scale of change

Creating and sustaining collaborative child welfare reform across cities and states

by Andrew White
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In the text, the names of Clara T., Luisa F. and Dennis P. have been changed, as have important, identifying features of their lives, in order to protect their anonymity. In addition, the photographs that appear throughout this publication are illustrations; the individuals who appear in them are unrelated to individuals discussed or quoted in the text.
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In much of the United States, authorities investigate parents accused of child abuse or neglect and order their strict compliance with government and the courts. So it is especially notable when vast urban and statewide child and family services systems achieve reforms that make them dramatically more family friendly, community-centered and responsive to individual needs.

In recent years, several child welfare agencies across the U.S. have adopted new, collaborative methods of working with parents accused of child abuse or neglect, and with those who are simply in need of help. In the process, authorities have folded open the long-closed box of child protection and invited outside organizations and community leaders inside, more widely sharing the responsibility for keeping children safe.

In some cases, innovators have brought about these changes at a scale that allows them to touch the lives of many thousands of families each year. To achieve such scale, they have devised and implemented well-defined strategies for change and applied those strategies in alliance with leaders across government and in politics, charitable foundations and community-based organizations.

This is a paper about three such efforts. In each of the case studies included here, child welfare authorities are engaged in strengths-based, respectful collaboration with foster parents, young people, and importantly, parents accused of abuse and neglect, on the assumption that openness is more likely to lead to stronger families and more stable communities.

These case studies offer a view inside their endeavors, exploring how the reforms were conceived, implemented and expanded across their district or state. Each documents a creative, community- and family-centered initiative
that has been brought to scale, albeit with many compromises, and which has substantially reshaped child welfare services across a large jurisdiction. In California, the Family to Family initiative is guiding the work of officials in 25 counties seeking to improve foster care and child protection. In Iowa, the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children project is collaborating with human services officials to integrate highly individualized casework and neighborhood-based family supports into that state’s child welfare system. In Washington, D.C., seven nonprofit Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives are creating supportive, strengths-based neighborhood safety nets that are closely linked with city-run services in the District’s high-poverty wards.

Each of these initiatives is modestly funded and replete with internal variations and contradictions. Nonetheless, each case illuminates valuable lessons about how skillful, strategically oriented reformers have established a complex infrastructure that supports implementation while winning over stakeholders in their respective child welfare systems, including elected officials, agency administrators, frontline staff and community residents and clients.

The stories in the following pages describe the challenges and difficulties that reformers in California, Iowa and Washington, D.C., have encountered as they seek to infuse collaborative values and practices throughout government-run child welfare systems. The cases also explore the factors that have made these reforms both scalable and sustainable over time—while changing the lives of families, children and their communities for the better.

With the housing market crashing all over California’s central valley in 2007, Clara T.’s administrative job with a builder disappeared. She needed money to support her young children and her unemployed husband to pay for rent, food and daycare for her two
tireless toddlers. She took a sales job that sent her on the road right through summer and into the fall.

Clara’s hard-drinking husband often slipped out in the evening and left the children alone without a babysitter. Twice, neighbors found the toddlers wandering in the street after midnight, far from home, and called police. The children were experts at climbing a chair to unlatch the door.

By the longstanding traditions of child protective services, most county or state governments would charge Clara and her husband with child neglect and take their children into foster care, where they would stay until a caseworker and a juvenile court judge were convinced the parents were undeniably sober and their lives more stable. In the meantime, the caseworker would make a plan the parents had to follow: attend parenting classes, complete substance abuse treatment and maybe take part in regular counseling. With the caseworker squarely in control, her relationship with Clara would likely be authoritarian, contentious and loaded with distrust.

But it didn’t work out that way. For Clara, the remarkable recent transformation of her county’s child welfare agency meant that just 12 hours after police took her children from her home, she arrived at the offices of the Department of Child and Family Services to take part in a team meeting designed to find an immediate solution to the crisis. **Accompanied by her mother and a close friend, Clara was tense, her tearful face betraying both fierce anger and fear.** Her husband and his brother sat across the table.

The family members spoke nervously for a few minutes with a woman from a community health organization who explained she was there to help in any way she could. Then, together with the investigator on their case, several other family support workers and a meeting facilitator, the group spoke with enthusiasm about what makes this family strong: the parents are loving, the children are healthy and happy, relatives are nearby and Clara is a hard-working mom. **They talked about how**
to solve the problem, and an hour later they had a plan for Clara and the kids to move in with her mom out in the countryside that same evening. She would have child care assistance when they needed it, as soon as Clara found a new job. Her husband agreed to move in with his brother in town, to seek treatment for alcoholism and to give up the house the couple could no longer afford.

Clara was giddy with relief. “When I came in here this afternoon I thought I’d have to beg to see my kids for a little while,” she said after the meeting. “I had no idea what would happen.” By that evening, Clara, her mom and the kids were driving together to the house where she had grown up.

With the participation of state and local officials and leaders in philanthropy, advocacy, research and policy, California’s Family to Family initiative has established a powerful infrastructure for improvements across child welfare. The changes are reflected not only in the strengths-based family engagement that Clara experienced. There are also improvements in foster parent recruitment methods, agency accountability and planning practices, and in the coordination of services and relationship-building between government and the low-income and working class communities where child abuse and neglect are most often reported.

There is tremendous variation among California’s counties in terms of how fully they have implemented the Family to Family initiative. Some are much further along and more invested in reform than others. As a result, leaders of the initiative expend a great deal of energy attempting to ramp up the marginal performers, set and keep high standards of practice and solidify the local base of support for improvements.

In Iowa, the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children have grown over the last decade to become the spinal column within a body
of reform across the state’s eight human service administrative districts, encompassing 99 counties. The partnerships seek to involve entire communities in ensuring the well-being of children and families through inclusive governance and by establishing neighborhood networks of residents, institutions and services to support families in need. Based within the state’s Department of Human Services, they have also used a model of family team meetings to promote more individualized, appropriate services for families—and, in the process, have begun to transform policy and practice across the child welfare system.

Once again, the impact varies dramatically across the state. In some districts, families and communities are experiencing ground-breaking changes. Statewide, caseloads are smaller, repeat maltreatment of children involved with the child welfare system has declined, the number of children returning to foster care has dropped steeply, and kinship care is more prevalent than in the past.

Meanwhile, in the District of Columbia, a 1989 lawsuit and the ensuing court-ordered receivership of the capital city’s child welfare system led to the creation of seven community-specific Collaboratives designed to organize resources for preventive family support in working class and poor neighborhoods. Beginning in the late 1990s, these Collaboratives morphed into seven very different nonprofit organizations which, in combination with their networks of partners, today incorporate most of the city’s government-funded preventive human services system. But unlike most social service providers, the Collaboratives are also centers of community planning and mobilization, service integration, youth development and innovative, family-centered social work practice.

Here too, these Collaboratives have taken a leading role in embryonic efforts to institutionalize family team meetings and other methods of respectful, individualized and supportive parent engagement. The Collaboratives’ leaders have been effective advocates for new
investments in preventive family supports. They are also finding that
top city officials now echo their vocabulary of prevention, in ways strik-
ingly similar to those of leaders of child welfare bureaucracies in both
California and Iowa.

“There has to be a place where families know they
can go for help close to home, where they are welcome,
where they feel comfortable,” says Sharlynn Bobo, who until
recently was director of Washington, D.C.’s Child and Family Services
Agency. “That’s not going to happen inside the child welfare system,
by itself. Our resources have to go in that direction, to the front end,
to the communities.”

These three reform initiatives are not entirely unique. Many
cities have acknowledged neighborhood-based family support
networks as a viable method of improving social services not only in
the child welfare field but in systems serving people with developmen-
tal disabilities and in homelessness prevention. Within child protective
services and foster care systems, more than 100 counties across the
United States were using some form of family-centered team meeting
case practice as early as 2000. Elements of the Family to Family model
are shaping practice in several dozen communities nationwide, including
both Los Angeles and New York City.

What makes California, Iowa and the District of Columbia
worth examining is the way they each embraced a model
that combines a far-reaching vision for change with
very specific, detailed structures explicitly designed for
achieving and sustaining change.

Each place in its own way has intentionally developed a substantial
infrastructure for training, standardized practice, program evaluation
and relationship building with government funders and other stake-
holders. Iowa and California reformers have been especially successful
at driving fundamental policy and practice change within the core of the child welfare system. Washington’s evolution toward system reform has been less linear, but its leaders have tapped the unique strengths of each neighborhood, prioritizing community-driven strategies even as they move closer to integrating their vision into government child welfare practices.

These are relatively young reform projects, each barely more than a decade into implementation and, in many Iowa and California localities, far younger than that. Yet in those two states especially, well-defined core strategies guide the work. Iowa and California are using highly specific tools and methodologies that have provided local administrators and their community allies with maps for applying resources and achieving positive results. The feedback mechanisms built into both initiatives, including data on outcomes, reinforce these tools, offering leaders and, in some cases, communities a view of what’s working and what’s not.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., an increasingly strong training program in family engagement is reaching not only staff in the Community Collaboratives and neighborhood nonprofit organizations, but also several government agencies. Reformers in and out of government have developed shared-practice standards to serve as a guidebook for a new “out-basing” partnership created jointly by the Community Collaboratives and the District government’s child welfare agency. The new project will house government child protection and case management staff alongside the Collaboratives’ family support programs in neighborhood offices, and is expected to begin late in 2008.

These are but a few of the factors that have bolstered efforts in each of the three places to bring change to scale and achieve sustainable, broad and deep transformation in services for communities rife with the hazards of poverty. While each case study tells a story that is in some ways idiosyncratic, several shared, broad strokes of infrastructure development and strategic development stand out.
Each initiative has a defined theory of change that assumes government child welfare agencies are under-resourced, isolated and often under siege. Reformers can improve practice by taking advantage of moments of crisis (or a critical review by federal regulators), offering specific strategies rooted in a clearly defined set of values; developing an infrastructure for training, peer support, feedback and evaluation; and detailing how they can achieve improved outcomes for families that can be documented over time. In each case, the theory of change was tested in smaller localities, or at a small scale, before it was intentionally cultivated for a much larger population.

Each initiative offers a specific package of strategies and tools. This has great appeal for local and state administrators under pressure to create measurable improvements. With significant investment by public agencies, some of these methodologies—family team meetings and the nurturing of community networks foremost among them—can measurably improve frontline case practice. In some cases, community-building efforts have also improved public perceptions of child welfare agencies, including with members of the press, activists, elected leaders and members of religious institutions.

Each initiative has installed its reform project directly within the streams of government child and family services funding. While independent investment and technical assistance by foundations have catalyzed the work, each of these projects is integrated into local and/or state budgets, sometimes with great creativity. For example, Iowa’s community partnerships initiative has its own modest state funding line, but it is enmeshed with other more substantial funding streams that cover the large majority of its work related to the state’s child welfare agency. The D.C. Community Collaboratives have various government contracts and are intentionally broadening their funding base.

Each initiative has leveraged the self-interest of high-level administrators and elected officials. In Washington, D.C., the Collaboratives have become key providers of highly valued constituent services for the legislators on the District Council. In each project, their local roots offer elected officials and administrators opportunities for establishing positive local relationships with new constituents. For high-level agency administrators, though, the added, indispensable value of these initiatives is found in the ground-level infrastructure that drives case practice improvements and measurable outcomes.
Family team conferencing, in one or another of its various incarnations, is the preferred vehicle for transforming child welfare case practice. In each of the initiatives examined here, family team meetings—in the generic sense of the term—are being used as the central mechanism for integrating individualized, respectful, strengths-based case practice into the frontlines of the public child welfare system. Preparing the workforce and its collaborators for this work, weaving team meetings into the larger reform agenda of an agency or a local district, and building up the support infrastructure have been among the primary objectives of the work.

Developing stakeholders on the frontlines of child and family services consumes vast amounts of time for each initiative, but has proven fundamental. Resistance to change is intense wherever longstanding traditions guide practice. This is especially true when caseworkers are asked to give up some of their power and control. In Los Angeles, child protective investigators defied the implementation of family team decision making not only because of the extra work involved in convening the meetings, but because many of them felt their authority would be undermined. Only when they saw positive results—and became certain that they would not be held solely accountable when a decision made by a team went awry—did many workers buy into the project. Today, nearly one thousand team meetings take place each month across Los Angeles County on child protection, foster care and adoption cases.

Sandy Lint, who coordinates Iowa’s Community Partnerships for Protecting Children, says she and her colleagues have always intentionally sought out frontline staff and supervisors in every district office of the state’s Department of Human Services who seem to be instinctively interested in new and creative ways of doing their work. If you can convince them you have useful tools and that you’re not simply promoting the latest passing fad, they will join in the effort and help win over the fence sitters. “The last third will follow because they have to,” Lint says. “We struggle with the workers who are just going through the motions, who don’t get the depth and breadth of the work,” she adds.

Coaching, mentoring and peer support have been institutionalized in all three initiatives. Success in implementing family- and community-centered practice has depended heavily on the commitment of supervisors and managers. They must become effective coaches, well-versed in the reforms and the true owners of all of the improvements in frontline practice. Both California and Iowa have given supervisors and frontline
staff time and space to reflect and be critical as new policies and practices take shape. “Change doesn’t just happen,” says Mary Nelson, who oversees child and family services for Iowa’s Department of Human Services. “You have to recognize it is going to be emotional for staff. There is grieving in giving up some of their authority. You have to allow people to articulate that. Shared responsibility and accountability take work. You have to work through that as a process, early.” Coaching and mentoring are also important tools for quality control.

The training and technical assistance infrastructure is locally grown, nurtured and far-reaching. California, Iowa and the District of Columbia have each established a training and technical assistance infrastructure to support transformation and, in each case, this infrastructure is indigenous—the trainers are themselves practitioners from within their respective reform efforts. Staff from public and private organizations take part in training sessions, receive core systems support and learn about the central values of their initiatives from local colleagues. In each case, outside programs or specialists—usually foundation-sponsored—have helped devise curricula and “train the trainers,” but once the internal cycle has been set rolling forward, it has become self-reliant.

Each initiative has devised standards of quality case practice. In each case, standards were learned over time and instituted belatedly. Today, there is still debate within the D.C. Community Collaboratives about what constitutes quality standards for case practice, but a new shared practice manual has been developed and other standards will follow. Both Iowa and California have developed and enforced standards for team meeting practice, and Iowa has begun to institute standardized measures for other aspects of the partnerships’ work as well. Standardization helps to ensure quality and, theoretically at least, aims to achieve more consistent and documentable outcomes.

Centralized committees coordinate strategy, devise practice standards, plan for policy impact, and pursue lobbying and public education. Each of the initiatives has some form of executive committee or council responsible for shoring up the interests and planning of the larger group. Family to Family has gone further, institutionalizing a Sacramento-based project that collaborates with the statewide association of child welfare directors to educate legislators, assess statewide policy challenges and opportunities, and map out possible responses that would benefit the work at the county level.
Each initiative has pursued broad collaboration with community stakeholders. For the Iowa and the District of Columbia initiatives, community collaboration is fundamental to their founding principals and vision of extending the responsibility for child safety and well-being beyond government bureaucracies. In California, local counties have used community networks to strengthen their team meeting practice and, in Fresno, helped administrators address racial disparities in the child welfare system. In all three, neighborhood networks and community engagement efforts have, to different degrees, fostered more positive attitudes about child protective services and foster care.

Each of these initiatives is by definition decentralized, with local nodes of governance and implementation as small as local neighborhoods. Establishing truly representative community governance of these initiatives requires that leaders reach well beyond established practitioner agencies to involve informal associations, retired professionals, parent advocates, faith congregations and other social institutions. The strongest community partnerships in Iowa and California and the Collaboratives in the District of Columbia all have skillful outreach staff who consistently work with resident groups, build circles of support for struggling parents and integrate agency frontline workers with people from many walks of life. But it is notable that in each of the initiatives, project coordinators say community organizing has been a weak spot, and an often difficult concept for social service professionals to embrace. All of them say financial support and more training and leadership is needed for the local governance and community participation work.

Are these initiatives sustainable? In government, it is conceivable that most anything can change when a new administration takes office, or a fiscal crisis strikes. Large-scale reform requires protection from the whims of budget cutters and of public reaction following a crisis. In each case this has been achieved so far by establishing a broad base of support, proactively engaging influential community
leaders and political officials—city council members, county supervisors, state legislators—as well as judges, school principals and, in some cases, even editorial board members of local newspapers.

In Iowa, internal advocacy within the Department of Human Services reaches as high as the Director’s office and is reflected in the strategic policy papers of the agency. In California, Family to Family has an especially strong ally in the nonprofit, statewide association that represents all of the state’s county child welfare directors. In the District of Columbia, the Collaboratives are part of the neighborhood political infrastructure, but observers say they could certainly lose substantial funding if the mayor chose to develop new and different methods of delivering community safety net services and countervailing support was not quickly mobilized.

In this age of growing demands for evidence-based practice in social policy, each of the initiatives recognizes the necessity of documenting its work, tracking its impact and, wherever possible, providing data to prove positive outcomes. This is an important theme in each of the case studies.

These initiatives have all reached a size, a level of visibility and a degree of philosophical investment by powerful public sector supporters that they appear unlikely to be washed away by any radical shift in government priorities. Financial investment in the reforms has been modest, and yet each initiative has managed to embed important structural changes in its respective child welfare system.

What’s more, they are not isolated projects. They are not pilot initiatives that stand on their own apart from the systems with which they engage. In the counties where the reforms are most successful, they are fully integrated, touching the day-to-day work of scores of people. “Here, it is embedded enough that it is sustainable,” says Mary Nelson.
There are many strong advocates for this work in the neighborhood networks, governing boards, executive offices and community-based organizations. But the full breadth of reform is most visible among the frontline staff and the parents and children with whom they work. Many supervisors and child protection staff say they’ve seen reforms come and go over the years, but they describe the partnerships differently, as a system of belief that directly impacts their work.

Micki Vrban, who supervises child protective caseworkers in Des Moines, describes the experience of a family in which the domineering father had severely shaken his baby and abused his wife, who in turn failed to defend the children from his rage. The family’s intense religious beliefs contributed to the mother’s subservience and inability to respond, Vrban says. In the past, she adds, in such an extreme case, there would have been no discussion: all of the couple’s children would have been removed, with the full expectation that both parents would lose their parental rights.

But through a long and carefully nurtured collaboration with the mother’s family and local organizations, her relatives became empowered and helped the woman learn to live independently and act with confidence. She became a leader at a battered women’s residence, her kids returned to live with her, and only the father’s rights were terminated.

"Without all those people advocating in court, this would have ended in termination of parental rights long ago,” Vrban says. “The county attorney let me make my case, and the judge came around to our view. The kids are safe. They’ve been through enough. They didn’t need to lose their mom, too.”

"As this process works, as a social worker you start thinking differently,” Vrban adds. “In the past I would not have been advocating for that mom. But I’ve learned. You can step out of your personal values, you can step out of your biases. And you can see where these families are coming from.”
California

Family to Family remakes practice and policy in the largest state in the nation

The case that might have ended Cathi Huerta’s career with the Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services began when a 20-year-old lance corporal in the U.S. Marines, Robert Quiroz, flew home in a hurry from his post in Kuwait, near the Iraqi border. His wife in Fresno was dying from a brain hemorrhage suffered during childbirth. He arrived at the hospital that late summer day in 2006 only to say goodbye, and to watch doctors remove her from life support.

Reforms are taking place in the state’s most populous counties, home to about 75 percent of California’s 9.5 million children.
The young soldier was suddenly a single father with a newborn baby. He moved in with family, but struggled with depression. A few weeks after his wife’s death, he told a television news reporter about his conflicted feelings for his infant boy, whose birth had left him a widower. Nonetheless, with his sister-in-law’s help, he managed to care for the baby, at least for a time.

Two months later, Quiroz brought the boy to the doctor with a broken arm. Officials later said the father gave no clear explanation for the injury. County case-workers placed the infant in foster care while police investigated the injury. But after meeting with his family and other social service workers, county child protection specialists made plans for Quiroz to get outside help, and returned his child.

It later emerged that Quiroz never received mental health counseling or other support from the county. And the following month, the baby was dead, with several broken bones and a fractured skull. Family members said they never witnessed any physical abuse of the child, but prosecutors are seeking to convict Quiroz of murder. As of early 2008, the Marine was still in prison awaiting trial.

“Nothing else has shaken us to the core like this,” says Huerta, director of the Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and its 750 employees. Huerta’s agency works with tens of thousands of families every year in one of the most impoverished districts in the nation. The department’s mission is to help families in crisis and keep children safe. Most of the time, they do.

The Fresno Bee devoted thousands of words to the Quiroz case. In late winter 2007, a Bee editorial accused department case-workers of incompetence and called for the county supervisors—the elected leaders of local governments in California—to intervene in child protective services. Often, when the public concentrates its attention on the death of a child known to children’s services, heads roll and entire agencies are reorganized. But this is not always the case.

Instead, one of Fresno’s county supervisors and several community leaders leapt to Huerta’s defense. They met with the author of the Bee’s editorial and convinced him that serious errors in the Quiroz case were not emblematic of an agency-wide collapse. A review led to changes in the coordination of criminal investigations with the child protection system. But there was no wholesale overhaul of the department because such an overhaul was already well underway. Since 2003, Huerta and her colleagues had been transforming Fresno’s child protection and foster care systems, overcoming what critics described as endemic disorganization by implementing aggressive new accountability measures and an innovative approach to working with families. They also had been organizing far-reaching community support and involving local people in the lives of foster children and struggling families. By 2006, the work had shown good results. No one involved wanted to see it derailed.
“We are as transparent as we can possibly be,” says Huerta today. “That’s huge. God forbid we are in a situation like this again, I’d like to think the community would be with us.”

The most realistic measures of success, she explains, are more dramatic than anything one case can reveal. Fresno officials have recruited hundreds of new foster parents to replace group homes, residential institutions and motels where many foster teens had been living. And they have also largely reversed long-standing disparities in the number of black families and children placed in foster care, compared to whites. The number of children re-entering foster care after returning home dropped significantly. The county was using money more wisely, while also keeping more children with their parents or relatives and placing fewer in foster care. Despite a raging epidemic of methamphetamine abuse in California’s Central Valley, the number of children placed each year in foster care in Fresno dropped by 31 percent between 2002 and 2007.

Despite a raging epidemic of methamphetamine abuse in California’s Central Valley, the number of children placed each year in foster care in Fresno dropped by 31 percent between 2002 and 2007.

Today, Family to Family is guiding change in California’s most populous counties, home to about 75 percent of the state’s 9.5 million children. Each of the counties has adopted elements of Family to Family, altering the ways in which their child protection and foster care systems function. Some are making dramatic improvements while others struggle to move forward with more moderate changes. But most are attempting to use the models and tools of Family to Family to improve the outcomes of their work—including placing fewer children in foster care, achieving shorter stays and gaining more stability for those who do enter care, and establishing community-based supports for families so that more children are safe at home.

This is among the most ambitious attempts in the United States to bring community- and family-centered child welfare reforms to scale, with the Family to
Family initiative’s leadership helping to transform the practices and policies of dozens of county-level agencies in what is by far the largest state in the nation. While local and state agencies in a total of 17 U.S. states are implementing various aspects of the Family to Family model, few outside California have been part of such a far-reaching effort.

None of this has happened spontaneously. Reformers in California have had to create an entirely new infrastructure for training, technical assistance, leadership development, quality assurance and, ultimately, cultural transformation within the county-level child welfare agencies that manage the day-to-day work of child welfare.

In the process, reformers have engineered a carefully conceived collaboration of county and state leaders, guided by family and youth advocates, former child welfare administrators and foundation executives. They have gained leverage with local directors like Cathi Huerta thanks in part to the demands imposed by federal regulators and the state legislature, who have sought improvements in key aspects of the child welfare and foster care systems. The Family to Family initiative provides child welfare administrators with a very specific set of tools for transforming frontline practice, improving the quality and effectiveness of family and children’s services, recruiting foster parents and sustaining improvements over time. By tying these tools directly to the outcomes desired by federal and state oversight, the initiative has clear appeal to the county-level family and child services administrators who create and implement policy.

The project is buoyed by the investment of more than $2 million per year from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Stuart Foundation and state government, by peer support networks that stretch across counties and the state, and by an advocacy and education partnership in the state capital. While statewide funding and resources serve as catalysts, the most intensive focus on change is at the county level, where local leaders are implementing new policies and practices, redirecting substantial child welfare resources and reshaping staff responsibilities to support Family to Family strategies.

In the Family to Family method, parents who need help regaining their footing as they struggle with addiction, poverty or mental illness are meant to be able to find support near home. If a child welfare system is transparent, inclusive, and fully engaged with families, neighbors, young people and community institutions, then the responsibility for children’s safety can be shared and parents will be surrounded by supports in times of need.

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“This is a very common sense way of doing things,” says Kate Welty, who has spent her career helping orchestrate community-centered child welfare reforms and is today a site leader for the Family to Family initiative on the west coast. “It’s what many people came into social work to do.”

But the challenge of reform in California remains huge. Some counties such as Fresno have seen substantial improvements reflected in official data, including a significant drop in the number of children re-abused or re-neglected after child protective caseworkers first became involved in their lives, and a steep decline in the number of children entering foster care.

While change can be documented at the local level in some communities, the wealth of tracking data gathered by the state reveals no statewide changes in outcomes that can be correlated directly with Family to Family’s work. Reports of abuse and neglect remain at extraordinarily high levels, with nearly one of every 20 children in the state reported for abuse or neglect in 2006. That same year, 40,140 California children were placed in foster care.

During the 1990s, California state and county officials wrestled with a growing and unwieldy foster care system. By 1998, 104,600 children were in foster care statewide, nearly half of them in Los Angeles. Child advocates had begun to organize support for radical changes in foster care and investigative practices even as they experimented with new approaches to social services, some of which had begun to show modest results—including more individualized, integrated services for families struggling with drug addiction and poverty. Family to Family was one of these, sponsored by Los Angeles officials in the mid-1990s in an attempt to reduce the number of children entering its overwhelmed foster care system and improve community-based preventive services.

At the end of the decade, amid growing public dismay with child welfare, the administration of Governor Gray Davis began a statewide planning effort to devise new strategies. At about the same time, a small cadre of philanthropy executives, public child welfare administrators, community advocates and academic researchers began trying to move the Family to Family initiative beyond Los Angeles, where its impact had dissipated thanks to turnover in county leadership.

One proponent was the former San Francisco child welfare director, Pat Reynolds Harris, who convinced her successor there to give the initiative a try along with neighboring Santa Clara County. Bill Bettencourt, who was at that time the director of San Francisco’s family and child services agency, immediately saw Family to Family as a way to bring in new resources to improve the city’s safety net.
“My initial interest was around getting new foster homes,” Bettencourt says today. “Our recruiting, licensing and retention were really bad. We knew Family to Family could help with that. My initial idea was, there’s this need, and they could fill it.”

With grant support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and training and technical assistance from a team of consultants, Bettencourt and his staff not only transformed foster parent recruiting, but also institutionalized the initiative’s structured, strengths-based social work models for making key decisions on child safety, removals, changes in foster care placements, family reunification and adoption.

Family to Family revolves around four core strategies, each of which is supported with investments in training, technical assistance and peer support. They include: 1) the recruitment, development, and support of resource families—that is, foster parents, neighbors and kin, who can care for children and help parents get back on their feet and speed reunification; 2) the creation of community partnerships to mobilize local people and institutions in support of children and families; 3) the development of tools and routines for self evaluation and quality assurance; and 4) a method for collaborative, individualized decision making on each child welfare case.

The fourth core strategy has proven especially important for bringing Family to Family to scale across California. “Team Decision Making,” or TDM as it is called by Family to Family participants, is a process of facilitated meetings on child protection and foster care cases that involves family members, friends, caseworkers, community representatives and social services staff in assessing the family’s strengths, exposing and defining the problems that need to be solved and devising immediate strategies for dealing with them—all within one or two hours. Participants decide on individualized safety plans for children whose families are in crisis, and organize supports that can often help stabilize families or even keep them together.

Implementation of these meetings has been a key tool for overhauling the culture of frontline practice and family engagement within government child welfare systems. The work requires skilled facilitators, trained and coached in the method. What’s more, for TDM to succeed, child protective caseworkers must be ready and able to spend extra time in the initial phase of each case engaging more people, focusing closely on the individual strengths and needs of families and sharing responsibility for key decisions.

“I didn’t even know about TDMs when I agreed to do this,” Bettencourt recalls. “My managers had heart attacks when they learned about it. But I liked it.”

He wasn’t the only one who felt that way. By implementing Team Decision Making and the other elements of Family to Family, agencies inculcate a set of
values in their own workers and community partners that are often overlooked in child welfare work, including a deep recognition that families are more formidable than any single crisis—and that a group of people with varied knowledge and expertise can learn more about a family’s situation, make good decisions about child safety and well-being, and build on the family’s strengths.

“In the past, we’d bring in a mom at the worst moment in her life, and put her in a room alone with a worker to explain why we should give her her kids back,” says David Plassman, a social work supervisor who oversees data and evaluation efforts in Fresno. “It won’t go well, especially if you have a bias against her because of what you’ve seen. But when you have a TDM conference, you see so much more, it overcomes your bias. You’re not looking at a person in isolation and reinforcing your bias. You have the mother, the father, the relatives and their friends.”

These methods held special appeal in California in the early 2000s largely because of new federal and state requirements for documented improvements in child welfare services. In 2001, the state legislature passed a law establishing a new framework for measuring 14 specific outcomes for children and families involved with child welfare agencies. The Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, more commonly known as Assembly Bill 636, created a standardized gauge that allowed local and state officials to determine whether systems were improving—or not. The law was California’s response to the federal implementation of Child and Family Services Reviews, put into action by the Clinton administration in 2000, which also defined very specific goals for improvement.

That same year, Bettencourt left San Francisco government to join the Stuart Foundation. He began to promote the broad expansion of Family to Family to new counties across the state.

“Everyone knew federal review was coming,” Bettencourt says. That gave him and his colleagues new leverage to get the state government involved. “We asked the state to dedicate staff, and they did. Then it grew by word of mouth. People were getting prepared for the push toward outcomes and accountability, and they saw this as a way to bring in resources.”

Carrying this message across the entire state posed a huge challenge. “In California, it’s radical to bring people together for a more coordinated statewide approach to child welfare,” says Welty. “The state has very little power. The counties have all the power.”

With child welfare and other human services in the control of county executives rather than the governor, the initiative’s backers knew they would have to develop a broad base of county-level support. Because Family to Family provides administrators with practical policies and practices—that is, tools local administrators could grasp, adapt and put into place if they recognized the need for them—Bettencourt and his colleagues had a marketable product that offered solutions to
formidable problems.

The team recruited five more counties in the Bay Area and the region north of Santa Barbara on the central coast, providing each with a three-year, $100,000 annual grant. In order to maximize funding by matching the grants with federal and state child welfare funding, they deposited the money directly into county general funds budgets rather than funneling it through a separate nonprofit. The approach caused trepidation for foundation leadership, but ultimately allowed for greater flexibility on the part of the state and local administrators.

For a time, all of this became a sideline to the harsh politics that followed the state’s energy crisis and the dot-com collapse, which torpedoed state revenues, and the 2003 recall election that brought down Governor Davis and led to the election of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Yet the requirements of the 2001 Improvement and Accountability Act and the federal reviews had already begun to exert substantial pressure. Bettencourt and others linked up with the state County Child Welfare Directors’ Association, a small and well-regarded nonprofit that lobbies for the interests of county social services agencies in the state capital. This alliance was fundamental to Family to Family’s success: in a county-run system, statewide reform would require either massive regulation by the governor, or the commitment of county-level directors to join in and follow a plan together. Only the latter option made any sense, says Bettencourt, who soon left the Stuart Foundation to join the Annie E. Casey Foundation as a full-time leader of the Family to Family initiative, first in California and then across the entire western region. “It only works when people believe in it and want it,” he says today. “And when it works, more people want it.”

In 2000 and 2001, Fresno County’s foster care system was in crisis. There were so few foster homes in place, and so many kids entering care in the midst of a methamphetamine epidemic, that the county broke state law by housing almost two-dozen foster children in supervised motels without enrolling them in school or providing mental health care.

“Back then, the department was totally dysfunctional,” recalls Mort Rosenstein, a physician and chair of the Foster Care Standards and Oversight Committee that emerged out of a grand jury investigation. The grand jury’s report found that “children bounce between foster homes, social workers are inadequately trained and fail to make required regular visits to ensure children’s safety, and there are not enough foster homes for the children who need them,” reported the Fresno Bee.

The county supervisors looked to Bettencourt’s team, based in San Francisco, for a solution to the crisis. He and a group of consultants worked with the county Department of Children and Family Services leadership to put both the crisis and their staff’s devastated morale behind them. Part of the art of rooting Family to Family in a new community is in facilitating conversations and exercises that help
agency staff and leadership understand a clear set of values and principles about strengths-based practice, shared responsibility, individualized services, child safety and open partnerships with outsiders. In Fresno, the catharsis came quickly, and Welty was soon helping the agency figure out a major new organizational development scheme that would institutionalize an entirely new approach to child protection, foster care and family support.

Instead of simply looking inward to restructure, Huerta—then a deputy to child welfare director Gary Zomalt—and other agency executives turned outward. In the summer of 2003, after surveying local leaders and foster parents in several high-poverty communities, Zomalt and a Family to Family consultant traveled the county to hold more than 60 one-on-one meetings with neighborhood advocates, pastors, public officials and others, seeking to learn who could bring legitimacy and weight to the project. Juvenile court judges, law enforcement and social service providers were brought into the fold. Within the department, task forces reached deep into agency staff, each with a clear set of objectives and a steering committee to hold them accountable.

Fresno County has one million residents spread out across hundreds of miles of farm country, mountains, desert stretching away from a modest urban and suburban sprawl at its center. It has the largest agricultural industry of any county in the nation, and one of the largest populations of migrant workers.

“Family to Family opened up the store for us, into all kinds of possibilities,” says Huerta, who was assistant director at the time. “We were searching, working alone in a vacuum. We didn’t like where we were. We saw what we wanted but we didn’t know how to get there. Family to Family gave us a roadmap, a step-by-step guide to the process.”

Following the roadmap, and with funding from the state and the Stuart Foundation, the department fielded organizers to develop community partnerships in the most high-density poverty districts in the heart of the city of Fresno, where on many blocks half the families live in poverty, as well as in rural areas.

The new collaboratives held monthly meetings, at which the agency presented data specific to the communities, detailing the number of abuse and neglect reports and child placements. Former social service and education professionals came together with their neighbors to share information about families or children who needed support. These partnerships became increasingly integrated into the county child welfare system, so that by 2007, about 65 community representatives—including 30 neighborhood activists—were receiving $25 stipends to take part in TDM case meetings with families who were on the verge of losing children to foster care.

Some of the community participants describe the experience as both contentious and productive. “We’ve had clashes with workers and with supervisors,
we saw cases where nothing was being done” says Oscar Haynes, a retired teacher who is part of a group that provides community representatives for every TDM in the county involving African-American families. “But we had the support of the administration. That was great.”

“At first we thought the administration was just bringing us in to do the politically correct thing, to stifle us,” he adds. “But the key was, they took us to a statewide Family to Family convention. That opened my eyes, to see what other people were doing. So we became cultural brokers for families and for the social workers.”

Trained in a special 46-hour, government-funded program at Fresno State University, the community partners learned to assist families as well and to understand more of the nitty-gritty of child protection.

“The morale and camaraderie that developed through this is really evident, the sea change is really something,” says Rosenstein. “The changes that have resulted are unbelievable. There was not collegiality back then. Now everyone was brought into it.” An agency with a long-standing reputation for isolation, secrecy and mismanagement had reversed course and built a storehouse of goodwill.

About 60 percent of the child population in Fresno County are Hispanic, and 6 percent are African American. As in much of the United States, the small African-American population has long been overrepresented in the child welfare system. In 2000, 18 percent of the children entering foster care and one-quarter of all the children already in care were from African-American families.

Fresno’s new structure of community collaboratives, data sharing, training and team decision making gave the county a method for directly addressing the disparity.

Haynes and other local residents, including pastors, retired social workers and others, began to help families and friends come up with alternatives to foster care placements, providing respite care and connections to local social service organizations, among other things. By 2006 the data were revealing stark improvements—only 7 percent of the children entering foster care that year were from African-American families.

With all of these changes, Fresno has managed to cut its foster care budget by $10 million. Some of the savings has been reinvested in mental health services for foster kids and reunified families, while some has been siphoned off to law enforcement agency budgets. Overall, the department still struggles mightily for resources; fiscal conservatism is the standard in Fresno County. There is no government money for the community partner stipends, only foundation funding, explains Andrea Sobrado, who started here as a Family to Family consultant but is today Huerta’s deputy. The five community collaboratives—including the one Haynes is part of—are sustained by volunteers, supported by a small cadre of agency staff who are assigned to outreach, organizing and data sharing.
And yet, the changes have taken hold.
“This is where we go to recharge our engines,” Bettencourt says with a laugh, reflecting on Fresno’s success. “I call it my drug of choice.”

In 2003, Monterey, Orange and Santa Barbara counties also joined the initiative. Los Angeles, which initially experimented with the Family to Family initiative in the mid-1990s, had a new and charismatic child welfare director, David Sanders, who by 2003 was pursuing an aggressive agenda for community-based family support services, reduced dependence on foster care and the placement of foster children in neighborhoods close to their families. He and Bettencourt devised strategies for adapting the Family to Family methods to fit with the county’s larger system transformation.

“The theory was, the department doesn’t do a good job raising children. We should not be raising children,” explains Michael Rauso, a division chief in LA County’s Department of Children and Family Services who joined the agency soon after Sanders’ arrival. He says explaining these values to residents of the city’s sprawling neighborhoods has never been easy. “The department has a reputation of being child snatchers. People need to know we have an objective process. They need to know we are here for a specific purpose, protecting children and supporting families and communities to do the best for their children.”

Team decision making would provide one of the underpinnings for Sanders’ new approach. But Los Angeles is not Fresno. The county covers 4,000 square miles of mostly urban and suburban communities, has a breathtaking problem with gangs and gang violence, and encompasses extraordinary ethnic diversity. The county is divided up into eight child and family service areas and 19 field offices, so there is great diversity in methods and practice.

“We call it the ‘State of Los Angeles,’” explains Jana Rickerson, an Annie E. Casey Foundation site leader who oversees Family to Family’s regional network for technical assistance and training. Los Angeles accounts for 28 percent of all the children in the state and more than one-third of the foster children (down from nearly half in 1998).

In 2006 and 2007, TDM conferences became standard practice in much of Los Angeles, required every time a child was to be removed from a family. Increasingly, they are also used when a foster child switches homes or prepares to return to his or her parents. The use of TDMs required lengthy negotiations with the child welfare employees’ union, which felt caseloads were already unmanageable and thought the meetings would add to the caseworkers’ burden. Some workers feared the meetings would undermine their authority, allowing outsiders to influence cases while leaving frontline workers ultimately responsible if anything went wrong.
“I didn’t see how everyone at the table could make decisions on a case when I was the only one out there assessing the family,” recalls Wendy Luke, an emergency response supervisor in child protective services who has been a frontline worker in the Los Angeles system for a decade. “It was a shift of power away from me and my supervisors. And it was me saying, ‘What? Not with this family! How can they think this will work?’ ”

The statewide Family to Family initiative focused its efforts on just six offices in LA, providing technical assistance and facilitating peer support to these anchor sites while preparing the county to carry it to the others. A university consortium, including UCLA, receives county and federal funds to train TDM facilitators.

Luke works in the Compton field office, created in 2003 by a pair of activist administrators, Eric Marts and Blanca Vega, in the heart of a predominantly working class and poor African-American and Latino neighborhood. The area is a sprawling swath of stucco houses and two-story apartment blocks, with boulevards of strip malls, brake shops and banquet halls.

Just a few years ago, Luke says, her job centered on one question: Do I remove the child from the home, or not? “You go in, you assess, they’ll stay home or they’ll come with you,” she says, describing her work in years past. “I used to detain three times a week. That’s what we did. It was better safe than sorry.” But after joining the Compton office, she says, she eventually saw that agency leaders truly abided by the principle of shared responsibility.

“I used to detain three times a week. That’s what we did. It was better safe than sorry.” But after joining the Compton office, she says, she eventually saw that agency leaders truly abided by the principle of shared responsibility; in one incident, a child known to the office was murdered by her stepfather after she had been left in her home by the agency, following a TDM meeting. Luke suspected the child’s caseworker would be blamed for the death, the way such incidents had unfolded so many times before. But she wasn’t.

“Everyone was held equally responsible. Something had happened out of her control. And everyone had been involved in the decision to leave the child home,” she recalls. “That changed it for me. I could then say ‘Yes, we need to do these TDMs. And everyone is responsible.’ ”

This spirit of ownership and investment by agency staff is fundamental to Family to Family’s success. And it’s not only the staff that is invested: from the state capitol in Sacramento, where the County Child Welfare Directors Association works with the initiative on devising the best possible legislative supports for child welfare, to the community partnerships in places like Fresno and Compton, a huge swath of people have become instrumental to Family to Family’s growth and institutionalization in California.

Bettencourt and his colleagues developed a structure for implementation that has many moving parts. They built on the demand for accountability and the widespread desire among agency directors for tools and technical assistance to be applied
directly to their steepest challenges. And with that demand, a good strategy and a lot of luck, Bettencourt explains, they have been able to inculcate the core values in county after county.

Technical assistance is provided by Family to Family’s site directors, employed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as well as consultants. The team helps agencies with organizational development and restructuring; partnership building, self-evaluation and data-sharing methods; foster parent recruiting, and more.

Through a contract with the University of California at Davis, the initiative organizes frequent state and regional peer-support conventions for county agency supervisors to share their experiences, think and plan, away from their day-to-day jobs. They explore their principles and assess long-term needs. “But they are also here to gain inspiration,” says Bettencourt. At every convening, he says, there should be a panel of foster parents and parents, or young people, or an inspiring trainer or writer who can speak directly to the issues participants see every day in their work. It instills the purpose in their consciousness, and stirs their emotional connection with the work.

Training resources are housed in special academies based in California’s state university campuses in several counties, funded by the state. And in Los Angeles, an interuniversity consortium—funded with federal and state child welfare dollars through LA County—prepares TDM facilitators for their unique role.

(Los Angeles has a Title IV-E waiver, allowing the county to apply federal matching dollars to a wide variety of uses, including training and professional development).

Underneath all of this is a straightforward theory of change. First, Family to Family appeals to a clear demand for meaningful, workable solutions to the complex problems faced by county and local administrators. Child welfare agencies are often under-resourced, isolated, sometimes even stuck in a siege mentality. By offering strategies that directly address these common struggles, Family to Family is attractive to many agency executives and public officials. When financial resources and several years of technical assistance for implementation are added to the mix, the offer of help is even more compelling.

Next comes instilling the values that support the core strategies—and establishing the organizational structures that make implementation possible. Only then can community partnerships, recruitment and development of resource parents, team decision making and individualized services, and self-evaluation all begin to become routine elements of an agency workplace culture. The data used in evaluation efforts—and in tracking countywide and statewide performance—is coordinated and published electronically by the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley’s School of Social Welfare.

And then there’s the exoskeleton of the entire effort—the team of professional
staff, consultants and technical experts who help support the transformative work on the ground, combined with all the personal relationships, carefully cultivated, that reinforce the work at every turn.

This process allows for the integration of Family to Family with other like-minded initiatives, of which there is no shortage in California. From Los Angeles County’s “Points of Engagement” initiative, to San Francisco’s “Communities of Opportunity” strategy, and statewide initiatives including “differential response”—for diverting low-risk cases of alleged abuse and neglect directly to social services programs—and on improving supports for young people transitioning out of foster care, Family to Family’s infrastructure and methodology have proven valuable, officials say.

The California initiative has gone further, too, by collaborating not only with state officials but also state legislators and lobbyists, university research institutes and training programs, and philanthropists. All of this may ultimately sustain Family to Family over the long haul, even if the initial sponsors eventually move on.

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“Everyone’s doing their own thing, there’s no standardization of the model” in Los Angeles, says one of the TDM managers. “Not all of the trained facilitators are doing the work,” she adds. “Not everyone doing a TDM is a facilitator. And not all of the facilitators behave appropriately in the meetings.” In other words, she and others say, while there has been a cultural shift in some of the field offices, particularly among younger workers, there isn’t enough clarity and consistency to claim Los Angeles as a Family to Family success story.

In Compton recently, a gang killing left two girls, aged 8 and 11, orphaned. At the police station, a detective dropped the children with Janelle Duda, a young child emergency response caseworker. Within a few minutes, she set the community partnership infrastructure in motion. The children’s aunt and grandmother arrived. An agency supervisor called for two local clergymen, who were there in half an hour. A caseworker from the office where
the girls were to be assigned arrived soon after. “When everyone was there, we told the girls what had happened to their mom,” Duda recalls. They went home with their grandmother, a plan for grief counseling already in place.

Ultimately, Family to Family has begun to give workers like Duda and her supervisors things child welfare workers haven’t had for decades: trusting relationships with people beyond their office walls, pathways to collaboration and communication outside their agency and open communication with community leaders. Above all, they can share the difficult burden of keeping children safe and helping families become stronger.

“We’ve been pretty lucky in terms of how things have moved,” says Bettencourt, in his usual understated way. But there’s a quick amendment: “Lucky and strategic,” he adds.

Plassman takes it one step further, grinning as he prints out data he’s put together to describe Fresno’s changing system. “Look at this,” he says. “It’s a miracle.”

Maria Aguirre, a 17-year veteran of child protection who now oversees Fresno County’s preventive services system, is more blunt. “We’re really doing social work now,” she says. “Family to Family brought back the basics.”
Iowa

Community partnerships become a reliable framework for a statewide transformation

Denise Moore began using drugs when she was a teenager. By age 26, she was a mother of two and addicted to methamphetamine. Twelve years later, pregnant with her sixth child and dealing drugs, police recorded her on a wire selling meth to an undercover cop. Moore ended up on intensive probation—and the state sent her children to live with her mother and brother. “I was missing from their lives long before that,” she says today.

Iowa has vastly increased the use of kinship supports and strengthened community networks that assist families.
But Moore continued to get high. “I couldn’t stop using,” she says. She wanted her kids back, so she’d go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, but she was still getting high. “I kept thinking I could beat the system.”

One day her caseworker from Iowa’s child welfare agency, the Department of Human Services (DHS), sat her down in front of her kids and told them she had relapsed yet again. “I saw my son’s face fall,” Moore recalls. “He was crushed. I didn’t believe in AA. But I saw his face, and I stopped using.”

She’s been clean ever since. “My life would not have changed without that caseworker,” she says, pushing her long hair away from her face to reveal her habitual, genuine smile.

Today, four years later, Moore shakes her head in disbelief at the turn her life has taken. Her 19-year-old son is in college on a football scholarship, and she is raising her other five children, ages 4 to 17, while working full-time with DHS and its Polk County office, in Des Moines. She helps other parents put the pieces of their lives back together so they can get their kids back from foster care—or avoid losing them in the first place.

“No one is more credible to these families than someone who has done meth,” explains DHS child protective social worker Tracy White. Moore and a half dozen other women with first-hand experience of the child welfare system lead training sessions with child protective caseworkers, helping the workers to understand exactly why people like them—former addicts, survivors of domestic violence, women who have found their way back to being nurturing parents—can be very effective at encouraging other parents to work with the agency, to do what’s right for themselves and their kids. They know what it takes to get the agency out of their lives.

Another part of Moore’s job is to coordinate the Polk County Community Partnership for Protecting Children (CPPC), one of dozens of partnerships started across the state in recent years that aim to break down the walls that have long divided child welfare agencies from the larger community. Through the partnership, Moore sits at the policymaking table with high-level child welfare officials, juvenile court judges, nonprofit executive directors and frontline caseworkers and their supervisors. She organizes community leaders, activists and other parents to take part in the governing council that helps guide improvements in the county’s child protection and foster care system.

In a DHS district office that manages 5,000 investigations each year, has responsibility for 1,000 foster children, and oversees another 1,100 children living with relatives, community people like Denise Moore have an influential voice.

For Moore, this is a radical and almost inconceivable change in her life. “One and a half years ago I couldn’t get a job at the Dollar Store or Perkins Restaurant because of my felony,” she says. “It’s an honor to do what we do,” she adds, as she travels from one mid-day meeting to the...
next with one of her fellow parent advocates. “Who would have ever thought that people like us would do what we do?”

LIKE MANY OF THE PEOPLE involved in the transformation of frontline family engagement in Iowa’s child welfare system, Moore is playing multiple roles, sitting with caseworkers one hour, parents and community activists the next. Her work is one facet of a much larger effort to develop a family-centered, community-rooted system to support families and protect children. With origins dating back more than a decade to a foundation-funded pilot initiative in Cedar Rapids, Iowa’s second largest city, there are now 39 community partnership sites affiliated with the child welfare offices that serve all but one of Iowa’s 99 counties.

These partnerships are setting the pace for improvements taking place across Iowa’s child welfare system. State and local officials currently rely heavily on the CPPC model of collaborative family engagement and its inclusion of stakeholders outside the child welfare system in policy and practice decisions. They have integrated the partnerships with other, older state-funded programs that have substantial budgets, added modest new allocations of money, established or expanded county councils that help to define local reform priorities, built up substantial training resources and, in many districts, used the partnership tools and strategies to radically reshape the practice of frontline family engagement by child protective and foster care workers.

The local partnerships’ collaborators, including community organization leaders, parents, social service providers, judges, youth leaders, school principals, sheriffs and other grassroots leaders, are creating programs and advocating for policies that have a direct impact on the lives of thousands of low-income families.

In strategic policy documents, Iowa’s human services leadership has placed the CPPC network at the center of its reform agenda, defining the partnerships as a key vehicle for implementing fundamental improvements in family services across this state of about three million people, with its compact urban areas and vast rural distances. These reforms, including more rigorous parent engagement and more appropriate services for families, became urgent following a harshly critical 2003 federal review that threatened to cut federal reimbursements for foster care and other family and children’s services.

In the process, Iowa has vastly increased the use of kinship supports and strengthened both formal and informal community networks that assist families already struggling with abuse and neglect investigations, as well as those who might need help but haven’t yet shown up on the DHS radar. They have also established new quality assurance and review measures that help guide practice improvements.
Nearly all of this work is in sync with the core strategies of the CPPC model, which was originated by the Washington, D.C.-based Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in the mid-1990s.

These guiding strategies include:

- **Individualized, family-centered practice** for families involved with child welfare services and parents seeking preventive family supports, structured around family team meetings and backed up by quality assurance reviews;

- **Neighborhood networks** that bring together government agencies, nonprofit organizations, community institutions and neighbors to provide integrated and supportive services to local families;

- **Shared-governance bodies** with real decision-making power, convening representatives from government, communities and family-serving agencies to develop priorities and guide implementation of reform efforts; and

- **Policy and practice change** that is rooted in—and informs—the partnerships’ collaborative decision-making efforts, their individualized family-centered practice and their neighborhood networks.

Each of the strategies is meant to support the others, and to create integrated supports for families that reach across and throughout communities, strengthening the safety net and shifting weight off the overburdened shoulders of government child welfare agencies. The partnerships aim to keep children safe by creating attentive, far-reaching networks across community institutions, neighbors and families.

“It’s not just government’s responsibility to make sure children are safe,” explains Ro Foege, a former Catholic Charities social worker who has represented part of the Cedar Rapids area in the state legislature for a decade, and has been a legislative champion of the CPPC initiative. “It’s everyone’s responsibility.”

Iowa, like most states, is still far from having a comprehensive community safety net for families and children. But even as reformers strive to bring the CPPC methodology to scale, they are already having a very clear impact in large swaths of the state.

“We’re moving from the developmental stage to an infusion stage,” says Sandy Lint, CPPC State Coordinator at DHS. “The learning curve has gotten shorter and shorter.”

The CPPC project began in Cedar Rapids, a small industrial city in eastern Iowa. This was one of four community partnership pilot sites nationwide that received large multi-year grants and technical assistance from CSSP and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation beginning in 1997. A cadre of advocates, DHS officials and a bipartisan group of legislators soon became enamored of the improvements they saw in community-based family supports in both Cedar Rapids and in Louisville, Kentucky, another of the pilot cities. In 2001, these state leaders decided to roll out the partnership model, district by district, across the state.

At first, they gained little traction. Local DHS districts began to organize more than a dozen partnerships, but
few applied substantial resources to the project. As the foundation funding for Cedar Rapids drew to a close, local officials there decided to continue funding the project with about $250,000 in child welfare reinvestment money. But elsewhere it appeared the project might fade away. The environment changed radically amid the turmoil of a state budget crisis, some tragic and very public deaths of children who were “known” to the child welfare system, and the 2003 federal Child and Family Services Review, which gave a failing grade to the state’s child welfare system.

Responding to the critical federal review, Iowa officials put new urgency and attention into the partnership rollout. The Center for the Study of Social Policy helped steer technical assistance to the agency, while the state built a training and organizing infrastructure for the partnerships, relying heavily on the core group of practitioners in Cedar Rapids who had guided the pilot project since the late 1990s.

They also dramatically beefed up the funding mechanism for reform; interweaving the new partnerships into previously established pools of state funding that had been dedicated since the 1980s to promoting community-centered and locally-controlled social service initiatives. These funds, known as the “decategorization” and “empowerment” programs were established in the 1980s to reinvest child welfare funding into preventive social services, and are still guided by local boards that include representatives from DHS, the juvenile courts and other service providers. Many of these boards signed on with the partnerships and steered substantial additional funds into the child welfare reform pot.

In the years since, the partnership sites have multiplied and their work has deepened. The CPPC itself has always been modestly funded, with just one statewide DHS staff person—Sandy Lint—administering a dedicated budget of $1.1 million spread thinly across the 39 districts. But by meshing the partnership model with these other large funding streams as well as newer initiatives backed by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative and other sponsors, Iowa has begun to dramatically change the nature of child welfare in much of the state.

Today, increasingly, frontline DHS staff are working with parents differently, following the individualized practice model pioneered by the partnerships. Communities are beginning to support young people in foster care in new and creative ways. In some districts, the mobilization of shared governance and the creation of circles of neighborly support is giving parents concrete encouragement—and keeping children safe at home.

“This has affected practice across the state,” says Carol Behrer, founder and Executive Director of the Youth Policy Institute of Iowa. “It’s night and day from five years ago.”
Individual leaders have had fundamental roles in the transformation of the child welfare bureaucracy. Representative Foege and his Republican colleague Dave Heaton credit Wendy Rickman, a 21-year veteran of DHS, with carrying the message of the partnerships and family-centered practice to Iowa’s frontline workers and community-based direct service providers. “She was the right person in the right place at the right time,” says Heaton.

Tough, eloquent and charismatic, Rickman had been a top agency administrator for several years when she began to educate others across the state about strategies for reforming and improving practice in the child welfare system. In 2004, she became the top DHS administrator in the Des Moines service area, the largest of the state’s eight human services regions.

When she took over the leadership position there, she found caseloads so high—70 to 80 cases per worker handling ongoing cases—that agency staff weren’t even visiting the children and families under its care, in clear violation of regulations. The high caseloads were a direct consequence, she says, of the agency’s over-reliance on the district’s overloaded juvenile court system.

“When I first got here, workers had only court cases,” she recalls. At that time, nearly every family under the oversight of a DHS caseworker in the Des Moines area was being taken through the court as a matter of routine—not only those whose children had been removed, but also many others who were expected to take part in services. Caseworkers and their supervisors had become dependent on the extra leverage that court orders could provide in mandating services, she says. As a result, nearly every case was under some sort of judge’s orders—and that meant most of the cases took a very long time for DHS to resolve, sometimes years at a time, while every key decision had to be reviewed by a judge.

With caseworkers carrying so many longstanding cases, there was little room for new ones. The failure was stark and systemic, and staff turnover was extreme. Worse, foster homes and group programs were filled to capacity, and workers were making little effort to place children with their relatives.

The new administrator and her deputies began to push back. They wanted only those cases in court that truly belonged there. “We decided to figure out, what can the court do that we can’t do?” Rickman says.

“You wouldn’t believe the outcry,” recalls Mary Ellison, the social work administrator and Rickman’s deputy, responsible for supervising frontline managers in Des Moines. “People wanted [the court] to tell them what to do on their cases. We said ‘No! You are the social worker, you make decisions!’ ”

Along with the Polk County Attorney, Rickman set new standards for bringing abuse and neglect cases to court. She required supervisors and caseworkers to articulate exactly what they thought a judge could accomplish—and what they
believed they could not accomplish without the judge. That alone knocked down the number of court filings, Rickman says. But she also worked out a deal with the chief prosecutor: if parents would not accept services or other instructions from DHS, the county attorney would send the parents a letter explaining that if they failed to attend their next DHS meeting, they would be called in to see a judge. Usually, the letter made the desired impression.

The focus on reducing court involvement and caseloads helped get the crisis under control. The next step was to strengthen casework practice. In order to have a more permanent impact in families’ lives, Rickman looked to the core CPPC strategy for individualized, family-centered practice: family team meetings. These meetings are the centerpiece of a strengths-based approach to engaging with families in crisis, assessing their situations, and working as a team to devise an individualized plan for keeping the children safe and addressing the problem at hand.

These team meetings convene family members, friends and other supportive people—whether from school, a congregation or the neighborhood—around a table with child protective services and other service providers. The method is similar but less structurally restrictive than the “Team Decision Making” meetings used in California’s Family to Family initiative. With the help of a trained facilitator, the group discusses the family’s strengths, defines the problem at hand, brainstorms solutions and develops a plan for achieving safety and stability.

Rickman and her colleagues decided that in order to change the way caseworkers related to parents and kin, speed reunification, and instill a more results-oriented culture in the agency, they needed to organize family team meetings for every case where a child was about to be removed from home and placed in foster care. This way, DHS would be more likely to find a family member who could step in to care for the child, the child’s immediate needs would be addressed, and a support plan would be in place quickly to help parents with whatever issues led to the removal. Better yet, the case plan would be in good shape before anyone went before a judge.

The Iowa CPPC had long since developed an infrastructure for training facilitators and educating caseworkers, supervisors and community representatives in the team meeting practice. The partnership had eight trainers and four master trainers available to work with DHS offices across the state. They had a coaching, evaluation and certification system in place for facilitators, a set of well-established standards and a tool kit to help assure quality and adherence to the model. In other words, the tools were readily at hand for Des Moines to implement the strategy. They just needed to be applied.

By late 2007, facilitators employed by three nonprofit organizations under
contract with DHS were managing dozens of family team meetings each week for Des Moines-area families involved in the child welfare system.

“I’ve seen a lot of change just among the workers in the last year,” says Melissa Williams, a facilitator employed by Visiting Nurse Service who works alongside DHS case investigators. “They are looking at relative care, at relative placements. They are looking at the needs of the children, not just saying, ‘We’re saving this child.’ They’re asking, ‘Are there people who need to be there for this child? What’s visitation going to look like? What will happen at holidays?’ These questions aren’t pushed to the side anymore.”

Three years after Rickman arrived, half of the children in out-of-home care in the Des Moines district are now living with relatives, twice as many as before. Case-loads for assessment workers (who do initial investigations of suspected abuse or neglect) are at about 12 per person. Case-loads are down to about 30 for those who work with families and children following the initial investigation, a level Iowa DHS considers appropriate. Workers are visiting every child, Rickman says. Cases are resolved faster, she adds, and re-reports of families previously investigated by the agency have declined.

“From where we started, we’ve made massive strides in terms of our workers’ understanding,” says Rickman. “Most workers understand that if we came to their house and took their kids, they’d want to be involved in the decisions that are made. They aren’t all there yet. A big part of it is getting the structure in place, and we have that now.”

All of this was possible because of decisions made several years earlier to cultivate the methods and tools for reform, statewide. In 2004, under pressure from the critical federal review, DHS policy staff had laid out a reform plan that centered on the community partnership model to guide system reforms. The failure to improve could have triggered provisions in federal law to withhold child welfare funds from the state.

In Iowa’s reply to critical federal reviewers, child welfare executives explained how the practice of family engagement would reflect a strengths-based approach rooted in family team meetings. Training and support would be leveraged statewide through the CPPC. The state’s social services safety net would be integrated with community-based family supports through the partnership’s district-level governance councils and neighborhood networks. Policy and practice would be informed, at least in part, by a statewide CPPC executive committee representing partnership sites in every district.

What’s more, supervisory case reviews would incorporate a practice known as Quality Service Review (QSR), which had been adopted by several other jurisdictions nationwide. In this process, about a dozen cases in one district are selected and scrutinized intensely, including new interviews conducted with participants in the case such as parents, caseworkers, supervisors and outside practitioners. The casework and outcomes are reviewed by focus groups, assessed and scored. Done properly, the QSR process not only tests the quality of services, it also informs practitioners about hurdles in specific topical areas, such as how to more effectively
address mental health or domestic violence issues.

“It was a long struggle to get our system to recognize this was even doable,” says Krystine Lange, a DHS policy veteran who coordinated the state’s response to the federal review. She explains that today, every DHS social worker handling ongoing cases is trained and certified as a family team meeting facilitator. “It doesn’t mean they all facilitate meetings, but it transforms their view of just about everything they do in practice.”

Meanwhile, the state developed new regulations that completely rewrote the DHS model of practice with families and children to be consistent with the partnership’s methods and strategies, she adds. “There came a point where I was having trouble holding on to the back of the wagon as the whole state leapt forward with this,” Lange continues. “That was 2006. I could barely keep up with the requests for training and policy change.”

Implementation has been uneven. Today, in several Iowa service areas, nearly all families involved with DHS have family team meetings. In other districts, there are only a few that take place each month. The Des Moines service area has sprinted forward with team meetings, while other counties still are not entirely grounded in the need for change, observers say.

The training infrastructure, developed through the partnerships and inside DHS districts since 2003, is now of a scale that rivals child welfare training programs in the largest U.S. cities. Initially, CPPC leaders and DHS officials established strict criteria for who could train and coach team meeting facilitators, and brought in specialists from outside the state to train and mentor many of them. The curriculum for learning to become a team meeting facilitator is detailed and demands four days of classroom work, a short apprenticeship and authorization by a coach following a standardized evaluation. As team meetings have become DHS policy across the state, the agency’s training department has adopted the partnership curriculum. More than 1,800 facilitators have been trained and 1,154 have been approved statewide. Trainers can now be hired directly through the CPPC website by local partnerships to train staff at non-profit provider agencies and community organizations.

Maintaining the quality and effectiveness of collaborative family engagement and team meetings requires skilled coaching and mentoring. The Cedar Rapids partnership created a training program used by districts across the state to prepare DHS supervisors and community leaders to be skilled coaches, funded in part through the central CPPC budget. They are now establishing a new training curriculum on advanced family team meeting practice.

With CPPC having made huge strides toward its goal of transforming the nature of child welfare case practice in Iowa, and with the infrastructure for maintaining that change in place, advocates are beginning to think about the next big policy
and practice hurdle: community engagement and the wider safety net.

“There needs to be more support to help more sites move beyond the ‘101’ level of practice to ‘201’ or ‘301,’ says Steve Scott of Prevent Child Abuse Iowa. “There’s not a lot of expertise about how to move it to another level. It’s always hard to support the training that will carry this beyond the very basics.”

What’s been lacking until very recently, Scott says, is the willingness to carry the investment in partnership strategies beyond family team meeting practice and into preventive services that would keep more families from ever coming into contact with the child welfare system in the first place. Traditionally, he explains, services are provided only after a parent is confirmed as abusive or neglectful, largely because that’s where federal and state governments allocate their intervention dollars. Beginning in 2008, DHS shifted a modest pot of federal child abuse prevention funding to the partnerships and created opportunities for a somewhat different approach in many Iowa communities. “This doesn’t totally change things, but it is a really positive development,” he says.

Scott has played a central role advocating for the partnerships in the state government and the legislature. And with AmeriCorps funds and private foundation grants, his staff helps organize some of the community-centered efforts of the partnerships, and coordinates the regional and statewide trainings on the CPPC’s four strategies. Still, he compares the DHS response to the federal review to schools that focus exclusively on test scores. “The federal measures have nothing to do with early prevention. So if they’re responding to the federal guidelines, it’s like if all the tests in schools focused only on math and English, and that’s all you work toward.”

Nonetheless, in some Iowa districts the partnership has taken a cue from traditional community organizing to rebuild local planning councils and create neighborhood networks that are trying to solve problems well beyond child welfare—getting right to the heart of preventive services like child care, substance abuse prevention and youth development.

In the northwest corner of the state, sparsely populated farm country is laced with creeks and rivers and the occasional industrial town springs up from the flats. Among Cherokee County’s rolling hills, about one of every 10 children live in families with incomes below the poverty line. Here, since 2004, local CPPC coordinator Nola Aalberts has fostered the partnership by mobilizing county residents to take on very specific problems in their communities. For example, in the small city of Inwood, students at a bus stop outside the municipal building routinely raised havoc and bullied younger kids. Aalberts, along with the city clerk and a group of other residents, came up with a program to provide the kids with food, activities and
after-school tutoring. One project led to another, and now the local network has established a welcoming committee that reaches out to every new family moving into the city, giving them information, personal contacts and neighborly kindness. This is true community-based prevention, Aalberts says.

In nearby Larchwood, Aalberts helped organize a network that established summer youth programs. The Iowa State University Extension hired a youth director, and the program is now serving dozens of young people every year. Each county in the area has a partnership council that includes city administrators, the university, school teachers, the sheriff’s office and others—and they all have members who participate on advisory boards, setting out proposals for child care, substance abuse and parenting issues.

“None of this is scripted,” says Aalberts. “It’s fascinating to see it develop.” The councils have worked with DHS to establish circles of support for women leaving welfare, and for mothers who had recovered from methamphetamine addiction. Meanwhile, the DHS district leadership has restructured case practice so that every family in the system has team meetings and a network of individualized supports, according to supervisor Jeannie Feeck, who oversees workers in four counties. Usually, these supports are informal and involve family, friends and neighbors, she adds, which makes great sense in a rural area where formal social services are few and far between.

In other parts of the state, the district councils and neighborhood networks have taken on a different character. Some counties are developing neighborhood hubs, where various community organizations and government agencies can provide family supports and youth services in one central location. Others are focusing closely on one or two small neighborhoods, where needs are greatest, to organize residents and build up preventive collaborations. A few are organizing parent advocates to work with mothers trying to overcome addiction or domestic violence.

“For these networks, there’s no program with a manual,” says Carol Schroeder, who coordinates the partnership training sessions from her base at Prevent Child Abuse Iowa. “They are all very different; it’s amazing how different they are.”

Krista Penrod grew up in foster care and a failed adoptive home, eventually aging out of the system at age 18. Today, at 19, she is a youth facilitator in Cedar Rapids and Iowa City and one of a group of youth leaders guiding the development of Elevate, an organization staffed by former foster youth. They are combining the coalition building and training infrastructure of the community partnerships with the family team meeting model to create an entirely new way of helping teens and young adults succeed in life after foster care.

An expressive young woman with intense dark eyes, Penrod speaks fervently about the necessity of helping other young people in foster care gain control over their lives. She explains how the standard family team meeting approach didn’t work well for teens who had already spent years in foster care. They were old enough to need to be in control of the meetings, and decide for themselves who would take part
among their own friends and relatives and the other adults in their lives. A group of teenagers has been working with CPPC leaders to develop “dream teams,” a form of planning meeting that each young person can design for themselves, helping them define and achieve their own life aspirations.

“In the past it’s always been workers who decide if a teenager is ready to be on their own, looking at the case files, and that’s it,” says Penrod. “But we’re creating something more positive. A young person says, ‘This is who I am. This is what I want.’ And the team, the community, sees they are more than their file.”

This is one of several variations and adaptations of the partnership strategies that have evolved through the shared decision-making process. Another initiative has emerged around building awareness about racial inequities. In a state that’s 95 percent white, African Americans have long been over-represented in the child welfare system—especially in foster care—and distrust of child protective services is common in African-American communities here, say local leaders. In Des Moines, DHS supervisors, court personnel, community partners and others came together to explore the impact of race on casework and decision making, and the effort has led to changes in frontline practice. The partnership and DHS have hired and trained family team meeting facilitators designated specifically to handle cases in the African-American community, and they have trained staff from community-based agencies to organize their own team meetings for families who need help but want to avoid involvement with the child welfare system.

All of this is, to a large degree, exactly what Krystine Lange and her policymaking colleagues in Iowa’s DHS headquarters envisioned when they placed the partnership at the heart of their reform plan. They never expected vast sums of government dollars to flow directly into CPPC. Rather, CPPC would become the spinal column that would lift up and secure transformative work of many different kinds, ultimately altering the practice of child welfare.

“Today there is less animosity, there are more well-informed people, our workers know more than they did,” says Kevin Concannon, the state’s Director of Human Services from 2003 to 2008. “This is a much better use of our resources. We’re strengthening the whole ecosystem.”

Changes in practice during the last few years have been anything but abstract, he adds. “We can help people when they have problems,” he says. “We don’t have to send them into the child welfare system. In the past it was always easier to send kids into DHS. But that’s not the case anymore…. If we can provide for more kids in their own families, that’s all to the good.”

The partnership initiative has formed coalitions that include people outside government, leveraging their support to help guide and press changes in policy and practice not only within DHS.
but also other government agencies and in community-based organizations.

“We’re riding a wave here,” says Carol Behrer. “We used to be workers who made decisions for young people. Now we’re making decisions with young people. We’ve always done a lot to families in the child welfare system. Now we’re doing things with them, alongside them. It’s taking hold.”

For nearly eight years, Sandy Lint has been the DHS staff person responsible for guiding the statewide roll-out of CPPC. Although her professional training is in social work, her style is of a soft-spoken, analytical community organizer and politically savvy consensus builder. From her base in a cubicle near the DHS director’s office, Lint travels the state measuring success, cajoling local administrators and coordinating technical assistance for all of the partnership sites.

From the start, she and her colleagues sought to adapt the partnership to take advantage of existing infrastructure for funding, governance and oversight. Their most important innovation was to use the well-funded “decategorization” program platform to launch many of the community partnerships, which have long been controlled by local boards. Although these boards were not as broadly representative as the community councils CPPC strives to develop, they nonetheless offered a formidable base to build upon.

Other networks have also been tapped to help build the partnership sites. Reaching out and creating shared-governance committees that included not only service providers, but parents, clergy and others has been difficult for many districts. One county overcame this by integrating its governance structure with already existing “circles of support,” groups of community people that were assisting single mothers leaving welfare. The move quickly brought a large group of citizens into the partnership fold. Youth development and domestic violence initiatives within the partnership have been able to mesh with existing projects in those fields as well, drawing them into the larger partnership fold and engaging DHS staff in their work.

In 2004, Lint organized a statewide CPPC executive committee with representatives from each DHS service area, eight community representatives nominated by the local partnerships, as well as parents, a young person from the foster care system and staff from Prevent Child Abuse Iowa. As a central governing body, the committee makes choices about resources, collaborations and peer support opportunities across the state.

During the roll-out, the CPPC and DHS also undertook several Quality Service Reviews in various districts to assess the emerging work on team meetings. More recently, Lint and the executive committee have sought to overcome weaknesses in some of the partnerships by drafting standards of practice for each of the four core CPPC strategies, which they use to define the level of accomplishment in each county.

From the beginning of the initiative, there has been wild variation in how the core strategies have been applied, district by district. In some places, administrators have failed to extend meaningful involvement beyond DHS and local provider agencies. In others, the notion of a “neighborhood network” has been construed as little more than an occasional
meeting held in the middle of the day, when only “professionals” can attend. The new standards list appropriate methods for pursuing each strategy and for measuring each locality’s level of complexity and commitment. Beginning in 2008, each partnership is required to submit reports that document their achievements against the established practice standards.

The executive committee has created several task teams that draw from partnerships across the state, which are responsible for different elements of the partnership and its practice. Meanwhile, Lint, the CPPC and Prevent Child Abuse Iowa organize day-long gatherings in different parts of the state so that participants can learn from one another, share their experiences and, as Lint says, steal methods from one another. “It’s a chance to look at what others have done and decide what you want to do,” she says. The group is now developing a second tier retreat called “Community Partnership 202,” geared to developing leadership skills and community-organizing expertise. In all of these regional retreats, participants, trainers, speakers and case studies are drawn from within the state, primarily from the partnership sites themselves.

Is the partnership approach sustainable over the long haul, even when political priorities and administrations change? Iowa’s new governor, Democrat Chet Culver, is a forceful advocate for children’s issues. Chief Justice Marsha Ternus, appointed in late 2006, has focused resources on the juvenile courts and speaks eloquently about the importance of child welfare services that support families. In early 2008, even as state revenues stagnated and a gap opened up in the budget, DHS was exempted from budget restrictions that the governor placed on most state agencies.

While statewide staffing for the partnerships is very thin—only Lint and a handful of staff at Prevent Child Abuse Iowa and other partners—the infrastructure to sustain the local partnerships and the changes in practice is formidable. The “decategorization” funding amounts to several million dollars statewide and helps pay for training, local staff and much more, thereby multiplying many times over the state funding specifically targeted for the partnerships.

Support within the legislature remains solid, according to Representatives Heaton and Foege. With the CPPC executive committee focusing more intently on outcomes and evaluation of the individual partnerships and the standards of practice, the top DHS administrators who are vocal supporters of the partnership philosophy will now gain a far more concrete understanding of the quality of the work taking place in the field, says Lint.

With the federal government returning soon to begin the next round of Child and Family Services Review, the state has kept careful track of its performance against federal outcome measures. There has been significant improvement, according to state data. Caseloads have declined steadily since 2005. There have been significant improvements in the rate of repeat maltreatment. And the rate of children leaving foster care only to return again within 12 months dropped from 25 percent in 2004 to just 11 percent at the end of 2006.
Among the biggest changes, says Con-
cannon’s chief deputy for child welfare
services, Mary Nelson, is that the relation-
ship between DHS and communities is
less adversarial. Many of the strongest
advocates for DHS policy and practice
reforms are outside the agency, in the
partnership organizations and community
groups, churches and local governments,
she says, which means the constituency for
reform is broad and formidable.

And within DHS, on the frontlines,
Nelson adds, the culture shift has been
intense and transformational. “We’ve done
a lot of work around bringing the supervi-
sors on board, listening to them so they
can own it, so they can say to themselves,
‘I believe in this,’ ” she says. “They are the
strongest messengers. The frontline lead-
ership really has to take the lead.”

In Des Moines, at least, DHS supervi-
sors have become enthusiastic coaches,
pleased with the changes they are seeing
among their workers. “The way we’re
approaching this now makes the most
sense,” says Nancy Skellenger, a 20-year
veteran who supervises child protective
Caseloads are lower. They are on top of
their cases. They are closing cases. They’ve
found it can make their lives easier.”

“Nothing we tried in the past really
made a huge change,” says fellow supervi-
sor Micki Vrban. “But this is a structure,
it’s been built in.”

“The department puts their guard down
and opens their doors,” she adds. “We’re
inviting people to the table and listening
to what they have to say. That is a huge
turnaround from what we did before.”
Neighborhood collaboratives fortify the local safety net for families and children.
With her sons skipping out on school, getting smashed up in fights and in trouble with the police, Luisa feared for their lives. She took a judge’s advice and made her way to the offices of the Columbia Heights/Shaw Family Support Collaborative, an organization that was trying to prevent gang violence. With its unusual hybrid roots in community organizing and family-centered social work, the Collaborative’s staff worked closely with families whose teens were at risk, helping them deal with poverty, earn money and stay in school, all the while trying to defuse tensions and end gang violence.

The organization helped police better understand the flow of information among young people in the neighborhood, and helped calm outbursts on the streets. At the same time, drawing from the social work core of their practice, the staff created support groups for the mothers. By gathering together Luisa’s relatives, friends and staff from other nonprofit organizations in the neighborhood, the Collaborative helped her deal with the court and probation services, eased her family’s move to another part of the city and guided her older children into jobs.

“She’s not super mom, but in terms of a stable home, she is there,” says Jacquelyn Horton, a supervisor of family services at the Collaborative. “That is success.”

More to the point, city officials credit the Collaborative’s gang-intervention strategy for helping nearly end gang violence among Latino youth in Columbia Heights. With funding from the District government, they have expanded their efforts to the African-American community in the area, where gang violence has erupted. Counselors are working with young people, schools, probation officers and youth organizations, and helping to thwart attacks when they learn of them and respond with assistance for families when violence strikes.

Counselor Cliff Rogers says every case he deals with involves exceptional people in exceptional situations. Violence and alcoholism, substance abuse and vandalism, lost wages and eviction notices, there is never the same combination twice. Yet these families all have remarkable strengths, he says, including parents and children who have reunified from foster care, kids who are finishing high school and going on to college, strong young mothers who are caring for their neighbors’ kids.

Rogers has helped five young shooting victims move to new neighborhoods and return to school, and they are all doing well, he says. He’s proud of the fact he and his team don’t tell kids or their parents what to do with their lives. Instead, they build relationships, show them...
options, involve other adults and organizations in their lives and support families in their plans for dealing with their most difficult situations.

“You don’t throw plans at people. You’re the expert on your own life, they’re the experts on theirs. I’m not going home to the projects where the lights are off, they are. I’m not sleeping four to a room, they are.”

Gang intervention represents only a small fraction of the Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative’s work. In March 2008, when a massive apartment house fire on Mount Pleasant Avenue left 200 people homeless in an instant, the organization sent a team of family workers and counselors there while firefighters were still on the scene. In the following days and weeks, they helped immigrant families with little English find temporary housing, obtain new identity papers, deal with medical issues and child care, avoid losing their jobs amid the sudden chaos in their lives, and much more.

These are just a few of the many varied and intertwined responsibilities that consume the days, evenings and sometimes nights of the Collaborative’s mostly youthful staff of about 40 men and women. The organization’s center of gravity is its innovative, solutions-focused family support services, which is practiced by social workers working in teams alongside paraprofessionals hired from the neighborhood.

“You don’t throw plans at people. You’re the expert on your own life, they’re the experts on theirs. I’m not going home to the projects where the lights are off, they are. I’m not sleeping four to a room, they are.”

These teams assist hundreds of parents and children every year, many of them caught up in the city’s child welfare system. Often they serve as intermediaries connecting the families with other nonprofit groups that are also members of the Collaborative—in fact, a very big part of this work is building strong relationships across organizations, constantly sharing information and resources for families. These other groups specialize in areas such as youth services, early education, adult literacy and tenants’ rights. Columbia Heights/Shaw is one of seven Community Collaboratives in the District of Columbia that, as a group, make up the greater part of the city’s system for preventive family support services. Known as the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives, each of the seven is an independent nonprofit organization funded primarily through contracts with city government.

They are not typical social service provider organizations, but rather seven variations on a theme of community building woven together in a supportive, strengths-based neighborhood safety net. Each has a governing board of community residents and nonprofit leaders who shape programs to reflect the needs and desires of their neighborhoods. Each has a pivotal staff of family workers who live in the housing developments, apartment blocks and row houses of the wards that they serve, and who work alongside professional social workers and others.

Most of the Collaboratives also have
an active group of partner organizations and institutions that run interrelated programs and, in some cases, operate as subcontractors providing core services funded through the Collaboratives’ government contracts.

The primary funding source for the Community Collaboratives is more than $14 million in contracts with the city’s Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), which oversees child protective services, foster care and family support services. In many of the city’s neighborhoods, the seven Collaboratives provide case management services for families at high risk of having their children placed in foster care following an investigation. They also work with other families, deemed low-risk, which CFSA refers for voluntary services, and with children and parents reunifying after foster care. Each year, hundreds of additional families seek out the Collaboratives’ services on their own, or are referred by friends, neighbors, child care agencies, schools, nurses and others.

In total, the seven Collaboratives work with several thousand very low-income families each year, including about 2,000 that take part in case management and family support services. In a city where about 12,000 families with children had incomes below the federal poverty line in 2006, and tens of thousands are living in near-poverty, the Collaboratives’ reach is far from all encompassing. Nonetheless they are a substantial presence, especially in the handful of city neighborhoods where hundreds of children enter foster care each year, and hundreds more return home to their parents.

“We can say very clearly that without these Collaboratives, many of these families would not have gotten services when they needed them and with the intensity they’ve gotten them.”

Richard Flintrop, policy analyst with the Collaborative Council, a central body that coordinates advocacy, government relations and technical assistance for the seven Collaboratives.

“We know how to support parents in the child welfare system,” adds BB Otero, a founder and board chair of the Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative and a member of the Collaborative Council.

“Children used to get into the system and the parents would disappear. Now, the large majority, when their kids go into the system, the parents stay involved,” thanks in part to the Collaboratives. And that means more families broken up by foster care eventually become whole again.

In September 2001, there were more than 3,500 children in Washington’s foster care system. Four years later there were just 2,505. The sharp decrease was not caused by a decline in the number of placements, but rather by a three-fold increase in the number of children leaving care each year—the vast majority of them returning to their families. Some of these families benefited from supports provided by the Collaboratives. So too did hundreds of families who otherwise may have seen their children taken away. So far, there is no independent study that details the
quantitative impact of the Collaboratives on the district’s child welfare system, but city officials describe them as an important part of the larger change.

Through the Collaboratives, the District of Columbia has established a highly individualized, family-centered and community-based safety net rooted in those city neighborhoods where the services are most needed. “We’re not at scale yet, not compared to where the dreamers thought we should be,” says Flintrop. “But we’re doing good by a whole lot of families. On the prevention side, there’s almost nothing else.”

How the Collaboratives have gotten this far is a story of opportunistic entrepreneurship in the face of a local government’s bureaucratic meltdown—followed by a long, strenuous effort to standardize the quality of social work practice, systematize training and technical assistance, and invigorate a vast array of government-run human service programs with principles of family-centered practice. In the process, the Collaboratives have become increasingly indispensable to the city’s political and bureaucratic leadership while remaining true to their community roots. Members of the Council of the District of Columbia—the District’s legislature, known locally as the D.C. Council—depend on the Collaboratives to help their constituents through crises large and small. The child welfare and homeless services systems depend on them to provide core services. In some neighborhoods, nonprofit groups and local institutions—schools, churches, health centers—depend on the Collaboratives for staff training and simply for tethering the community together.

Washington’s Community Collaborative movement dates back to the years following the 1989 LaShawn A. v. Barry lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union against the city’s then-beleaguered and mismanaged foster care and child protection system. The case eventually resulted in a court order assigning control of CFSA to a receiver, Jerome Miller, a youth services reformer from Massachusetts. In his former work, Miller had established successful community alternatives to juvenile detention. He quickly latched onto one sentence in the LaShawn decree, which said that the District of Columbia should move to a community-based model of care.

In 1996, Miller and the staff of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, the court-ordered monitor for LaShawn, encouraged neighborhood leaders in four wards of the city to begin mapping a plan for family support collaboratives that would take on the kind of family services almost entirely lacking in the city at the time. With planning grants, technical assistance and the promise of government child welfare funds, groups in the four communities began to develop asset maps, cobble together advisory committees and establish fiscal sponsorships with larger nonprofit organizations. Their goal was to create supportive community networks that would muster local resources, help
reduce rates of child abuse and neglect and provide support for families considered at risk of losing their kids to foster care.

James Gibson, a civil rights leader and former foundation official with close ties to federal and District government officials, arranged for a $5 million federal grant to the good-government organization he ran, D.C. Agenda, which in turn distributed the money as initial operating and development funds to the new Collaboratives. “It gave us the flexibility to get money flowing to targeted projects and keep the money out of the district’s bureaucracy,” says Gibson, whose organization was devoted to incubating and funding projects that promoted effective local government. “It was the right time for this. Government bureaucracy is never so cooperative as when it’s up against the wall.”

“The first year was spent educating the community, reaching out, meeting people,” recalls Louvenia Williams, Executive Director of the Edgewood/Brookland Family Support Collaborative. Over time they began to build their staff and integrate programs with other organizations.

By 1997, work began on four more Collaboratives. One soon dissolved, leaving the seven that remain today. In the years since, the Collaboratives have grown from sponsored projects of local nonprofits into substantial, independent multimillion-dollar organizations.

In addition to their work with the child welfare system, the Collaboratives manage eviction prevention programs and emergency re-housing for families—along with cash grants and supportive services to help stabilize families—under contract with the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, a public/private partnership agency that manages Washington’s homeless services system. Each Collaborative also coordinates a fatherhood program geared toward supporting men’s employment as well as their involvement in their children’s lives and schooling.

Each Collaborative has also branched out in its own direction. Edgewood/Brookland focuses its resources on families living in two huge, subsidized housing developments with more than 1,300 units in Northeast Washington. Its staff also works with nearby school administrators on truancy and parent participation, and with seniors in the community to address issues that matter to them. One goal is to build trusting relationships with whoever can assist vulnerable children and families. “If it’s not the community’s issue, they aren’t going to support it,” says Williams. “You have to make it their issue.”

Across the Anacostia River, the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative has a widely praised financial literacy program that helps parents and young people manage money and build assets while coordinating tax clinics to promote filings for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The Far Southeast Collaborative awards mini-grants to local residents and small groups to establish community-building and youth development projects.
Several of the Collaboratives have become involved in city-funded job training and workforce development initiatives. The Georgia Avenue/Rock Creek East Collaborative, for example, is working with men and women returning from prison, easing their transition into jobs.

Along the way, each Collaborative has spun off from its original fiscal-sponsor organization and become a free-standing, independent nonprofit. This was a controversial move for some. “I’m still not convinced it was the best move,” says BB Otero, who feared the change would weaken the motivation to stay deeply engaged in community organizing and network building, leaving the city with just one more handful of service provider agencies. The trade-off, she says, was the need for greater professionalism, independence and lasting credibility. “It has helped the work collectively,” she adds. “But they are learning that the biggest challenge is to maintain the community role even as you go through change.”

There was good reason to be concerned about long-term stability. After all, the Collaboratives had grown from a novel, even radical idea about the use of government social service funds, and each successive mayor has not necessarily been on board with the idea, at least not at first. “When new mayors come in, if they didn’t invent it, it’s not theirs, they don’t own it,” says one longtime, high-level D.C. government insider who has been close to the Collaborative movement. “Mayors want to control things as opposed to having communities run them.”

After Mayor Anthony Williams took office in 1998, his administration contemplated shifting city funds away from the Collaboratives and into a new model of community services. Hundreds of residents from across the city turned up at a D.C. Council hearing and catalyzed renewed political support for the Collaboratives. The administration abandoned its plan. Even so, other city officials have over the years spoken openly of their doubts about the Collaboratives, speculating there may be more efficient uses for limited preventive services dollars. For years, there has been a very obvious need to secure a more solid accounting of the effectiveness of preventive services, while also building the Collaboratives’ political strength.

One vehicle for this work has been the central Collaborative Council, housed originally within D.C. Agenda. This governing council includes three members from each of the seven Community Collaboratives’ own boards of directors. It was spun off as an independent nonprofit in 2001, and is funded primarily with a share of the Collaboratives’ CFSA funding as well as additional government and foundation support. It had an annual budget of $2.8 million in 2006.

Over time, the Collaborative Council has become the principal advocate for the interests of the seven organizations, advancing their political and fiscal priorities and those of their community partners. The Collaborative Council coordinates contract negotiations with government
officials and, with the help of the D.C. Council, has secured several multi-million dollar funding increases for the Collaboratives in recent years. Its staff prepares, coordinates and frequently delivers testimony at D.C. Council hearings, raises grant funding for the seven groups and has guided the systematization of standards of organizational management, including personnel policies to case practice, for all of the Collaboratives.

There is intense awareness among many of the Collaboratives’ board members and leadership that the groups must document and publicize evidence of the effectiveness of their good work with families—and if possible prove how their services ease the pressure on the city’s human service systems. In an age where government leaders and grant-makers increasingly value evidence-based practice, the mayor and the D.C. Council—including two of its members who were among the original founders of the first Collaboratives—are pressing for documented performance against measurable goals.

“As they become more mature, it’s time to hold them accountable for outcomes,” says Sharlynn Bobo, CFSA Director in the administration of Mayor Adrian Fenty. “This mayor is driven by data. We have to be able to show that.”

The Collaborative Council has begun to implement a new data tracking system at each of the Collaboratives, although some of the groups have been slower to adopt the system and maintain quality data. The Council also commissioned an outcome study by independent researchers.

“It’s huge, and scary. But we had to be accountable when we took responsibility for eliminating Latino gang violence in Columbia Heights, and we did that.”

The first part of the study, published in early 2008, looks retrospectively at a random selection of the Collaboratives’ case files from 2006 to determine whether the services provided matched families’ needs and whether they documented positive outcomes.

The results were strong in some areas: for example, according to case files, most families that sought help with housing problems got appropriate services and 60 percent of those cases were closed with the family’s housing situation stabilized. About half of the families receiving help with child care and education issues, or adult substance abuse, also were noted as “stabilized” in the case files.

Prevention and family support are notoriously difficult to measure, as it is often impossible to know what may have happened to a family—a move to shelter, or a child lost to foster care—if there had been no intervention. One answer has been to define specific desired results for each program and project, while always staying faithful to the value base of the Collaborative, says Marian Urquilla, who was Executive Director of the Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative from its founding until early 2008.

“Being able to do this in a rigorous way that drills down to the neighborhood nonprofits is awesome,” she says. “It’s huge, and scary. But we had to be accountable when we took responsibility for eliminating Latino gang violence [in Columbia Heights], and we did that.”

While a program’s larger goals may be broad—reducing or eliminating gang
violence, for example—its more modest case-by-case outcomes nonetheless can be documented and categorized: a teen who is chronically truant or repeatedly suspended returns to school for several months; a parent addicted to cocaine is in treatment and sober for an extended period; a family served eviction papers is stabilized in an apartment they can afford; an unemployed parent is in job training and searching for a job. “You have to reengineer the whole organization to a results-based accountability outlook,” says Urquilla. “It’s hard, and it’s powerful.”

In fact, there are great variations across the Collaboratives in the quality of the strengths-based, family-centered core of their social work practice, according to city officials and nonprofit leaders who work with the organizations.

“They are not all at the same level of accomplishing our expectations,” agrees Sue Marshall, Executive Director of the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, which has tailored technical assistance and investments in capacity building for the Collaboratives that need it most.

Nonetheless, Marshall adds, the Collaboratives have for years been invaluable resources, keeping many families out of the district’s shelter system and in stable housing. “They are all in and of the communities,” she says. “They know the opportunities, they know the landlords and the landlords know them. They know the people who need the services. And they know what can be brought together for them.”

Notably, even as members of the D.C. Council challenge the Collaboratives to prove their worth with better data, they also depend heavily on the Collaboratives to provide basic constituent services to residents of their wards. “There’s a structural role the council members recognize,” says Urquilla. “They can’t run constituent services that are super-layered and complex, so partnering with the Collaboratives is very helpful to them.”

The Collaboratives have become crucial to the political and human services culture of the district—at least so long as their executives remain keenly aware of elected leaders’ interests. “They have to make sure the referrals from the D.C. Council are handled well,” says Eugene Kinlow, a former federal official and member of the Congressionally appointed financial control board that oversaw the District’s budget and operations during much of the 1990s. He was also a co-founder of the Far Southeast Collaborative. “The council members have to get elected,” he adds. “They have constituents to care for.”

Even more important is the relationship with CFSA and the mayoral administration. “We have a symbiotic relationship with the child welfare agency,” says Urquilla. “We provide a function they can’t provide internally and it makes a big difference. We’re able to move quickly, to solve problems quickly. It takes a lot of pressure off the system.”
“Bureaucracies are regularized places,” she adds. “They really can’t deal with the exceptional cases. For families with multi-systemic issues, we can unpack the issues and address the complexities. Being able to broker a solution [for a family] is the best value we can bring to the agencies.”

Bobo, the former CFSA Director, agrees. “The Collaboratives can be flexible. They can do things government can’t do,” she says. “The child welfare agency is the agency that takes your kids, or at least we are perceived that way. They are seen as the source of support and help. They are seen as neighbors, and there’s great value in that.

“Government funds and operations are so siloed, it’s hard to make systems work together and get agencies to work together,” Bobo adds. “The Collaboratives can approach the work from the perspectives of the families, from them up, rather than from the agency down. That’s very, very essential.”

During the summer and fall of 2008, CFSA is scheduled to start out-stationing units of child protective caseworkers in offices of each Collaborative. They will work in teams with the Collaboratives’ family support staff on the cases of neighborhood residents whose children have not been removed or have returned home from foster care. The shift has been discussed for nearly a decade, but after many unfulfilled promises, $1.7 million in city funding for the move finally came through in 2007.

“It’s absolutely a radical change for CFSA,” says Bobo. “We’re not just colocating. It’s a partnership in practice.” The move sparked a group effort, involving frontline workers and supervisors from the Collaboratives and CFSA, on a shared case-practice manual that, for the first time, could fully institutionalize a strengths-based, solutions-oriented approach to family support within the District’s child protective units.

As in Iowa and California, the Collaboratives have long used versions of the family team meeting model to strengthen their casework and build networks of support around vulnerable families. CFSA also recently began to implement a spare version of this practice. With city caseworkers and Collaborative family workers teamed together, there is some expectation on both sides that the team meeting practice will deepen and improve, involving more extensive community outreach and more careful coordination with families and friends.

Thus the Collaboratives are beginning to formally extend their methods directly into government-run services, shifting practice in a way that could impact thousands of families.

In reflecting on the impending change, Penny Griffith, the new Executive Director of the Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative, harkens back to the philosophical seed from which the Collaboratives originally grew: the idea that local people should work alongside professionals.
to establish a safety net for their own neighborhoods, infusing community-minded family advocacy with local knowledge and local relationships.

This concept has proven to be both a strength and a challenge. The Collaboratives are paying a living wage, for example, to women who once provided informal child care or fed hungry kids in their neighborhoods. Griffith, who joined the staff in 1997, found the paraprofessionals from the neighborhood to be extraordinary resources. “I learned a lot from them,” she says. “They taught me about community engagement. Watching how they worked with a family, it was very friendly. They lived in the same neighborhood, they knew the same grocers, the blocks and the families. It was all about informal relationships.”

But at the same time, these community residents often had modest educational backgrounds and required extensive training and coaching. They were also at the center of a culture clash between the Collaboratives and some staffers in the city’s child welfare agency. “The workers at CFSA, they hated us when we started,” Griffith recalls. “To this day, there are still social workers there who view us as mom and pop with no skills.”

Of course, the culture clash worked both ways. Many in the Collaboratives felt CFSA’s own social workers were too disconnected from families and neighborhoods. “I never felt they really engaged with families on a level that you needed to,” says Jackie Henry, Executive Director of the Collaborative Council. “It was always, just do what you need to do to be compliant with the court orders. Do so many visits, so many case plans, do just enough to get out of receivership.”

Today, the paraprofessionals at the Collaboratives take part in a Family Development Credential program designed by Cornell University’s College of Human Ecology, which teaches skills for supporting and coaching families toward their goals. Before they earn the credential, they take 90 hours of classes as well as a final exam, and produce a portfolio that describes their work with families, reflecting their newly honed skills. Many of them have moved up at their organizations to be project directors and supervisory staff, proving the validity of their original vision.

Overall, members of the Collaboratives have created a formidable infrastructure for training, professional development and peer support. Classes in team conferencing, solutions-based casework and much more are routine and members of the Collaboratives provide a layered set of trainings not only to every staff member of the seven Collaboratives, but also to teams of government employees who work directly with families and young people—CFSA caseworkers, school counselors, even probation officers—and for employees of dozens of community-based partner organizations. The Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative is training all of the CFSA and Collaborative staffers that will take part in the co-location of child protective units.

“Whenever we’ve taken to something new, we’ve invested in training for trainers
and then brought it in-house,” says Urquilla. “We’re now in our third generation of in-house people doing solution-based practice training.”

By rooting their practice and methods squarely in key government human services funding streams, the Collaboratives have thus far assured their survival and sustainability. While most preventive services are almost always a lower priority for funding than services addressing full-blown crises, the Collaboratives have made sure their holistic, multi-systemic approach is applicable in many circumstances. Crisis intervention, post-foster-care family services for CFSA, workforce development, constituent services for elected officials—they have all been part of their role.

Documenting their impact remains a stark challenge, although Louvenia Williams of the Edgewood/Brookland Collaborative points out the argument about evidence may not be as difficult as it appears: “Data is a pressing issue. But the most important ‘data’ is the reality that prior to the Collaboratives, there was no resource to support children and families. They had to go into the foster care system. We have options now.”

Another significant hurdle is to more fully instill the ethos of the shared, accessible community safety net within the District government. “We have constituencies in the schools, with law enforcement, with CFSA,” says Urquilla.

“Is this sustainable? It’s not only sustainable; it’s the practice of the future. It’s more cost efficient, more preventive as opposed to intervening after the crisis and trying to fix the problem. It’s holistic, it’s looking forward. And it has a tinge of advocacy to it.”

But when it comes to the top of the hierarchy, there are no guarantees. “One administration could wipe this away,” she says.

More predictable, though would be the damage wrought by a severe government fiscal crisis. There would be far more intense pressure to prove the value of their work, as well as new pressures on staffing levels and the likelihood of reduced influence on the practice standards of family engagement in city human services agencies.

For now, though, there’s no reason to dread what’s around the next corner. “Is this sustainable?” asks Sue Marshall of the Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness. “It’s not only sustainable; it’s the practice of the future. It’s more cost efficient, more preventive as opposed to intervening after the crisis and trying to fix the problem. It’s holistic, it’s looking forward. And it has a tinge of advocacy to it.”

For 21-year-old Dennis P, the collaborative movement has been a path back to a more hopeful life. He had been away at college for just one semester when his brother was murdered two years ago. Soon after that, his mother passed away as well. “Everything happened so sudden,” he says. “I was lost, running around in a soup bowl.” On his own at 19, literally all by himself, he was barely holding on in the Shaw neighborhood where he had lived most of his life.

“I wasn’t open to people,” he says. “It took me about a year to get that cloud out
of my head.” After his 21st birthday, a friend’s mother found him and they began to talk. She was careful, encouraging him to open up. When she brought him to the Columbia Heights/Shaw Collaborative on 12th Street, youth counselor Cliff Rogers helped him reconnect some of his old family ties: a former basketball coach, some of his mother’s co-workers and some friends. They got together with him and made plans to keep him in their lives. One began to take him to dinner; another called him every week; another played ball with him.

He said he wanted a job. His coach connected him with the local councilman, who helped him land a job cleaning graffiti with the District’s Department of Public Works. Poised, tall, with black hair pulled back tight, he’s looking forward to using his paycheck to move out of the one-bedroom apartment he shares with five other young men.

There is no funding in any local organization’s budget to help young people like Dennis, says Penny Griffith. But the Collaboratives can maneuver across their grants and contracts and put family support staff to work where they are needed most. “If we don’t do something for these kids, they will be on the street,” she says.

And that means something very concrete to Dennis. “I was never much of a person to ask for help,” he says. “It doesn’t feel right sometimes. But these people here, they set a positive trend.”
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