cafés have established theories of change that will guide actions and provide a basis for evaluation efforts. SFWA has published a report on its early efforts to pilot strategies in early care & education settings statewide. With a grant from United Way Worldwide, United Ways of Washington has implemented, and evaluated, several Strengthening Families strategies, including embedding the Strengthening Families approach into United Way funding and Community Cafés. And the Community Café Collaborative uses Appreciative Inquiry as part of its evaluation process.

Evolving Work

Inclusion of Strengthening Families in the new state ELP represents a significant endorsement of SFWA's work. Focused effort will be required to link the Strengthening Families approach to other aspects of the ELP and engage the many public and private entities that have roles in advancing these strategies at the state, regional and local levels.

The demand for Community Cafés is growing exponentially. A recently established partnership among the Community Café Collaborative, the Children's Trust Foundation, the Foundation for Early Learning, and the Council for Children & Families includes a focus on increasing the capacity of Community Café Collaborative to meet these demands.

The continuing negative economic environment creates challenges and opportunities for SFWA in the coming years. SFWA's low-cost strategies – "Small changes that produce significant results" – are more appealing than ever, but the capacity of partner organizations to provide leadership and resources to advance these strategies is severely strained. State budget decisions for 2011 may threaten the capacity of the Council for Children & Families to continue providing the foundational leadership for SFWA.