



November 30, 2005

Dear Colleague:

We are pleased to share with you the enclosed evaluation report for the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children (CPPC) initiative, which was conducted by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

The Community Partnerships initiative was supported by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation from 1996 through 2005. Four cities and states participated in this effort: Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Louisville, Kentucky; Jacksonville, Florida; and St Louis, Missouri. These sites were selected because each one already was undertaking social service reforms and therefore was willing to test the CPPC's core elements. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) was part of the design team and coordinated the technical assistance provided to sites by several organizations during this period. Over the ten years of the initiative, the Clark Foundation provided \$41 million in grants and administrative costs toward this effort.

This letter highlights the major evaluation findings and the implications we draw from those findings. The evaluation report is being disseminated widely, among child welfare practitioners, CPS administrators, managers and frontline staff as well as policymakers and academicians, as it contains useful information, on multiple levels. We recommend that you read the complete report, as the potential lessons of the evaluation are grasped most fully by reviewing the findings in detail.

Evaluation Scope and Design

The evaluation, which covers the activity of the four sites from 2000 through 2004, was conducted as an outcomes and impact evaluation. Consequently, this report focuses on the extent to which the outcome objectives set for the initiative as a whole were achieved, across the four sites. These outcomes were to reduce: the likelihood of abuse and neglect among children in each community; the likelihood of re-abuse; and the rate of severe injuries to children.

This evaluation follows an implementation evaluation of an earlier stage of the initiative, also conducted by Chapin Hall, which described the various elements of the initiative and the practices that comprise it. The current evaluation, concentrating as it does on outcomes and impacts across all four sites, does not update that implementation study. Nevertheless, Chapin Hall's report lends valuable insight about the operation of community partnerships; illuminates how sites put the building blocks of this approach in place; and offers some thoughts on *why* specific outcomes were achieved or were not in the four sites.

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The Report's Description of the Community Partnership for Protecting Children Initiative

The CPPC initiative's theory of change relies on four interconnected elements that involve (a) improving how service plans are created for families where abuse and neglect has occurred, (b) creating neighborhood networks of formal services and informal supports to families, (c) changing policies, practices, and culture within the public Child Protective Services (CPS) agency, and (d) establishing a local decision-making body of public and private agency representatives and community members to develop the initiative's priorities, review its effectiveness, and mobilize broad citizen support for it. This report discusses each element of the CPPC's theory of change in detail, documents implementation challenges and ways in which these were and were not met, and raises and discusses important clinical and practice issues.

The report also provides a review of specific issues and challenges relating to practice such as what makes for good case planning in child welfare; obstacles to good practice often encountered in CPS agencies and ways to ameliorate or reform them; how to develop collaborative networks of agencies and concerned individuals to help reduce child abuse and what is reasonable to expect of them; what it takes to mobilize neighborhood residents to become involved in promoting child safety and what they can accomplish; and, of course, the challenges and complexities of evaluating such efforts and their impacts. The information in this report is valuable to all those working to reform public child welfare systems.

Findings: What the Evaluation Tells Us

Each of the CPPC initiative's four core elements had its own implementation challenges and outcome objectives. The report describes and discusses the ways in which these objectives were met and were not at each site, and provides contextual information to explain the results it documents.

The fundamental objective of the CPPC initiative was to improve child safety, community-wide and system-wide, at all four implementation sites. The Chapin Hall evaluation indicates that this did not happen. This finding is not entirely surprising considering the range of social, economic and community factors that are powerful influences on child safety and the relatively modest scope of the interventions in this initiative. The evaluation suggests that the initiative's original theory of change was not strong enough to address this full range of societal factors or to achieve the ultimate desired outcomes of child safety within a community or across a local child welfare system. A national process for reassessing the theory of change is about to begin and is described in more detail in the next section of this letter.

The evaluation report also itemizes positive findings from the initiative. For example: across all sites, workers involved in this approach believed children to be safer. Families involved in the partnerships showed some modest improvements in several indices of family functioning, and were positive about this approach. Indicators associated with child safety modestly improved in some sites. The evaluation points out a number of ways in which child welfare practice was positively affected in sites.

In sum, what has been learned in the course of this initiative does not add up to a prescription for how to improve child safety community-wide or system-wide. However, there is much that has been learned about the benefits of good practice for families, about how to have child welfare services become a more trusted part of a community's service system, and about site-specific improvements. Administrators and policymakers who are considering implementing all or part of the community partnership approach to child welfare should approach it with realistic expectations about what the evidence suggests that it can and cannot do at this point in its development.

Implications of the Evaluation

We see several implications of the evaluation and forecast several next steps.

- 1. Re-examination of community partnership theory and practice.*** As mentioned above, the fact that the initiative did not achieve its overall objectives with regard to the improvement of child safety suggests the need to re-examine the theory and practice of the community partnership approach. Many factors may have played a role in why the initiative, across all four sites, did not improve child safety community-wide or system-wide. Chapin Hall cites several of these. While some or all of these factors may have affected the findings, we place paramount importance on reviewing whether each of the elements of the community partnership approach is viable, which elements need stronger conceptual or operational definition and development, and what additional strategies are needed to make communities safe and families strong and able to protect their children.

This review process is being undertaken immediately. One pertinent effort that will begin this year is an Executive Session convened by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners will study what is now known about the community partnership approach and consider directions for the future – including looking at programmatic approaches to protecting children that have strong empirical evidence.

- 2. Attention to gaps in implementation.*** The evaluation points to areas in which implementation of the community partnership approach was effective, as well as to areas in which implementation did not meet the expectations of the original design, could not be carried out because of lack of state, local or community resources, or simply proved too demanding in the context of the multiple and simultaneous changes and innovations required. Specific areas where we believe greater attention to implementation is needed include: the use of follow-up meetings with families as part of the Individualized Course of Action (ICA) process; better integration of child welfare and domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse in order to strengthen local networks; and increased attention to prevention. The four sites are already re-examining their practice in these areas. We hope that other jurisdictions considering this approach will be able to use the evaluation's findings to improve service delivery and that community network building will benefit from what has been learned from this initiative.

3. **Priorities for future evaluations of child welfare services.** Chapin Hall's evaluation identified serious challenges in evaluating community-based child welfare reform initiatives, and we believe these warrant close attention by future researchers. Five lessons seem particularly important. *First*, an outcomes evaluation should be conducted only when an initiative is at its full strength in terms of implementation. As Chapin Hall notes, an outcomes evaluation was probably premature for the community partnership initiative. This lesson also raises the question of whether the replication or expansion of an initiative is warranted before the model can be shown to be capable of being implemented at full strength. *Second*, a cross-site evaluation should be undertaken only after the theory underlying the initiative has been fully formulated and translated into clear guidance for implementation. Guidance and operational models were stronger for some components of the community partnership approach than others. *Third*, when trying to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions, there are serious weaknesses in using administrative data on child abuse and neglect reports as a measure of child safety. That said, administrative data provide a foundation for all public policy assessments, and it would be difficult to exempt child welfare from this standard measure of impact – limited though it is. *Fourth*, as Chapin Hall suggests, a more deliberate phasing-in and sequencing of complex interventions such as the community partnership approach would allow for more discrete evaluation of the component parts. *Finally*, community-based initiatives such as this one, that allow sites to tailor their efforts to local circumstances, suggest a need for site-specific evaluation approaches – both quantitative and qualitative – that examine relationships between implementation, local context, and outcomes. This is not to deny the importance of cross-site evaluations – it is fair to expect a set of interventions to produce benefits in multiple places – but the absence of site-specific evaluations, as in this case, risks missing valuable lessons available from specific sites.

The Community Partnership for Protecting Children initiative has been one of the most ambitious child welfare innovations of the past decade. Leaders in the neighborhoods, cities, and states that implemented it deserve thanks for pioneering new ways of doing the crucial job of protecting children. We offer our heartfelt thanks to all the initiative's originators, to the individuals and organizations at the four sites who participated in the CPPC initiative, to the officials who supported it, to the professionals who served as advisors, and – most significantly – to the families who participated in this important attempt to demonstrate a better approach to child welfare. The evaluation provides an opportunity to learn from their tireless and creative efforts. Our children's safety depends on understanding these lessons, absorbing them, and redoubling our efforts to protect children and support and strengthen families.

We welcome your comments about the initiative, the evaluation itself, or the observations we have made about the report's implications for the field at large.

Sincerely,



Michael Bailin
Past President
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation
(February 1, 1996 – June 22, 2005)



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