

Evaluation of Implementation and Outcomes

Supporting Change in Child Welfare

An Evaluation of Training and Technical Assistance



EVALUATION BRIEF 3

In recent years, organizations in the human services field have increasingly considered not only what programs and practices to implement but also how to implement them and whether implementation has been effective.

The 2015 report *Supporting Change in Child Welfare: An Evaluation of Training and Technical Assistance* examines implementation practices by providing an overview of the evaluation approaches used by five regional Child Welfare Implementation Centers (ICs) (see Children's Bureau T/TA System and Evaluation) to assess the outcomes of child welfare implementation projects. This brief focuses on how project evaluations assessed implementation, fidelity, and system and organizational outcomes. Evaluation lessons, drawn from a synthesis of implementation project evaluations, are applicable to organizations in child welfare and other human services fields that undertake major change efforts.

Children's Bureau T/TA System and Evaluation

Beginning in Federal fiscal year (FY) 2009, the Children's Bureau expanded, coordinated, and re-oriented its network of child welfare training and technical assistance (T/TA). Ten **National Child Welfare Resource Centers (NRCs)** shared expertise and provided services to States, Tribes, and territories in specific child welfare content areas, and five regional **Child Welfare Implementation Centers (ICs)** worked with selected jurisdictions on specific child welfare projects (referred to as implementation projects) and focused T/TA on implementation and sustainability of systems change. A coordination center, web-based data system, and a virtual workspace to improve communication among providers supported this T/TA system.

The Children's Bureau also funded a 5-year evaluation of the T/TA system: *Supporting Change in Child Welfare: An Evaluation of Training and Technical Assistance*.

Implementation Projects and Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA)

Over 5 years, the ICs partnered with child welfare systems in 24 jurisdictions (18 States, 5 Tribes/tribal consortia, and 1 county) to support the implementation of new programs, policy changes, and other interventions with the goal of improving the quality and effectiveness of child welfare services. Child welfare agencies participated in implementation projects to address important organizational and systems issues, including developing casework practice models, using data to support data-driven practices, broadening stakeholder engagement, and enhancing tribal child welfare practices.

During the projects, ICs delivered a variety of services, such as consultation and problem-solving, facilitation of meetings, training and coaching, product and tool development, and peer-to-peer learning. They also assisted jurisdictions with developing strategic plans, building implementation capacity, conducting evaluations, and designing sustainability plans. Most jurisdictions received over 600 hours of direct T/TA, with some receiving more than 1,700 hours of tailored services over the 2- to 4-year project periods.

Project Evaluations

In order to receive T/TA, each jurisdiction was required to participate in an independent evaluation of its implementation process and project outcomes. Local evaluators helped identify project objectives, develop logic models, monitor implementation, and assess outcomes. Evaluators aimed to assess four key aspects of each project:

- Implementation capacity (Did the jurisdiction develop the ability to implement effectively?)
- Intervention adoption and fidelity (Was the intervention implemented as intended?)
- Organizational and systems outcomes (What changes occurred as a result of the project at the system level?)
- Child and family outcomes (What changes occurred as a result of the project at the child and family levels?)

Figure 1. Evaluation of Implementation Process and Outcomes



Figure 1 illustrates the four key aspects of the project evaluations along with examples of activities for each aspect. While shown sequentially, evaluation data collection activities were sometimes implemented in a different order, and not every aspect could be assessed in every evaluation. While child and family outcomes were the ultimate goal of the projects, they

were not always attainable or measurable within the project period. Several jurisdictions were able to identify relevant measures and develop methods to track changes in child and family outcomes moving forward; some demonstrated indications of a positive impact. The discussion that follows describes the other three aspects of the project evaluations.

Implementation Stages Assessed

- 1 Early exploration
- 2 Late exploration
- 3 Early design and installation
- 4 Late design and installation
- 5 Early initial implementation
- 6 Late initial implementation
- 7 Early full implementation
- 8 Late full implementation

Implementation Capacities Assessed

- Shared vision, values, and mission*
- Leadership
- Staff selection
- Training
- Coaching
- Performance appraisal/assessment
- Facilitative administration
- Systems intervention
- Decision support data systems
- Stakeholder engagement*
- Cultural competence*

(*Capacities reflected “drivers” in the NIRN Framework with the exception of those marked with an asterisk.)

Changes in Implementation Capacity

T/TA was designed to build jurisdictions’ organizational capacity for implementation. IC evaluators assessed implementation progress and changes in capacity across projects using two common measures guided by the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) framework¹ and adapted by IC evaluators to reflect implementation in child welfare settings:

- **Implementation Process Measure (IPM).** An instrument completed semiannually by IC evaluators to measure implementation and the status of capacities and interventions across implementation stages.²
- **Implementation Capacity Analysis (ICA).** A focus group protocol to assess changes in implementation capacities from the perspective of local implementation teams.

What was learned from evaluation findings about implementation capacity?

Results from the IPM offered data on the length of time needed for projects to progress through the implementation stages and the importance of implementation capacities at different time periods. The ICA revealed stakeholder

¹ Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network.

² Armstrong, M. I., McCrae, J. S., Graef, M. I., Richards, T., Lambert, D., Bright, C. L., & Sowell, C. (2014). Development and initial findings of an implementation process measure for child welfare system change. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 8(1), 94–117. doi: 10.1080/15548732.2013.873759.

perceptions of increases in specific implementation capacities and ways T/TA helped to strengthen those capacities. Despite the use of common measures, the different ICs varied in how they collected and reported the data, which limited the ability to conduct cross-project analyses.

Intervention Adoption and Fidelity

Project evaluations measured adoption and fidelity using the following:

- Intervention fidelity checklists of program/intervention components
- Surveys and assessments of knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors consistent with the intervention
- Case reviews or other documentation of participation in activities or specified practices
- Quality assurance assessments

What was learned from evaluation findings about intervention adoption and fidelity?

Understanding whether interventions were implemented as intended can provide important insight into why a project is or is not reaching target outcomes. Some implementation projects were able to use findings from fidelity assessments to shape subsequent intervention rollout in multiple sites. In other cases, ICs reported challenges to measuring fidelity, including defining how fidelity to practice standards could be demonstrated, delays in implementation, and insufficient data in case files.

Organizational and Systems Outcomes

Project evaluations collected both quantitative and qualitative data related to system and organizational changes. At the individual level, outcomes included changes in staff attitudes and knowledge and stakeholder perceptions of relationships. At the organizational and systems levels, project outcomes included changes in organizational climate, capacity-building infrastructure, application of policies and procedures, and cross-system collaboration. Table 1 lists common project outcomes and examples of specific outcomes measured.

Table 1. Common Organizational and System Outcomes

Category	Examples of Outcomes Measured
Staff attitudes, knowledge, and competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff knowledge of new models or practices ▪ Staff articulation of agency mission/vision
Organizational culture and climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff collaboration ▪ Staff perceptions of job stress
Policy revision and implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Changes in policies ▪ Consistent application of State laws
Stakeholder awareness, knowledge, and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role of families and other stakeholders in governance, policy, and programs ▪ Engagement of community service providers
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Implementation of coordinated processes ▪ Communication and collaboration among stakeholders
Use of data and technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perceptions of the utility of data systems ▪ Use of data to inform decision-making and practices
Change management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Application of implementation science drivers ▪ Skills in change management

What was learned from evaluation findings about system and organizational outcomes?

Overall, evaluation findings suggested that the jurisdictions made strides in advancing organizational and systems change in respective focus areas—implementing practice models, enhancing Tribal child welfare practices, using data and quality improvement systems, building supervisory and workforce capacity, engaging stakeholders, and implementing safety, risk assessment, and intake procedures. Individual evaluations of system and organizational outcomes pointed to areas of progress and those needing additional attention as the jurisdictions moved forward.

Barriers to Evaluation of Project Effectiveness and Outcomes

Some evaluators reported barriers across across key aspects of their evaluation:

- **Evaluation Timeframes.** Evaluation schedules were hindered by implementation delays, such as the time needed to train staff or to adopt new practices. Competing initiatives, a lack of common vision among stakeholders, and staff turnover also delayed the evaluations.
- **Distrust of Evaluators.** Distrust stemmed from staff perceptions that data might be used with punitive consequences and from negative prior experiences with researchers.
- **Data Collection Infrastructure Issues.** These factors included technical issues with online databases, varying degrees of staff comfort with data systems, and a lack of leadership support for data collection efforts.

Through anticipation of potential barriers and skilled planning and design, and with consideration of the following lessons learned, evaluators can continue to design and execute meaningful evaluations.

Lessons Learned

The analysis of the evaluations of ICs' implementation projects provides guidance on evaluating implementation effectiveness and outcomes:

- **Promote understanding of evaluation as an effective and collaborative tool** to guide change, inform decision-making, and create a learning environment
- **Prioritize fidelity assessment in early implementation stages**, educate stakeholders on the benefits of assessing fidelity, and enhance the capacity of model developers, practitioners, and evaluators to identify fidelity criteria and measure fidelity
- **Engage key stakeholders early in the evaluation process** in articulating the connections between project components and goals, identifying fidelity criteria, and defining desired outcomes and indicators
- **Establish timeframes that allow for assessment of system outcomes and long-term impact** following implementation of selected interventions and development of data collection systems
- **Use T/TA as an opportunity to build evaluation capacity** and develop internal expertise on assessing implementation, fidelity, and outcomes for ongoing and future initiatives
- **Promote development and consistent use of standardized instruments** and common administration protocols across multiple sites to strengthen the evidence about what works and what doesn't in building capacity for implementation and producing positive outcomes

Applying these lessons can help further advance the understanding of whether implementation has been effective and how T/TA and other factors contributed to that effectiveness.

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