

Strengthening Children and Families: A Blueprint for Community-Based Solutions

Court Leadership – Collaboration – Prevention – Diversion – Treatment



STATE JUSTICE INSTITUTE IMPROVING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM RESPONSE TO MENTAL ILLNESS

Interim Report
April 20, 2020



Conference of
CHIEF JUSTICES



Strengthening Children and Families: A Blueprint for Community-Based Solutions

To ensure healthy and safe communities, community-based solutions and the child welfare system must be strengthened. Courts are in an ideal position to lead efforts to support the vision of a community-based approach that is less reactive, more holistic, and focused on keeping children safely with their families and out of foster care. This blueprint is intended to support court leadership to guide collaborative community discussions that result in a more effective and preventative system. Points of prevention and intervention that target community services and the child welfare system process are outlined to develop a comprehensive picture of how children and families enter and move through the system. In addition, they identify opportunities to connect families to supportive community services. The Blueprint serves as an overall picture and conceptual framework for communities to map their specific dependency process, identify opportunities for prevention and intervention to divert families to appropriate services both before and after formal court involvement, and to identify gaps in services and the child welfare system.

Points of Prevention and Intervention

Prevention		Child Welfare	Courts	Aftercare
Primary Prevention	Secondary Prevention			
Programs targeted at the general population to provide, educate, and support before problems occur <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthcare • Education • Transportation • Community Supports 	Programs targeted to alleviate problems and prevent escalation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance Use Disorder Treatment • Mental Health Disorder Treatment • Trauma Therapy • Domestic Violence Services • Housing Services • Employment Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral • Screening • Investigation • Intervention Services • Provide treatment to address needs • Referral to Court 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court Diversion • Petition • Case Plan • Permanency/Disposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linkages to Community Services • Reentry Prevention • Exit Planning

Community-based solutions focus on building the community’s capacity to solve its own problems and to be accountable to each other. Strong and robust community-based solutions are crucial for prevention and intervention strategies that successfully reduce the number of children and families that become involved with the child welfare system. Even when children and families enter the child welfare system, keeping children within their own community and relying on the community for services and support is part of good child welfare practice. Courts must engage the community as a resource to create ownership to improve the system and child and family outcomes.

When community-based supports are lacking, courts become the default system for addressing the needs of children. The number of children who received a child protective services investigation or alternative response increased 10% from 2013 (3,184,000) to 2017 (3,501,000).¹ As leaders of courts and communities, judges are in a unique position to improve their community’s response to children and families who have come to the attention of the child welfare system. An effective response requires a diverse group of committed stakeholders, sustained effort, and time. A judge is the optimal convener and leader of this group, and this blueprint provides an overview for how to convene stakeholders, develop community-specific solutions, and improve outcomes for children and their families.

Key Issues at Each Point of Prevention and Intervention

Prevention		Child Welfare	Courts	Aftercare
Primary Prevention	Secondary Prevention			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public service announcements that encourage positive parenting • Parent education programs and support groups that focus on child development, age-appropriate expectations, and the roles and responsibilities of parenting • Family support and family strengthening programs that enhance the ability of families to access existing services, and resource to support positive interactions among family members • Family Support Centers • Nurse-Family Partnership • Public awareness campaigns that provide information on how and where to report suspected child abuse and neglect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent education programs located in high schools, focusing on teen parents, or those within substance abuse treatment programs for mothers and families with young children • Parent support groups that help parents deal with their everyday stresses and meet the challenges and responsibilities of parenting • Medical/Legal Partnerships • Legal Aid lawyers in schools to help families at risk (e.g. WV program) • Home visiting programs that provide support and assistance to expecting and new mothers in their homes • Universal screening for ACEs (e.g. CA) • Early childhood education (e.g. head start) • Respite care for families • Family resource centers that offer information and referral services to families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent education programs (e.g., Strengthening Families) • Family Group Conferencing • Mental Health Counseling • Intensive family preservation services with trained mental health counselors • Homebuilders Intensive Family Preservation and Reunification Services • Parent mentor programs providing support to families in crisis • Parent support groups • Child Abuse and Neglect Report Hotline • Child Protection Services Intake • Multiple Track Child Protective Services Response • CPS Investigation including Safety and Risk Assessments • Placement Decision-Making and Permanency Planning • Comprehensive Family Assessment • Specialized CPS Domestic Violence Investigation and Protective Order Process • Child Advocacy Center • Homemaker Services • Parent Pals/Child Welfare Mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Treatment Courts • Baby Courts • Pre-petition programs (e.g. DAP) • High quality legal representation • Dependency mediation • Due process rights • Court Appointed Special Advocates • Supervised Visitation • Post-Prison Reunification Services • Emergency Kinship Placement • Emergency Shelter Care • Domestic Violence Shelters • Child Welfare Medication • Foster Care • Group Home Care • Residential Programs for Adolescents • Coordinated Court Response/Communication between Different Courts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adoption Support • Post Adoption Crisis Intervention • Guardianship Support • Independent Living Skills Development Program • Job Coaches

Prevention		Child Welfare	Courts	Aftercare
Primary Prevention	Secondary Prevention			
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavioral Aids • Father/Male Involvement Services • Public Health Aids • Outpatient Substance Abuse Services • Outpatient Domestic Violence Services • Outpatient Mental Health Services • Sexual Abuse Treatment • Therapeutic Child Care • Intensive Family Preservation 		

Guiding Principles for the Courts

1. The well-being of children and families is the responsibility of the entire community.
2. Judicial leadership at the state and local level has the power to make positive system changes.
3. It is a fundamental right of parents to parent their children, and families should be kept together safely.
4. Our community should support families in a way that is strength-based and trauma-informed and does not require entering the system for services.
5. Services for families and children should be responsive to race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, faith, language, age, and developmental level.
6. Professionals should be aware of implicit bias and ensure equitable access to services to all.
7. When families come to the attention of the child welfare system, their unique needs should be addressed effectively and in the least restrictive way through the use of evidence-based practices.
8. When a family is involved with multiple agencies, there should be a focus on safe information sharing and case coordination.
9. Data collection, evaluation, and continuous quality improvement should be prioritized in planning, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive community response.
10. A strong, healthy child welfare system which includes addressing vicarious trauma should be developed.

This document was developed under grant number SJI-18-P-048 from the State Justice Institute. The points of view expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the State Justice Institute.

ⁱ <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/statistics/can/can-stats/>