



Technical Assistance Partnership

A Collaboration between American Institutes for Research and National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health

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Benefits of Systems of Care for Child Welfare

What is a System of Care?

A system of care is a coordinated network of public and private organizations and community based services and supports that are organized to meet the challenges of children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families. Families and youth are actively engaged to ensure that services and supports are effective, build on the strengths of individuals, and are culturally and linguistically competent. By working together, organizations are better able to provide care that is comprehensive and coordinated and family-centered. Successful systems of care share resources and responsibility for supporting the child and building the capacity of the family.

Systems of Care is part of a Federal Initiative

The Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program is a federal initiative that was established by Congress in 1992 and is administered by the Child, Adolescent and Family Branch of the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. HHS. The purpose of the program is to develop integrated home and community based services and supports for children and youth with serious emotional challenges and their families through the development and expansion of systems of care. Over 120 communities, tribal communities, territories, and states have received grants. There are currently over 60 communities being funded across the United States. Attached is a list of current and graduated system of care grantees.

Systems of Care and child welfare share common goals

Systems of care recognize that enhancing a child's healthy development and providing the family with supports and tools they need to care for their children will increase the likelihood of achieving safety, permanency and wellbeing. Core values that provide a foundation for systems of care are consistent with child welfare values:

- *Family-centered practice* – engage the whole family to identify strengths and needs and partner in identifying resources and strategies for addressing challenges.
- *Community based practice* – mobilize formal and informal supports for families in the community with the goal of keeping the child in the community to maintain connections.
- *Individualized services* – work to understand the unique interests and cultural perspectives of child, youth and family and identify and access services and supports that are appropriate in meeting individual needs.
- *Strengthen parental capacity* – enhance parental capacity so families can adequately care for their children and ensure their child's safety, permanency and wellbeing.



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Why should child welfare be involved in the system of care?

A system of care promotes shared responsibility for addressing the mental health needs of children and youth in child welfare.

- Up to 80% of children who enter foster care have serious mental health challenges, including developmental, emotional and behavioral problems.¹
- Foster children tend to have higher levels of behavior and emotional problems and more physical, learning and mental health conditions that negatively impact school performance and psychosocial functioning.²
- Only 23% of children who are in foster care for at least 12 months received mental health services.³
- Compared to the general population, a disproportionate number of young people who were alumni of foster care had mental health disorders. More than half experienced one or more mental health disorders in the past 12 months and over a quarter experienced post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴

What are the benefits to child welfare to participate as part of a system of care?

- Assessment and referral to mental health services and other supports - Cross agency collaboration can enhance collaborative, individualized screening and assessment of the child and families strengths and needs, including mental health challenges. A “wraparound” approach to understanding the child and engaging and partnering with the family to access supports and services is critical for success.
- Increasing access and enhancing mental health services - Systems of care also identify and address service gaps identified in the community that are critical for supporting children with mental health challenges and their families and caregivers, including evidenced based practices for addressing the mental health needs of children and youth in child welfare system, many of whom have experienced significant trauma.
- Families are stronger – Addressing the mental health needs of children and families through a system of care helps reduce overall strain in the household. The majority of families reported decreased strain associated with caring for a child with a serious emotional disturbance and improved family functioning.⁵

¹ Simms, M.D. Dubowitz, H., & Szilagyi, MA (2000) Health care needs of children in foster care system. *Pediatrics*. 106 (4): 909-918.

² Kortenkamp, K & Ehrele, J (2002) The well-being of children involved in the child welfare system: A National Overview, Washington, DC. Urban Institute.

³ National Study of Child and Adolescent Well Being (2003)

⁴ Casey Family Programs. (2005) Improving Family Foster Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.

⁵ ORC MACRO. (2004) CMHS National Evaluation: Aggregate Data Profile Report, Grant Communities Funded 1998-2000.



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- *Families have more resources* – Children’s mental health needs can take a toll on caregiver employment and income as they miss work to deal with issues at home and school. Many caregivers reported increased earnings, and are able to work toward improved job, vocational and educational skills. Almost a quarter of families also have more time and social supports while participating in a system of care.⁶
- *Placement stability* – Children in systems of care are able to successfully address mental health challenges which results in greater placement stability, fewer crisis and placement disruptions. Children and youth who lived in multiple settings decreased by 22% over 12 months.⁷
- *Reduced out of home placements* – Systems of care are able to bring coordinated services and supports to families which leads to decreased out-of-home placements. Savings from reduced out of home placements are often diverted in communities to support family preservation and reunification.
- *Reduced subsequent child maltreatment reports* – Coordinating with multiple systems and community based services enhances early identification of needs and enables communities to create a differential response system to support families has decreased recurrence of child abuse and neglect.⁸

⁶ ORC MACRO. (2004) CMHS National Evaluation: Aggregate Data Profile Report, Grant Communities Funded 1998-2000

⁷ ORC MACRO. (2004) CMHS National Evaluation: Aggregate Data Profile Report, Grant Communities Funded 1998-2000.

⁸ Loman, LA and Seigel, GL. *Alternative Response in Minnesota: findings from the Program Evaluation*. Protecting Children, Vol 20, Number 2 and 3 pp 78-92. and Walters, J. *Hawaii’s Differential Response System*, Children’s Bureau Express, March 2008, Vol.9, No. 2.



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