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EVALUATION BRIEF
INTER-AGENCY INFORMATION SHARING: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 2006 TANF & CHILD WELFARE COLLABORATION GRANTEES
September 2012

Introduction

Efforts in recent years to improve the delivery of social services and the outcomes of clients served have increasingly involved collaboration between service providers in traditionally separate departments, agencies, and organizations. Collaboration is recognized as a means to more effectively address complex issues that require a comprehensive approach (Faems, Van Looy, & Debackere, 2004). These initiatives aim to break down antiquated silos and to move programs that traditionally operated independently towards *interoperability*, defined by Smith and Stewards of Change (2008, p.4) as "the ability of two or more systems, organizational or technological, to exchange and make use of information." In fact, inter-organizational information sharing -- whether in verbal, written or electronic data form -- is one of the most essential but difficult practices that must be in place in order to achieve true interoperability. Information sharing does not solely involve access to data; it also entails establishing effective communication practices among program staff (Smith et al.). Similarly, Dougherty and the Center for Child and Family Studies (2000, p. 3:1) state that "the better staff can communicate across programs, the more effective they become as collaborators."

Organizations embarking on collaborative efforts are diverse, representing service arenas such as education, healthcare, the judicial system, substance abuse, child welfare, and cash assistance programs, as well as others. As described in James Bell Associates' evaluation brief on *Evaluating Inter-Organizational Collaborations* (2011), there are numerous factors that impact whether organizations are successful in implementing collaborative services. The focus of this brief is on common barriers and facilitators to information sharing across agencies, as illustrated by the experiences of a cluster of discretionary grantees funded by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in 2006 to promote *Collaboration between TANF & Child Welfare to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes*.[a]

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[a]For brevity these grantees are referred to throughout the remainder of this article as the "TANF/CW grantees".

Background: Information Sharing between TANF & Child Welfare Services

The importance of collaboration between Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare (CW) service programs is widely addressed in the literature[b] and is the focus of additional study as more States, counties, and local entities seek to provide more efficient and effective delivery of these critical family services. In a recent examination of the relationship between increased data sharing and improved access to benefits and services, the U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO] (2011) reported that TANF and CW staff in approximately two-thirds of the States meet periodically to discuss common areas of concern, including the needs of dual-system (shared) clients and TANF clients at risk of becoming involved in the child welfare system. Such practices are particularly important due to the overlapping needs of clients served by these programs. As reported in the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect NIS-4 (Sedlak et al., 2010), children in families with annual incomes below $15,000 experience maltreatment at more than five times the rate of other children, are more than three times as likely to be abused, and are approximately seven times more likely to be neglected. These families face numerous challenges and are likely to have multiple, interrelated needs that no one program operating in isolation can effectively address.

While the goals of TANF and CW are complementary, dual-system clients are often challenged further by conflicting program requirements, service plans, and timelines that can delay or prevent the achievement of intended child and family outcomes. Information sharing is essential in the context of TANF and CW collaborations in order for these programs to: 1) identify mutual clients, 2) conduct comprehensive assessments of clients' needs, 3) develop well-informed case plans, 4) track and manage cases, and 5) determine client outcomes. Recognizing the complex needs of dual-system families and the need for greater coordination of services, ACF within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) provided funding to five State, county, and tribal organizations in 2006 to conduct five-year demonstrations of collaboration between TANF and CW services. The objectives of the 2006 TANF/CW grants were to 1) demonstrate models of effective collaboration; 2) evaluate and document the processes and outcomes of collaborations at both the service and client levels; and 3) develop models that other agencies could refer to for guidance and potential replication.

Each of the TANF/CW grantees served TANF-enrolled families currently in or at-risk of entering the child welfare system. The target populations of the grantees varied based on the unique needs of their communities, and included mothers of very young children, Alaska Native and American Indian families, families residing within identified geographic areas with the highest need, and kinship caregivers. Grantee agencies included the State of California Department of Social Services (Sacramento, CA); Louisiana Department of Social Services (Baton Rouge, LA); Jefferson County Department of Human Services (Golden, CO); County of

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[b] An extensive bibliography on collaboration between TANF and Child Welfare was amassed by Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011, June) and is available online at:
http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/TANF%20and%20Child%20Welfare_CWIG%20Bibliography.pdf
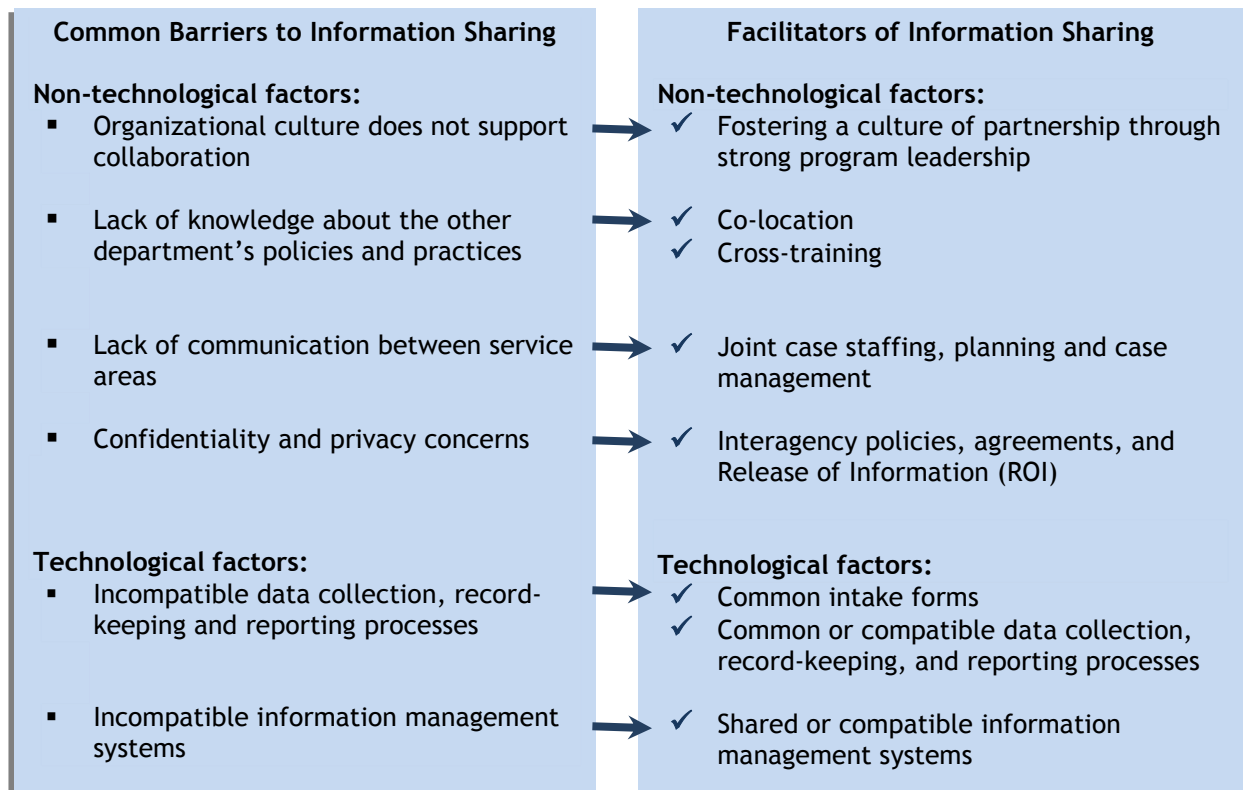
Rockland Department of Social Services (Pomona, NY); and Cook Inlet Tribal Council (Anchorage, AK).

Addressing Barriers to Information Sharing

The literature regarding TANF/CW collaboration and the experiences of the TANF/CW grantees indicate a number of factors, both organizational and technological, that can hinder information sharing between TANF and CW programs. These factors likely apply to collaboration between other programs and services as well. Commonly cited organizational challenges include organizational cultures that are not supportive of collaboration, lack of knowledge about the other department/agency, and lack of communication between departments/agencies. The sensitive nature of the information pertaining to TANF and CW clients also raises confidentiality and privacy concerns that traditionally have limited willingness to share data across these service areas. Technological challenges to interoperability are also significant, with dissimilar data collection, recordkeeping, and reporting systems, along with different or even incompatible information management systems, being the most frequently cited barriers.

These common barriers, and the key practices and strategies that the TANF/CW grantees have used to overcome them, are summarized in the exhibit below.

Common Barriers to Information Sharing	Facilitators of Information Sharing
Non-technological factors:	**Non-technological factors:**
▪ Organizational culture does not support collaboration	✓ Fostering a culture of partnership through strong program leadership
▪ Lack of knowledge about the other department's policies and practices	✓ Co-location ✓ Cross-training
▪ Lack of communication between service areas	✓ Joint case staffing, planning and case management
▪ Confidentiality and privacy concerns	✓ Interagency policies, agreements, and Release of Information (ROI)
Technological factors:	**Technological factors:**
▪ Incompatible data collection, record-keeping and reporting processes	✓ Common intake forms ✓ Common or compatible data collection, record-keeping, and reporting processes
▪ Incompatible information management systems	✓ Shared or compatible information management systems

1. Organizational Culture: Exchange of information between departments and agencies has not been common practice in most Federal, State, or local governments (Ehrle, Scarcella, & Geen, 2004). At the most fundamental level, information sharing between service areas, including TANF and CW, requires a shift at both the organizational and individual staff levels away from traditionally siloed practices. This change in process is substantially hindered in organizations with a culture that is resistant to change and/or collaboration, and requires organization-wide commitment to no longer conducting "business as usual."

Strong Program Leadership
In order to facilitate this intensive level of organizational change, all of the TANF/CW grantees obtained the buy-in and participation of program leadership at the outset of their collaboration projects and identified effective and respected managers and supervisors (referred to as "program champions") to explain and promote collaborative activities at local and direct staff levels throughout their programs. The most common method for fostering strong program leadership involved the formation of joint planning teams, steering committees, or policy councils that included leaders representing the grantee organization, TANF and CW agencies, and any other human service departments or community partners that contributed to the needs of the dual-system families (e.g., substance abuse, health, education, and housing). In this manner, the grantee agencies demonstrated collaboration from the "top down," which helped to offset resistance to change in the organizational culture. For example:

- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council*. Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) developed a Program Leadership Council (PLC) comprised of all of the organization's Program Directors as well as the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer. With the formation of the PLC, CITC began an organization-wide transition from hierarchical to "side-by-side" management that further enhanced their collaborative efforts. The group met bi-weekly to discuss and make decisions regarding policies, exchange information regarding their program areas, share concerns, and problem solve. CITC staff reported that the PLC has been vital to improving inter-program communication and enabled participants to identify significant points of contact between programs that otherwise would not have been discovered.

- *Jefferson County Community Connection (JCC)*. Jefferson County Community Connection program established a project steering committee to facilitate collaboration, communication, and information sharing regarding dual-system clients. The committee was comprised of members from TANF and CW, as well as staff from other community resources.

- *California Linkages Project*. The California Linkages Project infused stewards of the collaboration at both the State and county levels. The grantee established a State Linkages Oversight Committee (SLOC) that included leaders from the California Department of Social Services' TANF and CW programs as well as the leadership of the Child and Family Policy Institute (CFPIC), whom the State contracted to implement the project. The designated project leader from CFPIC was known and respected among County Administrators throughout the State, and became the lead "program champion" for the collaboration. A Linkages Coordinator was also identified within each of the participating counties to be the local leader of the initiative.

Fostering a Culture of Collaboration
Successful implementation of collaborative policies and practices cannot be accomplished without an organizational culture that is supportive of partnership and collaboration. In addition to providing strong and visible leadership, the TANF/CW grantees worked in a variety of ways to establish organizational climates that promoted the coordination of efforts in order to better serve families. Adopting a vision and goals that were known throughout the organization was a common first step in laying the groundwork for successful collaboration and increased information sharing. For example:

- *California Linkages Project*. *Linkages* administrators in participating counties ranked "workplace culture of willingness to try new things" among the top five factors identified for successful implementation of the collaborative effort (Harder + Company Community Research, 2011). Strategies for fostering this culture of partnership included the presence of strong and supportive leadership as well as adopting a shared vision or goal.

- *Louisiana Kinship Integrated Services System (LA KISS)*. LA KISS project administrators reported that fostering a culture of collaboration was accomplished through taking a team approach, cross-training TANF and CW staff, and adopting the shared goals of helping families navigate both economic and child welfare programs to increase the stability of children placed with kinship caregivers.

- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council – Agency without Walls*. CITC initiated their collaborative efforts using the conceptual framework of an "agency without walls." Using this framework CITC facilitated the emergence of an organizational culture that supports the integration of cross-departmental input into the planning process.

2. Knowledge and Understanding across Agencies/Departments: Prior to the implementation of collaborative efforts, most TANF and CW agency staff have minimal knowledge or training regarding the other systems' practices (Ehrle et al., 2004). This lack of understanding can contribute to the continuation of silos, become a source of tension between the two programs, hinder positive shifts in organizational culture, and limit sharing of information (Jordan Institute for Families, 2004). The challenges that stem from such siloed perspectives are experienced in many types of organizations. Common strategies implemented by the collaboration grantees to increase TANF and CW employees' knowledge of each other's approaches and practices include cross-training and co-location.

Staff Cross-Training
At a very basic level, when staff members in collaborating programs are knowledgeable about one another's work and the services they offer they can make more informed case planning decisions to address their clients' needs (Ehrle, Malm, Fender, & Bess, 2001). To address this issue, all of the TANF/CW grantees engaged in cross-training of their staff and provided ongoing training for new staff regarding collaboration. For example:

- *Louisiana Kinship Integrated Services System (LA KISS)*. The LA KISS project trained CW and TANF staff about the programs and services provided by their agencies. Co-location of the case managers in pairs facilitated ongoing learning in their joint daily work. The result was that families seeking assistance interacted with case managers who could help them navigate both agencies' programs successfully.

- *Jefferson County Community Connection (JCC)*. Training of JCC TANF and CW staff members included engaging training participants in interactive group exercises that conveyed the benefits of collaboration, providing information about each agency's programs and services, and providing participants with copies of the theory of change framework for the collaboration project.

Co-Location of Staff

Co-location of TANF and CW staff is one of several strategies used by human service organizations to promote information sharing and collaboration. This practice eliminates the challenges of spatial separation and allows workers, now easily accessible to one another, to foster increased understanding of each other's work and build mutual respect (Andrews, Bess, Jantz, & Russell , 2002). Co-location can also facilitate a more streamlined approach to service provision. For example, staff that once had to schedule meetings or participate in conference calls may now walk down the hall to address a case-related issue with their collaborative partners. Each of the collaboration grantees implemented physical co-location of TANF and CW staff in a variety of forms, whether bringing whole departments into the same building, pairing case workers from each department together in shared office space, or locating individual liaison staff members in the offices of the partnering department. For example:

- *California Linkages Project*. At the end of the five-year demonstration period, approximately half of California counties participating in Linkages reported some co-location of TANF and CW agency offices or individual staff (Harder + Company Community Research, 2011). These counties noted that co-location helps to reduce barriers to communication, physically reminds workers to discuss cases they have in common, encourages inclusion of both agencies' workers in meetings with families, allows strong professional relationships to develop, and helps workers understand one another's jobs more fully. Many Linkages counties reported that co-location has a stronger impact on facilitating communication than any other strategy (Harder + Company).

- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council – Agency without Walls*. Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) brought the staff of all of the agency's departments into one building in order to physically facilitate agency-wide collaboration. Physical proximity to other departments was reported to have increased opportunities for employees from different service areas to communicate and share information about the families they served. Co-location of all human service staff provided the additional benefits of enabling the departments to develop a common standardized intake process and open a jointly staffed welcome center for individuals accessing CITC services for the first time.

- *Louisiana Kinship Integrated Services System (LA KISS)*. The LA KISS Project paired their TANF and CW caseworkers into teams that were physically located in the same office space, which allowed them to work together in an interdisciplinary way that improved the provision of necessary services to their kinship caregiver clients.

3. Communication between Agencies/Departments: Information sharing is essential to TANF and CW collaborations in order to: 1) identify mutual clients, 2) conduct comprehensive

assessments of clients' needs, 3) develop well-informed case plans, 4) track and manage cases, and 5) determine client outcomes.

Joint Case Planning, Staffing, and Case Management
Breaking down organizational and interpersonal silos through co-location and cross-training of staff enabled a majority of the TANF/CW grantees to establish methods for ongoing planning and information exchange regarding mutual clients. The grantees introduced common intake forms and processes, coordinated service plans, and integrated their case management activities.

- *Rockland County Next Steps Program*. Rockland County's Next Steps program made efforts to develop a common comprehensive family assessment and coordinated service plan for their clients. In order to ensure that dual-system families met both TANF and CW requirements, program staff shared access to client case plans maintained in the county's TANF and State's CW data systems. Joint case conferences were conducted on a regular basis with TANF and CW workers as well as representatives from partner agencies (e.g., family treatment court, foster care).

- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council – Agency without Walls*. In preparation for conducting joint case planning, CITC provided integrated case management training to case managers within the three programs that were the focus of their collaboration: TANF, CW, and Recovery Services.

Interdepartmental Workgroups
- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council – Agency without Walls*. Interdepartmental workgroups implemented by CITC reinforced the organization's commitment to collaboration and enabled staff to address concerns and exchange ideas on an ongoing basis.

4. Confidentiality and Privacy: Concerns about confidentiality and privacy can pose a significant barrier to cross-agency information sharing. This can be especially true between two large programs such as TANF and CW. In fact, many States' TANF and CW administrators indicate that these concerns have prevented them from sharing information (GAO, 2011), and in some cases these confidentiality concerns have prevented TANF and CW agencies from developing and using common databases to share client information (Botsko, Snyder, & Leos-Urbel, 2001)). While there are no Federal laws that prohibit the sharing of information between TANF and CW, States are permitted to determine their own confidentiality rules, and questions remain regarding what information can be shared, and with whom.

Information Sharing and Confidentiality Policies and Agreements
As reported by Andrews et al., (2002), many TANF and CW agencies have written polices for sharing information with one another. A majority of the collaboration grantees reported developing memoranda of understanding and/or confidentiality agreements to ensure that TANF and CW staff adhere to confidentiality of client information and privacy guidelines. Client consents to release information between these (and potentially other) service areas were also obtained. For example:

- *California Linkages Project*. At the end of the demonstration grant period, 35 percent of California's Linkages counties reported developing formal polices requiring TANF and CW staff members to have regular contact with each other to track the progress of

case plans (Harder + Company Community Research, 2011). Confidentiality was reported to be less of a concern when TANF and CW programs are co-located physically or administratively under the same agency and are subject to the same confidentiality policies. In these cases, counties have used a simple release of information form to facilitate information sharing. In those counties where these services are not co-located or under the same parent agency, memoranda of understanding have been employed to guide the sharing of client information (Harder + Company). A template for a Memorandum of Understanding for State Agency Data Sharing is also available on the California Department of Social Services' (CDSS) Website (State of California, 2007).

- *Jefferson County Community Connection (JCC)*. In 2006, Jefferson County, Colorado, instituted a policy memorandum entitled *Customer Confidentiality and Information Sharing among Human Services Employees*. This memorandum is provided to all DHS employees to clarify the circumstances under which they may disclose information to other DHS employees. In regards to sharing information between the county's child welfare programs (referred to here as "CYF") and TANF (referred to here as "public assistance and welfare"), the policy states:

> *"CYF employees possessing information regarding any Child Welfare case (including "voluntary" cases or juvenile delinquency cases) may share this information on a need to know basis, for purposes of investigation and case management in the administration of their respective programs, with other department employees for the limited purpose of administration of public assistance and welfare* (Jefferson County Department of Health and Human Services, 2006, p. 2).*"*

5. Data Collection, Recordkeeping, and Reporting: Information management systems that cannot communicate, along with differing data collection and reporting practices, pose a significant technical challenge to identifying and tracking mutual clients and ultimately to achieving systems integration. Regarding collaboration between CW and TANF, although the majority of States have an operational Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), few report that their systems are capable of bi-directional interfacing with their respective States' TANF system (GAO, 2011). GAO found that regardless of whether States were operating a SACWIS, more than half of those surveyed reported obstacles to sharing data between their TANF and CW agencies. A majority of the grantees were further challenged by TANF and/or CW data being stored outside of their agencies in a State information management system over which they had little or no control. Data sharing efforts between other State agencies may face similar challenges or confront challenges and facilitators that are unique to their organizations.

Common Data Collection, Management, and Information Systems

The collaboration grantees implemented a variety of methods to address differences in how TANF and CW agencies collect, record, and report data. Each grantee addressed the challenge of data systems incompatibility by re-engineering their data systems, providing access to each other's data either directly or indirectly, and by employing other creative practices to work around the incompatible systems.

- *Jefferson County Community Connection (JCC)*. JCC implemented a Blackboard system to share files and data between TANF and CW. As a result, both TANF and CW caseworkers are more aware of what each system is doing with a client, and that information is then used in case planning as well as to improve service provision. JCC also offered data quality and data sharing training to TANF and CW staff participating in the project.

- *Louisiana Kinship Integrated Services System (LA KISS)*. LA KISS developed a new case management system and a calendar for case managers to input data and monitor case progress.

- *Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC)*. CITC's Management Information Systems (MIS) Department began an extensive process of developing a case management application. The successful development of some initial functions of this application improved CITC's ability to track clients across separate databases, which the grantee eventually unified into one integrated database. The creation of a unified information system allowed the grantee to better align several service areas, including children/family services, recovery services, TANF, employment and training, and education. The grantee also created its own Intranet for sharing information across all CITC programs.

- *California Linkages Project*. California Linkages counties created a Data/Evaluation Peer Cluster comprised of county representatives that communicate via regularly scheduled conference calls and share strategies for the collection and reporting of data at the statewide level across counties. Through Linkages, some counties in California also developed special standardized codes or flags to track dual clients in both CW and TANF data systems. Another approach to working around incompatible data systems is to designate specific employees from both TANF and CW and train them to cross-check for dual-system clients. At the end of the five-year demonstration, this approach was being employed in nearly 70 percent of Linkages counties (Harder + Company Community Research, 2011).

- *Rockland County Next Steps Program*. Next Steps program staff used an electronic reporting system to track referrals, program participants, and graduations.

Short-Term TANF/CW Client Outcomes Related to Information Sharing

The TANF/CW grantees demonstrated the use of innovative and effective strategies and practices for overcoming organizational and technological barriers to information sharing. While the focus of this brief is primarily on lessons learned to promote effective information sharing among TANF and CW agencies, the extent to which effective practices were

implemented necessarily affects their shared clients' experiences and outcomes. At a minimum, the grantees' implementation of strategies such as co-location, cross-training of staff, interdepartmental communication, joint case planning and shared access to client data foster more effective communication between TANF and CW workers and families, and contribute to the continued improvement of services for dual-system families. Based on clients' self-reports, initial outcomes that resulted in part from improved information sharing include decreased stress levels and an increased sense of support as human service staff came together with the shared goal of meeting their individual and family needs.[c] These outcomes are reflected in the comments of one Jefferson County Community Connection client:

> *"When you first start the process, you feel very alone; the JCC program definitely makes you feel that you are not. There are people there to help and having that support, those resources, and not feeling like it is you against the world, makes a difference."*

Looking Forward: The Future of TANF and Child Welfare Systems Interoperability

The conversation around improving information and data sharing between TANF and CW is broader than just the grantee cluster discussed in this brief, and additional resources are being developed to facilitate the interoperability of these services. In response to the GAO's 2011 report, *TANF and Child Welfare Programs: Increased Data Sharing Could Improve Access to Benefits and Services,* HHS commented that "regarding data sharing, States (and for IV-E, Tribes) are permitted to determine their own confidentiality rules and there are no specific Federal barriers to Title IV-E and IV-A programs exchanging information" (GAO, 2011, p. 53). HHS' statement further clarifies that no federal laws prohibit data sharing between TANF and CW agencies. HHS also describes current efforts towards interoperability between TANF and CW, including the establishment of an interoperability project team and the development of the first "Human Services Domain" (The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement [OCSE], 2012). The Human Services Domain, a part of the National Information Exchange Model, will establish a common set of data elements and definitions to facilitate smoother information exchanges between different human services systems at the federal, state, county, and tribal levels (OCSE). ACF and HHS have also produced an Interoperability Toolkit, which is available for download online.[d]

In addition, ACF/HHS recently launched the Data Exchange Standardization Project, which follows recent legislation on Titles IV-B and IV-A of the Social Security Act and requires the Office of Management and Budget along with ACF, and in collaboration with States, to set up working groups to define a standard way to exchange data (OCSE, 2012) .

Another resource available to States and Tribes to access information about data sharing, privacy, and confidentiality is the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT). HHS reports that NRC-CWDT hosted meetings and Webinars in 2011

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[c]Comprehensive information on the full range of client outcomes achieved by the 2006 TANF/Child Welfare Collaboration grantees can be found in the grantees' final reports.

[d] "Your Essential Interoperability Toolkit: An ACF/HHS Resource Guide" is available for download at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/interop/toolkit.pdf.

specifically on the issue of data sharing and related misconceptions around confidentiality and privacy (GAO, 2011). Examples of information releases and confidentiality agreements are available on the NRC-CWDT website at www.nrccwdt.org.

Although the above-mentioned resources are specific to collaboration efforts between TANF and CW programs, they may serve as a reference or provide guidance to collaborative and information sharing initiatives undertaken by a variety of agencies, programs, and organizations. At minimum, it is hoped that the experiences of the TANF/CW grantees and the strategies they employed will serve as a point of reference for other social service providers in the ongoing discourse around strategies for better meeting the complex needs of vulnerable families.

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