

WORKING SUCCESSFULLY WITH CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES



Ending Child Abuse and Neglect.

Citizen Review Panels and child welfare agencies share responsibility for creating a healthy relationship with each other. While it is in the best interests of both child welfare and CRPs to work together towards the shared goals of achieving safety, permanency and well-being for children, building and maintaining the healthy relationship required to do so is not always easy.

Someone once said, “Citizen participation is a lot like eating spinach. No one is against it because it is good for you.” Some child welfare systems may regard CRPs as spinach. As a requirement under CAPTA, Citizens Review Panels must be established and maintained. Child welfare administrators and agencies may acknowledge the CRP’s role but, challenged by the difficult work of integrating citizen involvement in a meaningful way, may not necessarily be predisposed to celebrate it.

Some important issues to consider as CRPs work towards building and maintaining a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship with the child welfare system include:

- ▶ ***Trepidation about the involvement of any non-agency personnel in the review of agency work.*** Just the fact that CRP members may have ‘outsider’ status can trigger agency concerns. The pressures of federal outcomes and expectations, being in the media spotlight, scrutiny from politicians and child advocates, and trying to make do with dwindling resources can all impact the willingness of a child welfare agency to work with any citizen group, especially one they fear may say negative things about it.
- ▶ ***Concerns that CRP members are not sufficiently informed about either the basics or the fine points of the child welfare agency’s function and practice.*** A national study of the key features of effective citizen–state child welfare partnerships reported that child welfare administrators



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are sometimes uncomfortable with some citizens’ lack of knowledge regarding the agency.¹ One noted, “These citizen groups want to make judgements about our practices and policies, but they really don’t understand the ramifications of their recommendations. They don’t know how a bureaucracy works, and they won’t take time to really understand.”

- ▶ ***The amount of time and patience required to develop a successful working relationship.*** Child welfare administrators are often strapped for time, and agencies often experience a high level of turnover. Both of these factors represent barriers to child welfare staff investing in, and being consistent about, building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with CRPs.

¹ Bryan, et. al., 2010.

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Here are some suggestions for ways in which CRPs and child welfare agency staff can work together successfully:

► **Honor the human element.** Sometimes, we get so myopic in our thinking and work that we forget that we are all in this together. Citizen Review Panels and child welfare agencies alike are ultimately working for the same thing: the protection and well-being of all children and families. This goal can only be achieved through the cooperation of all those involved.

Beyond participating in the formal communications and structured meetings that are essential to working together, simple gestures can go a long way in breaking down barriers and building a sense of shared vision and commitment. Share a meal or a training, write a letter of encouragement to a frontline staff person or foster parent, or hold an awards ceremony where both CRP members and child welfare staff are present. These types of activities can help child welfare staff see CRPs as welcome partners in the important work they both share.

- **Formalize the relationship.** The work of developing and adopting a formal Memorandum of Understanding can help promote a better understanding and level of comfort with the roles and responsibilities of each party. If an MOU has been established, it is worth the effort to review it periodically, as the process can provide an opportunity for clarifying and refreshing the relationship when things change.
- **Only request information you need and will use.** Nothing undermines trust and thwarts communication more quickly than for a CRP to go on a ‘fishing expedition,’ asking for information it will not use. Remember that at the end of every request, there is someone who has to respond. Courtesy and respect for people’s time are essential to building trust and a positive working relationship.
- **Work to ensure that a liaison from the child welfare agency is consistently engaged in the CRP’s work.** Having an agency representative at every CRP meeting is fundamental to creating and sustaining a productive relationship. A CRP’s mandate is huge. Essentially, it must evaluate how

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well the state is complying with state and federal laws and policies, engage in public outreach to gain a wider perspective on their work, and make recommendations for changes in the system. Citizens cannot be expected to know every detail of the inner workings of a child welfare agency, so having a child welfare representative at the table when a CRP does its work is a good insurance policy against the assumptions and misinformation that can stand in the way of CRPs playing a useful role.

References and Resources

- ▶ Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, (35), 216–224.
- ▶ Bryan, V., Collins-Camargo, C., & Jones, B. (2011). Reflections on citizen-state child welfare partnerships: Listening to citizen review panel volunteers and agency liaisons. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 1, 986–1010.
- ▶ Bryan, V., Jones, B.L. & Lawson. (2010). Key features of effective citizen–state child welfare partnerships: Findings from a national study of citizen review panels. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 4, 595–603.
- ▶ Collins-Camargo, C., Jones, B.L., & Krusich, S. (2009). The “Spinach” of Citizen Participation in Public Child Welfare: Strategies for Involving Citizens in Public Child Welfare. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 3, 287–304.
- ▶ National Citizen Review Panel Virtual Community: www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp.

For More Information

For specific information on your state’s efforts, visit the National CRP Virtual Community at www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp.

STATE SPOTLIGHT

SOUTH CAROLINA



The Citizen Review Panels (CRP) in South Carolina have made a concerted effort over the past few years to formalize their relationship with South Carolina Department for Social Services (DSS). This has come about through the use of a formal Memorandum of Understanding, as well as monthly meetings between DSS leadership and CRP Chairs. This partnership has led to an increase in communication, especially in the area of cases involving child fatalities.

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