Without a comprehensive understanding of what is getting in the way of improved practice and outcomes, attempts at practice- and system-level change may become thwarted, stalled, or frustrating to everyone. Partnerships based on listening to and respect for the varying worldviews, values, and traditions of the people served provide a critical forum for child welfare organizations and systems to explore, understand, and begin to address institutional barriers and biases that contribute to disproportionate representation and disparate outcomes.

By inviting a system review to study how the local child welfare system and its organizational structure, policies, and procedures are affecting services and outcomes for children and families, implementing jurisdictions demonstrated their agencies' willingness to take an honest in-depth look at themselves and more deeply engage community members, stakeholders and others affected by child welfare outcomes. System reviews are focused on system actions related to the specific group(s) of children that are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system or have disparate outcomes. While community partners will have perspectives on many system issues and barriers for their families, this kind of formal study can pinpoint the most critical themes and organize and energize partnership work on systemic issues and barriers.

Examples of Some Early Steps by Implementing Jurisdictions

In one jurisdiction, partners recognized that many Native children and families would benefit from culturally based services and providers, yet they had to use typical contracted providers because they were court recognized and approved. Agency leadership and Tribal community partners developed strategies to build the court's awareness of the issues and needs, resulting in the signing of a blanket court order in which participation in Tribal drug/alcohol services, domestic violence programs, and parenting programs is now court approved and recognized as part of case plan completion.

Another jurisdiction recognized a need to affect local administrative processes so that funds could be approved and used more flexibly for individualized services to meet child and family needs, such as paying for a dumpster so a family could make the home safe for its children or paying for a child or youth in foster care to participate in a cultural activity or event. After adjusting agency processes and sharing the process with staff, there are no longer delays, frustrations, and challenges in responding to individualized needs.

Another group in a large urban area spearheaded the development of a service portal that brings together all of the child welfare, mental health, faith-based, and other resources for children and families and provides on-the-spot information about availability, how to register, etc.

The document, Systemic Issues in Practice Model Implementation, also provides examples of the themes that were uncovered in system reviews in several implementing jurisdictions and how those system issues and barriers informed development of the Child and Family Practice Model.

System review processes often include:

- Interviews and focus groups with family members, practitioners, caregivers, and service providers

- Observations of court processes and practitioners in the field

- Analysis of existing data, policies, procedures, decision-making processes, and service structures

- Review of text and case records

The collective data are then analyzed, and a report developed summarizing key themes, findings, and opportunities for system change and improvement. Implementing jurisdictions found that the results of system reviews increase readiness for implementing the Practice Model and provide a base of information and study from which agency and community partners can identify priorities, action-plan strategies, and next steps to address system barriers.

While capacity for some form of record review can often be developed by the child welfare agency in-house, identifying funding that can support an external provider to do the analysis will garner greater community support and involvement in action planning to address the findings. There are experienced organizations that can do the study, or jurisdictions can work with community partners to identify the needed funding and develop a request for proposal (RFP) that solicits a study design tailored to local issues and needs for the target population(s) identified in the child welfare agency's data analysis.

A study design, called an institutional analysis, has been developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) working with Praxis International (http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/institutional-analysis). Institutional analyses were conducted in several jurisdictions implementing the Practice Model to help them understand organizational and structural contributors to poor permanency outcomes for African American children in the child welfare system. An executive summary for an institutional analysis report conducted in Fresno County, California, is available on the CSSP website, with the last few pages of that report providing information about the county's equity action plan to address issues that were identified in the analysis. (http://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/institutional-analysis/positive-outcomes-for-all-fresno-county-institutional-analysis-executive-summary.pdf)

As an alternative, a jurisdiction implementing the CFPM awarded a system review contract through an RFP process to the National Indian Child Welfare Association (http://www.nicwa.org/who_we_are/). The review process combines quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis and uses institutional ethnography in assessing the organization. The study examines systems that respond to and serve children and families involved with the local child welfare services agency, including system assumptions, logic, policies, and protocols that organize practitioner action. The study is designed to describe the institutional organization of the local child welfare agency and juvenile court and to draw conclusions regarding how those systems contribute (positively or negatively) to outcomes for American Indian and Alaskan Native children.

Once a system review has been conducted locally, it is important to develop an action plan that documents key goals and strategies to address the findings and recommendations in the report. Similar to a case plan for the system, the action plan should be developed with community partners and revisited regularly so they are aware of follow-through, challenges, and progress and can be part of making adjustments to that plan when needed.

It will also be important to determine how the system review report will be communicated and released. Child welfare agencies and their community partners will want to create and customize communications plans to meet agency and community needs. If the report is to be publicly released, it is helpful to "get out ahead" of the release by sharing key themes verbally before the report is released in order to provide a "soft landing" for expected findings and important context. Also jurisdictions may want to consider incorporating an action plan developed by agency and community partners into the report so that both findings and intended improvements can be understood together.

A System Review Communications Planning Template is available as a resource for key planning questions and sample communication goals, strategies, and activities. In addition, sample talking points are shared below as a resource in communication planning for local system review processes, findings, and reports.

COMMUNICATION TIP

Sample System Review Talking Points

1. **Self-Invited by Child Welfare Agency Wanting to Do Better.**
   - Our jurisdiction/agency wanted to conduct a system review study so that we could better support children and families. This assessment helps highlight areas where improvement is needed.
   - Our particular focus has been on the disproportionate number of _____ children *[insert your agency's target populations]* in our system and the unequal outcomes they experience.
   - Through dozens of interviews, critical issues have been identified, and we have learned much. Most of all, we are working with the families and community we serve to develop an action plan that speaks to the steps we are taking as a result of the study.

2. **Part of a Broader Effort to Improve Child Welfare.**
   - The issues identified in the study will inform system-level changes that are needed.
   - We are working with community partners to address these system-level changes at the same time that we are implementing a Child and Family Practice Model (CFPM).
   - By creating system- and practice-level change simultaneously, we can better support families in their communities and ensure children safely remain with their families, return to their families, or live with relatives or those with whom they have significant family or Tribal relationships.

3. **Bottom Line Is to Help All Children.**
   - What our agency learns from this study and from implementing the CFPM will help us better serve all children and families.
   - While our particular focus has been on _____ children, many of the obstacles we have identified for these children affect other children as well. Our goal is to help ensure that <u>all</u> children do better and thrive – in the care of loving,