Advancing the Family Support & Strengthening Field Project

Executive Summary of Survey Results

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For more information about the project, please contact:

Andrew Russo
Co-Founder & Director
National Family Support Network
andrew@nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org
Tel/Cell: (415) 730-5310
www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org

For more information about OMNI Institute, please contact:

Melissa Richmond, PhD
Director of Research and Evaluation
OMNI Institute
899 Logan Street, Suite 600, Denver, CO 80203
mrichmond@omni.org; 303-839-9422, x166
www.omni.org

Executive Summary

Across the country, Family Support and Strengthening Programs work with families in a multi-generational, family-centered approach to enhance parenting skills; foster the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families; prevent child abuse; increase school readiness; connect families to resources; develop parent and community leadership; engage males and fathers; support healthy marital and couples relationships; and promote family economic success. In a number of states, these programs are organized by statewide Networks operating with a collective impact framework[1] to ensure coordinated quality support for families. Networks are defined as a convening body for two or more Family Support or Family Strengthening Programs such as Family Resource Centers.[2]

In collaboration with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the *Advancing the Family Support and Strengthening Field Project* was implemented to increase understanding and raise awareness of these critical programs for families and the Networks that support them, as well as to inform strategic directions for the Family Support and Strengthening field moving forward.

As one component of the Project, a survey was administered to representatives from backbone organizations of statewide Networks. Survey respondents provided information regarding: Network structure, history, and composition, including funding sources and the types of member organizations that serve families; Network approaches to direct-service worker training and professional development to ensure quality practice; Network service delivery areas, in particular the areas in which Networks develop intentional strategies to improve family outcomes; and Network impact, including evaluation practices and areas in which Networks have demonstrated positive outcomes for families and communities.

Key findings from the 18 statewide Networks that participated in the survey are summarized below.

NETWORK STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

Statewide Family Support and Strengthening Networks vary substantially in history, structure, staffing, size and financing. Survey data reveal a diverse makeup of statewide Networks, with some recently formed and others with origins dating back to the 1980s. Networks vary notably across almost all metrics assessed in the survey; there is no one 'typical' Family Support Network. The information listed next provides key highlights of the diverse nature of Networks.

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[1] For more information on the collective impact framework, see http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact.

[2] Family Resource Centers are known by many different names across the country, including Family Centers, Family Success Centers, Family Support Centers, and Parent Child Centers. For clarity of presentation, in this report we use the term Family Resource Center. For more information on these centers, see the publication *Family Resource Centers: Vehicles for Change* at http://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org.

- One-half of surveyed Networks operate as independent nonprofits and the rest are part of a larger organization or operate with informal or grassroots structures.
- Network annual administrative budgets range from $0 to over $2.7 million, with some Networks relying on funding from a single source (most typically government) and others blending funding from a variety of sources; 61% of Networks pass funding through to member organizations.
- Some Networks report no full- or part-time staff dedicated to Network activities, with others reporting the equivalent of over 10 full-time staff dedicated to the work of the Network.
- In 61% of Networks, organizations apply to be members; 44% of Networks require member dues, which may be a flat fee or based on member organizations' operating budgets.
- Within Networks, the number of member organizations ranges from six to over 800, with a median of 27.
- Direct-service Network member organizations include centers or programs that are school-based, free-standing, or embedded in other organizations (e.g., health centers, home visitation agencies, Early Childhood Education, Head Start, larger human service nonprofits with Family Resource Centers as programs, etc.).
- A few Networks consist primarily of one type of direct-service member (i.e., school-based, free-standing, or embedded); most Networks, however, have diverse membership, with a mixture of different types of centers or programs serving families throughout the state.

Strong Networks tend to have formal structures with dedicated staff and resources to support Network-level efforts. Strengths identified by Networks include formal and locally responsive structures with dedicated funding and staff. Opportunities for networking, collaboration within and across family-serving sectors, the development of learning communities, and knowledge-sharing all contribute to strong Network functioning. In addition, several Networks highlighted the dedication and commitment of their member organizations and their staff.

The majority of Networks expressed financial concerns. Financial issues were the most frequently mentioned challenges of current Networks. Financial concerns include increased demand for services in a climate of stagnant or decreasing funding for programs and centers; state deficits; locating funding for the Family Support field; and insufficient resources to support Network-level coordination and administrative activities. Member organizations often volunteer their time to support Network-level efforts and Networks may struggle to keep members active and engaged in the context of limited resources.

NETWORK APPROACHES TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The characteristics and qualifications of direct-service family-support staff vary within and across Networks. Similar to variation in Network structure and composition, there is no 'typical' Family Support workforce. Networks indicated that worker qualifications are often locally defined and set by individual communities based on the needs and characteristics of the populations served. Furthermore, qualifications will vary within a Network based on position and role within the family center or program. That is, specific positions, grants, or programs may have required qualifications and trainings whereas other positions or programs may not.

The Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors Framework guides Network activities. All but two Networks report using the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework,[3] an approach that is grounded in the research literature and is designed to reduce child abuse and neglect through strengthening families, parenting, and child-development knowledge. Some Networks report that adherence to the Strengthening Families Framework is a requisite to membership, requiring staff at member organizations be trained on the Protective Factors and/or the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support,[4] which incorporate the Protective Factors Framework.

Networks play a critical role in the professional development of the Family Support workforce. Networks support the development of the workforce by requiring or promoting training across a wide array of areas to meet the complex needs of families and communities. Trainings may be based on member needs and priorities, and many Networks implement standards of quality. Most also promote training in parent education, resource and referral, child abuse/neglect, parent leadership, and community development. Networks foster training and professional development through conferences or regional meetings, or through financial support for staff to obtain certifications and credentials.

NETWORK SERVICE DELIVERY AREAS

Across Networks, the top four primary service areas provided by member organizations are parent education, parent leadership development, resource and referral, and child development services. Most member organizations offer parent education, such as parenting classes and parent support groups; parent leadership development, including trainings and facilitated leadership activities; resource and referral—linking families to community resources and services; and child development activities, including parent-child classes and child care. Many also offer peer-to-peer supports such as support groups and mentoring; child abuse/neglect treatment services, including family support, home-visiting programs; community development, including advocacy, housing, and employment; and service coordination, including family goal setting. Most member organizations tend to refer families to other partner organizations for domestic violence and substance abuse treatment services.

Networks support member organizations to provide high-quality services. Most Networks support member capacity through training, technical assistance, and building programmatic capacity via program implementation support, quality assurance, and promotion of best practices. Just over half of Networks provide funding support to their members, and just over half support their members' own fund development efforts. About three-quarters of Networks provide and maintain a data tracking system, whereas about one-half provide member-level and Network-level data analysis and evaluation reports. Furthermore, all Networks provide coordination for their members by supporting member connections, cooperation, and collaboration.

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[3] For more information on Strengthening Families, see http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies.
[4] For more information on the Standards of Quality, see http://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org.

NETWORK IMPACT ON FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Networks report a wide range of positive impacts on families and communities, including strengthened parenting and the factors that protect against child abuse and neglect; improved high school graduation rates for teen parents and reduced teen pregnancies; increased family access to health coverage and health care; increased economic self-sufficiency; increased access to resources; and improved skills of the staff who work directly with families. Overall, by examining both the impacts on individual families and on the staff working directly with those families, Networks prioritized improving service quality, strengthening parenting and increasing access to services.

In the coming year, Networks plan to focus on increasing training opportunities for center-level staff; expanding programs and services for families; increasing parent leadership opportunities; and increasing Network funding and organizational capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Advancing the Family Support and Strengthening Field Project* sought to assess the landscape of statewide Networks in the areas of structure and composition, workforce development, service delivery, and impacts on communities and families. Results reveal a complex array of statewide Networks that vary with respect to origin, structure, size, capacity and membership. Despite variation, Networks are generally united in their approaches as almost all adhere to the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework. In addition, Networks have already, or are moving towards, implementation of quality standards, with over one-half of Networks using the Standards of Quality that have been adopted by the National Family Support Network. Common standards and trainings can help create a unifying vision and set of core practices that explicitly articulate what it means to be a Family Strengthening and Support Center or Program. Networks also highlighted the importance of family-centered, locally driven centers or programs that are responsive to the communities that they serve.

Variation in Network strengths and challenges provides opportunities for Network-to-Network sharing of lessons learned. According to survey results, Networks may benefit from knowledge-sharing in the following areas: funding structures that promote stability of ongoing resources; methods of increasing member engagement in Network-level efforts; workforce training models; implementation and monitoring of quality standards; evaluation of Network-wide activities to identify impacts on families and communities; and creating and implementing policy agendas.

There is great opportunity for systematic study, both within and across Family Support and Strengthening Networks, to identify optimal Network structures, training and supports for the workforce, and service-delivery models that will lead to intended outcomes for children and families. Based on survey responses, it is clear that centers and programs provide critical supports and services to families across the nation. Individual Networks report a range of benefits to communities, including but not limited to improved parenting, economically stronger families, healthier families, and better outcomes for teen parents. Our hope is that the Strategic Recommendations informed by this report continue to ensure that families and communities have access to quality multi-service, multi-generational, family-centered supports that will ultimately improve the lives and well-being of children and families across the country.