The Application of Collaboration Models to Family Group Conferencing

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the design and structure of multi-party

collaborations and consider their application to a practice model of child welfare reform,

called family group conferencing (FGC). A collaborative is an organization or group that

brings together multiple stakeholders from the public sector, business, nonprofits and the

community into a common forum designed to solve problems. These groups usually form

when previous strategies have failed to resolve an issue, or the problems have proven to

be too complex for a single agency or group to solve alone. They use consensus based,

decision-making strategies to govern (Koliba, Meek & Zia 2011; Ansell & Gash, 2008;

Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004; Forrer, Key, Newcomer

&Boyer, 2010; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009, Moore & Hartlet, 2010; Brickerhoff &

Brickerhoff, 2011). These types of collaboratives may be formal partnerships made up of

different stakeholders who agree to work together, share resources and information, and

design an agreed upon governing structure that will share authority and attempt to find

creative solutions to "wicked" problems. These groups work best when there is a high

level of mutual respect, transparency and a commitment to common goals and shared

decision-making (Koliba, Meek & Zia, 2011; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009). These groups

are different from the usual policy or problem solving tools frequently used in the public

sector such as public-private partnerships, outsourcing or contracting-out to the private

sector for a variety of services (Salomon, 2002). Several researchers contend that these

more collaborative structures increase the individual stakeholders' satisfaction with both

the process and the eventual outcomes. And, as with most facilitated agreements, these inclusive processes improve the acceptability of the final decisions being made and thus their sustainability (Thoennes, 2009).

Family group conferencing (FGC) is a model of social work practice designed to empower and engage family members who are involved in the child welfare system. It invites family members into the decision making processes surrounding the care and protection of their child/ren who has been identified by the state as at-risk of abuse or neglect (Adams & Chandler, 2002; Pennell, 2004; Weigensberg, Barth & Guo, 2009; Crampton & Pennell, 2009; Berzin, Cosner, Cohen, Thomas & Dawson, 2009; Crea, 2010). The shared philosophy behind family conferencing is that "families function in a broad-based cultural system that when activated and informed, can better support and assist families than traditional agency-driven practices that focus only on the parents and children" (Sheets, Wittenstrome, Fong, James, Tecci, Baumann & Rodrigues, 2009, p.1188). The collaborative process, with the aid of a neutral facilitator positions the family, as a group to take an active role in the decision-making processes while the state agency agrees to support the family group's plans as long as they adequately address the agency's safety concerns (Sheets, et al., op cit). The approach brings together into the decision-making process the alleged perpetrator(s), invited extended family members and supporters, child protective agency workers, representatives from the court, other state or county agency representatives and private sector professionals.

Common to collaboratives and conferences is the effort to align the goals of the members; attempt to build trust and mutual respect; be transparent; share and pool resources and understand that the group progress is based on its interdependence. Goldsmith and Kettl (2009) reviewed several case studies and examples of successful collaboratives. Most were in the environmental and human services arenas. A major

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difference is that family conferencing, while structured like a collaborative has many of their attributes, but is different in that it includes not just stakeholders or *representatives* of constituents but rather, it must include members of the family who are the "case"… the consumers… the actual *recipients* of the services who are included into the decision-making processes of the group. This empowers family members in much deeper and more profound ways than a traditional case conference in which the family (usually only the parents) are often out-numbered by professionals and may feel somewhat intimidated by the child protective services (CPS) processes (Pennell, 2004; 2006; Adams & Chandler, 2002). Thus, while many collaborations include *representative* members from the groups and organizations that may be affected by a particular policy or program change; and there are many examples of the public sector inviting in representatives from an aggrieved group to hear their concerns and listen to their suggestions (see for example, Crosby & Bryson, 2005), a unique type of group is formed when a family conference is convened. It is a uniquely formed collaboration made up of the affected family members, the CPS staff, social worker and other professionals, community leaders and sometimes court personnel who together work to design a safety plan that is specific for one child and one family in the child protective service system.

Collaborative Approaches

Many authors (Forrer, Kee, Newcomer & Boyer 2010; Moore & Hartlet, 2010; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Margergerum, 2008, O'Leary, Gerard & Bingham, 2006; Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006) describe with case examples how organizations can be structured to work across traditional agency boundaries but have a common set of goals, a shared sense of reciprocity and the members agree to participate in a form of

governance that includes the active involvement of citizens. Perrault, McClelland, Austin, & Sieppert, (2011:283) define such collaborations as durable relationships that "bring previously separate organizations into a new structure with commitment to a commonly defined mission, structure or planning effort." They further note that each organizational partner or member will be contributing their own individual resources into a pooled or braided system and that the outcomes are expected to be bigger (and better) than the concomitant parts.

Barbara Gray (1989) described the basic elements of collaborative work being as distinct and apart from organizational cooperation or inter-agency coordination. She cites four essential elements of collaboration:

- interdependence among the stakeholders;

- the ability to address differences constructively;

- a joint ownership of decisions; and

- a collective responsibility for the future of the partnership.

Thus, collaboration thus has a higher degree of joint and joined responsibility and its members' interdependency are tightly related to its ultimate success. Ansell & Gash (2008, 544) define collaboratives as:

> "A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets."

Ansell & Gash (2008, 544-545) suggest that for the purposes of theory building, collaboratives are initiated by public agencies or institutions, include non state stakeholders as participants, engage members in the decision making and not merely

people being consulted by a public agency, are forums that are formal decisions are made by a consensus among all the members. The inclusion of non-state stakeholders (i.e. parents) being included directly into the decision-making processes, not as clients, but as participants, is a major modification from traditional social work case management and a primary tenant of family conferencing.

O'Leary and Bingham (2009) summarize the empirical research on collaboratives and suggest that successful groups need to have a consistent motivation and an organizational structure that supports the multiple members' needs and their ultimate goals. Groups that have come together due to a shared concern and have developed trust among the members and are willing to share resources, such as time, information and money, are the most likely to achieve their desired outcomes. Such groups that can come to agreements on the type and level of resources and support that will be committed to the group's endeavors is also important for progress (McQuaid, 2010). Perraul et al. (2011) add that informal relationships and communication systems that insure that the members feel fully informed, and strategies that work on developing mutual trust and respect increasing the chances of a collaborative's success. Leadership is also important, as is the ability of members to develop skills such as cooperation, communication, interpersonal skills, negotiation, creativity and a commitment to the process (Eggers, 2009; Perrault, et, al, 2011).

Such collaborations have an intuitive appeal because they are made up of multiple parties that can bring different strengths and resources to the table. However, this arrangement of multiple players may also be a source of conflict and disputes and a collective advantage may turn to collective inertia (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Vangen &

Huxham, 2010). If the interests (or needs) of some members of the group are not met, or the incentives to participate are not strong enough, members will likely choose to leave and/or undermine its outcomes. Members who join a collaborative formed to focus on a common mission and a specific set of expectations, may at times have (or develop) different and conflicting values, beliefs and ideologies. Different members may have come from different organizational cultures and may be used to different styles and methods of organizational operation. Some members may be used to different forms of governance, hierarchy and control, and may feel uncomfortable with the speed and pace at which things happen in the group or even how the decisions are being made. Members may rank their priorities differently and there may not only be inter-organizational challenges, but interpersonal disputes as well (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

The Challenges in the Public Child Welfare System

Public agencies, like CPS, which are responsible for the protection of children are charged with managing such complex issues they have often erected boundaries or agency's silos that prevent them from sharing information or developing the skills necessary for problem solving (Munro, 2005). Boundary-spanning activities are often required and CPS agencies need to learn and devise new strategies to bring their activities in sync with the multi-organizational, multi-sector, operating realities of complex problems (Forrer, Kee, Newcomer & Boyer, 2010). CPS agencies often fear that if they collaborate with others, these resulting new structures may be so porous and fluid, that it is unclear or difficult to determine where the specific lines of authority and accountability are (Ross, 2008). Traditional agency boundaries have been considered central to effective administrative processes, "as their lines and structures define what organizations are

responsible for and what powers and functions lie elsewhere (Kettl, 2006, p.10).

The public child welfare system is an exquisitely complex, public-private service delivery system with a history of challenges and tragedy (Chandler &Giovannuci, 2004). Some contend that the child welfare system isn't even an organized "system" of care (Berrick, 2009). Protecting children from abuse and neglect is usually thought to be the major public responsibility of a CPS agency, however, in fact, they do not have the authority or capacity to solve these problems without the extensive support and cooperation from other governmental and private sector agencies (Ross, 2009). CPS is really a network or a collaborative. CPS agencies are mandated to balance the competing goals of preventing child abuse and neglect, find stable homes for children who have been abused or neglected, reduce the number of foster care placements and the length of time spent in foster care, strengthen families who are often struggling with poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and then help children transition out from foster care to independence at the age of 18.

The work of child protection and support requires balancing several competing interests. While the paramount task is to protect children, workers must also respect the rights and needs of the parents. CPS work includes supporting parents with the hope their child may be returned to them, while they also are looking for a permanent, alternative home, in case the parents fail. CPS work involves managing the risk of keeping a child in a home which may be potentially a dangerous setting and weighing that risk against the trauma of taking a child out of his or her biological or resource family's home. Predicting when (or how much) harm might possibly occur is an imperfect science.

Another complexity in the field of child protection is that there are many people from different organizations, agencies and sectors involved in making the initial determination that a child has indeed been abused or neglected as well what subsequently should be done. For example, a physician or teacher may see bruises on a child and believe that a family member abused the child. As a mandated reporter, he or she must report those suspicions to a state (CPS) agency. Once there, the report will be reviewed by an investigator who may decide to follow-up… or not. In a non-emergency situation a risk assessment will be made, sometimes taking several weeks to determine if there is evidence of a serious risk of harm, and then a court will take jurisdiction and make its determination that a child should be removed from a home and/or placed in temporary foster custody. All the while, more information about this child and the family is being collected, either substantiating the problem or documenting risk factors, (thus justifying the CPS action) or not. Surrounding these CPS decisions are multiple professionals providing assessments, usually with insufficient information, that offer conflicting evidence about the risks to the child. This network includes CPS workers (some professionals, some not); law enforcement personnel (some trained in child abuse detection and some not); teachers and physicians (some in emergency rooms, some in pediatrician's offices, some trained to detect child abuse and some not); social workers and psychologists; court personnel and family court judges. The CPS "system" thus includes public sector personnel, professionals, the police, nonprofit organizations, the judiciary, school systems, medical personnel and other community groups that may become involved because they know the child or the family. This is an extremely complex cross-sector collaboration.

Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006, 44) define cross-sector collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve an outcome jointly that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately. Chile protection is clearly a collaborative decision making process, but left out of this array of decision-makers are the family members. A rapidly growing social work practice called family group conferencing (FGC) is moving traditional child welfare practice into a new form of collaborative practice that not only crosses professional and agency boundaries, but adds new members into the group - *parents and family members.*

Family Group Conferencing (FGC)

FGC brings together all parties who have an interest in or are involved with a child suspected of being abused or neglected including parents, their extended family members as well as friends and supporters from the community. This model was first developed in New Zealand in 1989 in response to a growing number of Maori children who were being removed from their homes and the disproportionate number of minority children living in non-kin foster care (Connoly, 2006). Conferencing promotes sharing the child protective agency's decision-making responsibilities with the family and community stakeholders involved with the family. FGC models vary somewhat across the United States but they usually have the following common tenets: (1) a collaboration among families, the state child protective agency, the community and service delivery experts; (2) a focus on the family's cultural and ethnic preferences and practices; (3) empowering strategies which include listening to both the immediate and extended family members, as well as the child's voice in the development of a safety plan; (4) and

mobilization of the family and community support designed specifically for each family's needs (Adams & Chandler, 2002; Berzin et al. 2009).

Family group conferencing (FGC) builds on other team based decision-making approaches but fully engages family members in the decision-making around the placement and safety plans of a child (Crea, 2010; Pennell, Burford, Connolly & Morris, 2011). Family engagement, recasts clients in the child welfare system from "perpetrators" to full participants in the decisions that affect their families, their children, their services and their communities (Pennell, et al. 2011). This approach moves parents from being defined as members of dysfunctional families to partners with the professionals making decisions about their children. Rauktis, Huefner &Cahalene (2011) in exploring perceptions of family members engaged in a variety of family group decision-making processes found that this is not a simple change in child welfare practice, but rather a tremendous paradigm shift for both the families and the professionals involved. This approach shifts from "blaming" the family to incorporating them into the decisions that make them responsible and truly shares power. The professionals in a conference must learn to yield control to the group members and they may need to develop new forms of communication and new types of skills in joint problem-solving (Adams & Chandler, 2002; Chandler & Giovannucci, 2004; Burford, 2005, Crompton &Pennell 2009).

Outcome research on family group conferences with random trials is rare, (see Berzin et al. 2009; Rauktis, McCarthy, Krackhardt & Cahalane (2010), but Crampton and Jackson (2007) found that children placed after a family group conference were less likely to have subsequent involvement with CPS; were moved from place to place less

often; were less likely to be placed in an institutional setting and were more likely to remain placed with their extended family members in a legal guardianship. Other studies have found that the families who participate in FGC are extremely satisfied with the process and reported that they appreciated that they were given helpful and sufficient information about the CPS processes (Pennell, 2006).

Applying Collaborative Factors to Family Group Conferences

If FGCs are conceptualized as a type of collaboration, there are many factors identified by Grey (1989) that are common and overlap in terms of structure, process and outcomes. For example, conferences are designed to address differences constructively with an emphasis on joint ownership of the concerns and ultimate decisions and there is a collective responsibility for the future of the child. There is a power differential among the CPS agency and the court, the professions and the families, the family member do have power, not only through their attorneys but also because the FGC process shines a light on the CPs agencies service delivery plans and that brings accountable due to required time lines and court oversight.

Ansell & Gash (2008) discussion of collaborative theory building when applied to FGC also is a good fit. For example, CPS is responsible for organizing a family conference which includes non-state stakeholders as "invited" participants. The conference structure engages family members into a decision making process about their child and formal decisions are made after a deliberation or facilitation that results in a plan agreed to by all the members.

O'Leary and Bingham's (2009) empirical work on collaboratives find that success is most likely when the group is structured to meet the multiple needs of the members.

FGC also works when the family members feel they are involved in the decision-making processes and they have a strong motivation to come up wit an agreement and acceptable safety plan for their child. The other members also have a strong motivation to meet the federal child protection requirements as well as the court's mandates. FGC is based on the strengths perspective that within families there are supports systems. Groups that share resources (both direct and indirect); develop strong interpersonal relationships and improve communication by sharing information are the most successful in obtaining their desired outcomes. FGC use a neutral facilitator to insure that information is shared and that communication is clear. The job of a FGC facilitator is to insure that the family members feel respected and included in the group's decision-making processes.

Table 1 was developed by the author to compare the commonalities between collaborative organizations as currently described in the literature and family group conferencing.

(Put Table 1 about here)

As the table displays, collaboratives are usually made up of cross sector members who represent an array of interests and together work to solve problems on behalf of an agency or the community's constituents. Family group conferences however are formed uniquely around the needs of an individual child and his or her family and its membership is designed for that family only. And family group conferences are much more than a social work case conference. While a case conference may bring in a network of problem-solvers, they do not bring in clients or family members as *equal* participating members. A case conference is designed to bring in professional experts to

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assess the family and advise the CPS about a family's risk factors. Conferences are more egalitarian and family-driven so that the family member's voice is more fully considered. This empowerment is a major key to the design (and success) of FGC.

The organizational structure of collaboratives is usually established by a contract or agreement naming the organizational members; a FGC is voluntary group and made up of invited "guests" of the family as well as CPS staff and others. Collaboratives may be led by an agency-based facilitator, or a neutral person agreed upon by the members, whereas in FGC there *must* be an independent facilitator not working for any one of the agencies involved. In collectives, group members determine their preferred type of governance structure and attempt to come up with a formal agreement. In FGC, the family is the crucial player and if they don't want to attend or participate, there can be no conference. Collectives may go on for years and usually there are monthly meetings; FGC begin with one or two sessions often stretching out from 3-5 hours and then there is a follow-up conference, several months later. The goal in collectives is often to have long-term agreements with actors maintaining good relationships. In FGC, the goal is to complete the work as soon as possible, and close the case, with a hope of not having long-term or repeat engagements with the family.

The skills of facilitation, negotiation and creativity are necessary for both conferences and collectives. And without consensus, there is no agreement. Balancing power issues that emerge in both settings and proving significant attention to this issue by the facilitators is essential to keep the process inclusive and respectful. The value of empowering the members and respecting the group process are common to both.

<u>Implications</u>

Past history:

The literature is quite clear that the conditions around which collaboration begin can strongly influence the outcome of the effort (Ansell & Gash, 2007). If stakeholders have bitter disagreements and a history of emotionally charged disputes, it is more difficult to work collaboratively than if there is a shared vision for what the group would like to achieve and a history of trust and mutual respect (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). In child welfare settings, particularly when parents have been involved in the CPS system before, they may see the CPS agency as an "enemy." In the early phases of a parent's involvement in a CPS case, the overarching goal of child protection must be the theme through which common goals will be crafted. If this new group is designed before the state has taken involuntary and coercive action against the family, the chances of its success are heightened.

Often a family conference will begin by asking everyone in the circle to think about their hopes, wishes and dreams for this child… ten years into the future. This often gets family participants to turn their anger and distrust into a more uplifting discussion in which family members can see commonalities with other members in the group. Many facilitators use this technique in the beginning stages of building a collaborative in order to develop positive relationships and attempt to move beyond past grievances.

Power imbalances

Susskind and Cruikshank (1987) raise the problem of power imbalances among stakeholders in collaboratives suggesting that this needs to be confronted early or the process can be prone to manipulation by the stronger members. Those with a less

privileged status, (which may be measured in terms of less information, capacity, skill, expertise, time or resources) need to be insured that there will be honest opportunities to participate in the group fairly and that there are known strategies for empowering the weaker stakeholders. This may be done when a neutral facilitator provides a clear explanation of the governance structures, and designs strategies for inclusion and/or provides reassurance that final decisions will be implemented only when a consensus is forged. In the family group conference setting, a neutral facilitator invites the members to share in a round-robin style of communication to insure that all members of the conference are heard and listened to.

Commitment to the Process

Margerum (2001, 2008) contends that the most important factor in facilitating collaborations is the commitment of the members. If a member's commitment was mandated or if a member is only there to insure that certain positions are heard and interests are not neglected, rather than to being actively participating in a problem solving effort, a positive outcome is unlikely. Before members commit to a collaborative process, they must be assured that the process will be fair and the outcome has legitimacy and integrity. Governance shifts from command and control to more horizontal decision-making processes and the ownership also must shift from the state to the stakeholders collectively (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Vangen & Huxham, 2010; Moore, 2009).

Interdependency

Collaboratives are organizational structures of interdependence involving many different organizations in an arrangement such that no one unit or part is subordinate to another. The structural stability is in fact built upon the interdependency of the multiple

players. Problem-solving is often contingent upon on members seeing the benefits of working together and also understanding how each member can assist and be assisted by the others. In the child welfare field, while the CPS agency may indeed seem to be quite powerful, in fact, it is dependent upon many other agents for legitimacy, resources and ultimately even its success. Family members in a conference may choose to go to a legislative hearing, or the Governor's office and complain about the manner in which they have been treated or they can "gum up" the courts by requesting delays, additional motions, and cause procedural slow downs (Chandler & Pratt, 2011). The child welfare system works best when it functions as a system and most of the elements are aligned for a "collaborative advantage" (Vangen & Huxham, 2010).

Transparency

Transparency is an important factor in trust building within any collaboration. Members want to know about other member's commitment of resources and style of problem-solving. Involving clients as informed participants is at the heart of family group conference and this implies that family members, as well as other members of the group, will have the information they need so they know what is going on with their child's case. Emphasizing transparency in ensuring that accurate information is provided is a value of conferencing that is congruent with the aim of including families as informed participants. Conferences widen the circle of responsibility for finding and implementing solutions to the child protection issue at hand—beyond parents and professionals to the child's extended family members. Taking and sharing responsibility in this way requires that all those in the wider circle have the information they need to make informed decisions. Providing accurate information informs the decision-making process. It also

shines a light on what the CPS agency did, didn't do or should have done in a more public setting. Families learn about services that could have (or should have) been provided or opportunities they may not have known about. The CPS workers also learn more about the troubles within the family structure as well as its strengths which they can draw upon. The need for transparency and honesty in working with clients is consonant with the values of empowerment and self-determination in social work and can be extended to aspects of successful collaboration.

Confidentiality and information-sharing barriers

Conferencing places all members in the roles of gatherers and sharers of information. Family members learn, sometimes for the first time, what information the agency has and what rationale the agency is using to place their child in a resource family, as well as what services are now available to them and their child. In conferences, family members become members of the treatment team as well as policy advisors. This designation permits them to be included in the decision-making processes and circumvents agency rules of confidentiality which usually would exclude them (Adams & Chandler, 2002). Frequently, CPS rules prohibit extended family members, and at times, even the biological mother or father to be informed about certain aspects of their CPS case. Before the new Family Finding efforts in an effort to protect the privacy rights of the child, CPS did not routinely inform or consult with a child's relatives when a child is being moved into a resource family to moved to another home. Sharing information across all members of a collective is essential for trust building.

Values and Accountability

In a conference, professionals provide information but they do not (in principle) advocate for a particular course of action. A safety plan is not an ultimatum—"Do this or lose your child"—but rather a course of action for which the agency, as well as family are responsible to implement. A new challenge however is the federal child welfare statutes that mandate an 18-month timeline for CPS agencies to either make a permanent, alternative placement decision or return a child to his or her parents. Time may run out on families, not because of any action or omission on their part, but because needed and promised services were not provided. The professionals in a conference will need to answer questions about the timeliness of their actions and their rationale to be discussed in front of all those most involved in the situation. This is an instant form of accountability.

Conferences also result in a redefinition of state/agency-family (agency-consumer) relationships. It provides an empowering approach to decision-making even though it still occurs in the coercive context of the state's mandate to protect children. Conferencing integrates knowledge with the ethical obligations of professional practice, client values, and the local knowledge, judgment, and experience of those involved. This is a particular strength of conferencing which is structured so as to enable families to tap into the values, wisdom, and resources of their own family group, community, and culture. The assumption is that, as Burford and Hudson (2000) suggest "lasting solutions to problems are ones that grow out of, or can fit with, the knowledge, experiences, and desires of the people most affected" (p.xxiii). The coordination and planning of the conference is a collaborative activity that sets the time, place, and cultural appropriateness of the process to suit the family's values and preferences. The family's

private time, when their plan is developed without CPS staff or other professions, is important to protecting decision-making from domination by professionals (Merkel-Holguin, 2004).

Systemic Perspective and Application

Family conferencing similarly, is most likely to fail where it is conceived as an "add-on" to a CPS system that continues with business as usual. It requires changes of attitude and practice among a wide range of actors, at the individual, organizational and at the system levels (Burford & Pennell, 1995; Burford, 2005; Crampton, 2007). It is a large shift in orientation and thus, it requires systemic changes to both practice and policy--a very different way of doing business (Merkel-Holguin, 2004). Conferences in most jurisdictions conclude with an evaluation process in which all participants provide feedback about their perceptions of the conference (Pennell, Burford, Connolly & Kate (2011). This provides useful data on the perceptions of different groups of participants (mothers, fathers, extended family members, CPS workers, other professionals, etc.) about the process and the decision made within the conference in which they participated. Such evaluations do more than measure client satisfaction; they get to the harder to define, qualitative aspects of collaborative decision-making.

Decision-making Devolution

By design and practice, family conferencing decision-making is kept as close as possible to the client-practitioner interface; as close as possible the front line workers. Pennell (2006:271) found by surveying people who had been involved in a conference that it was highly correlated with the participant's views that "The group reached the right decision"; "I support the final group decision"; "I think the right people were involved; and "I am satisfied with the plan agreed upon at the conference." Neff (2004)

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found that families who completed conferences had a increased sense of "procedural justice" compared to those who were in the traditional CPS system.

The New Design: Including Families as Partners and Resources

Given the pressures on CPS agencies, as well as many line worker's own views developed and reinforced when working in the child welfare bureaucracy, many public sector workers believe that families in the system are incapable of contributing to solutions for their children (Chandler & Pratt, 2011). It is not surprising that social workers frequently develop standardized safety plans that mandate three simple things: classes in parenting, anger management, and substance abuse treatment (Barth, 2008). This is often the case plan even though many families' needs may be quite diverse. Most CPS families need along with those services, housing, health insurance, medical care, job training, and cash. These are rarely are included in an agency's service plan.

Parada, Barnoff & Coleman (2007) found that new organizational constraints, system pressures, and even system reforms have led to an increase in rigid proceduralization and routinization of child protective practice. Their study shows that child welfare workers now must work hard going around the agency's constraints to retain any sense of professional autonomy in decision-making and CPS workers still are frequently reluctant to include family members into the decision-making processes that affect them. Even workers who may want to expand the decision-making processes and be more inclusive with family members, complain they can't due to agency policies or time constraints as well as the commonly held pessimistic views exposed by their supervisors. Failure to provide adequate training may also contribute to social worker and

staff cynicism or even subversion of newer attempts to be more inclusive with family members (Pennell, 2005).

Conclusion

       This paper has tried to show collaborative strategies can be successfully applied to a child welfare reform model called family group conferencing. By forming an innovative public-private partnership, that includes family members and is structured along the design of a collaborative network, with provisions for the families to be active members and have a significant participatory role and partnership status, a new relationship can be forged among the government, social service professionals, families and communities. This new structure re-conceptualizes the complex issue of cross sector collaboration and demonstrates that successful protection of children can not be achieved by the public sector CPS agencies alone. The inclusion of family members and a neutral facilitator, can keep a conference dialog constructive while focusing on serious and often unaddressed issues. Insuring joint decision-making in CPS actions increases the legitimacy of the CPS process and provides the family with more information which can result in improved decisions on behalf of children... and long lasting solutions. Conferencing focuses on the collective responsibility of diverse partners and is likely not only to be more successful for the child involved in the system, but for the family as well and is likely to improve child welfare policy and practices across the states.

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Table 1

Common Elements of Collaboratives and Family Conferencing

Factor	Collaboratives	Family Group Conferencing
Cross Sector Membership	Government, stakeholders, advocates, professionals, community representatives.	Government, professionals, community representatives **plus** family members, extended family and friends of the child at risk.
Organizational Structure	Usually formed by an agreement or contract; have rules of engagement, a manager and a facilitator.	Group is made up of *invited* members of the family's choice; is *voluntary*; has an *independent facilitator* not related to the agency or the case.
Decision-making Structure	Group members negotiate as equal members; members can leave the collective; decisions are formed by consensus with the goal of a final, written agreement.	The family members are crucial players in the discussion; they design their own plan with advice from others. All members receive a copy of the written agreements. (The CPS agency may veto the agreement if it believed to be unsafe, but this rarely happens.)
Timing	Multiple meetings may last for years.	Several intense (2-6 hour meetings) with a follow-up meeting 6 months later.
Strategy	To solve complex, public policy problem affecting cross sector players.	To include family members in developing a safety plan for a child at risk of abuse or neglect; protect the child and support the family.
Skills Needed	Facilitator, Negotiator, Problem Solver, Innovator.	Facilitator, Negotiator, Problem Solver, Innovator.

Leadership Style	Strong interpersonal skills; persistence; knowledge about the field; consensus building.	Respect and sensitivity; ability to insure that the family members are included and empowered; knowledge about the CPs system, laws and policies; can work around the "system" and bust barriers
Resources	Ability to find and share resources; know where grants, funding and services are; look inside the group.	Ability to find and share resources; know where grants, funding and services are; find resources within the family.
Values	Respect the group process; re-define what can be done.	Respect the family members as experts about their family; respect the group process re-define what can be done.
Measuring Performance	Design long and short term goals and objectives; work for traditional and non-traditional outcomes; get agreements early and often.	Design long and short term goals and objectives; work for traditional and non-traditional outcomes; get agreements early and often.