The Child Welfare Organizing Project
Community Connections
Program Evaluation 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation study was conducted in an effort to learn more about the innovative parent organizing model implemented by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) in East Harlem, New York City and identify the role and impact of CWOP community representatives on birthparents, families, and child safety conference outcomes. CWOP community representatives attend child safety conferences with the birthparents to provide them with emotional support, resources as well as information about their rights and responsibilities within the child welfare system. The community representatives who are familiar with the community and the resources available help parents as they take steps to either ensure that their children remain safely home or become reunified with them after a removal.

The study investigated perceptions of multiple stakeholders (i.e. birthparents, community representatives, and child protective services staff) about this model; examined birthparents satisfaction levels with CWOP representatives’ services; depicted barriers to parental engagement as well as factors promoting engagement; and discussed dynamics in collaboration between community representatives and child protection services.

A mixed-method design was employed where both quantitative and qualitative data sources were used. Child safety conference outcome data were quantitatively examined at site where CWOP representatives participated in safety conferences (East Harlem, N=232 cases) as well as the comparison site (Central Harlem, N=293 cases) where there was no CWOP involvement. Additionally, quantitative parent satisfaction surveys (N=68) were reviewed to assess parents’ satisfaction levels with CWOP community representatives’ services.

The qualitative data were generated from face-to-face interviews with parents who attended child safety conferences (N=21), community representatives serving them (N=9), and child protection services staff (N=30) involved in the conferences. Although both quantitative and qualitative sources were used, a stronger emphasis was placed on qualitative data as it provided a deeper understanding and exploration of personal experiences of various stakeholders during the child safety conferences and their perceptions of the impact of the parent organizing model.

The examination of child safety conference outcomes revealed that there was a considerable difference in the percentage of cases resulting in remand between the two sites (15.5% higher at the comparison site than the study site). The study site where CWOP representatives operated
had fewer removals, which arguably could be an indication of a decision-making that favored family-centered and family-preservation approach. While no further information was available on individual case specifics, circumstances, and possible intervening variables at each site, in general the cases were believed to be similar in their characteristics at both sites, which allowed for this comparison to be made.

The overall satisfaction levels by parents were very high ($M = 3.70, SD = .525$). Most were “very satisfied” (72.7%) and “satisfied” (24.2%) with representatives’ services. In terms of the ways in which CWOP representatives impacted families, the following common themes emerged from each group of participants: providing resources, emotional and physical support, mediating, educating and navigating, changing the child welfare system, and influencing parental behavior. Additionally, Community Representatives discussed the impact of their work on their own personal fulfillment.

Parent engagement is a critical and challenging task of child welfare, and meaningful parent engagement in a dialogue, service planning and acceptance of services are even more challenging in the context of non-voluntary child protection. Respondents felt that the negativity towards the child welfare system that originated from the stigma that surrounded families involved with ACS created the largest barriers in efforts to engage parents. Parents additionally reported that attitudes of some ACS workers reinforced the stigmatization they felt during not only the child safety conference, but the entire process. Additional barriers such as prior negative experience with the child welfare system, a lack of knowledge about the role of community representatives, and cultural differences were identified in the interviews.

Despite the factors that acted as barriers to parental engagement with community representatives, respondents explained the methods used to handle these barriers. The value of shared experience was heavily emphasized among the three groups of respondents. Having a similar background and involvement with the child welfare system as their parent clients, CWOP community representatives possessed a unique understanding of parents’ situation, which assisted in communicating with them. All respondents united under the concept that the disclosure of personal history with ACS to parents facing child abuse and neglect allegations would positively influence their decision to engage with a community representative and accept their services. This “shared experience” helped representatives demonstrate to parents that they could relate to them and, in turn, be someone who parents could relate to. Through emphasizing their common history of ACS involvement they were able to develop a system of mutual understanding, trust, and honesty with parents. Additionally, having a prior experience with the system prepared CWOP representatives to better guide others through it. Knowing that CWOP representatives had successfully negotiated the child welfare system for themselves instilled hope for parents going through similar experiences; to some parents, representatives were viewed as role models.

Though being a critical feature, disclosure of the personal experience was not always as important as the knowledge, resources, and personal communication skills that CWOP community representatives possessed. Qualities of CWOP representatives such as being personal, non-pressuring, non-judgmental and non-stigmatizing were instrumental in establishing a trusting relationship with parents and promoted engagement. The importance of
Differentiating the role of CWOP representatives and their non-affiliation with ACS and showing genuine support were also frequently identified as critical elements to engagement.

Overall, the relationship between CWOP community representatives and CPS staff members was viewed as positive. The main challenge that representatives faced in collaborating with CPS was a lack of knowledge and awareness about CWOP. Other challenges that mostly originated from it included descriptions of distance, neutrality, and a lack of interaction. CPS workers were receptive toward the presence of CWOP representatives, once they understood their role and niche.

Community representatives and CPS workers each mentioned multiple strategies to promote collaboration between the two organizations. The themes prevalent in both groups concern the importance of debriefings and providing opportunities for open communication. CWOP representatives recognized that being present at meetings made them visible to CPS workers over time, allowed CPS workers know who CWOP and their representatives were, and learn about their role. They noted that being assertive, upfront, and making personal contacts with CPS was a successful way to establish a relationship with workers.

Finally, CPS workers and parents were asked to give suggestions to improve CWOP services. Respondents from both groups suggested expansion to other districts and diversifying the CWOP personnel in terms of language, gender, age, race, ethnicity and other characteristics to meet the increasing diversity of parent clients.

Both parents and CPS staff suggested that representatives worked on developing a more long-term relationship with parents: do follow-ups after the conference, have more time before the conference to meet and talk to parents, and be present at other ACS-related conferences. Numerous parents felt that the values and strategies implemented by the CWOP community representatives should be transferred to ACS workers in forms of trainings and education.

Overall, the findings indicate that parent organizing model promises to ease pathways through the child welfare system for parents by providing various types of support, resources and information and guiding them through the system. It is undoubtedly a step forward towards building a family-centered practice in a highly adversarial and legal environment. While parental engagement and cooperation are critical and desired outcomes in child welfare practice, the emotional support, hope and resiliency building are also essential elements for ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being.