

# Building Capacity in Child Welfare

Findings From a Five-Year  
Evaluation of the Capacity  
Building Collaborative

## **Executive Summary**

*September 2020*



Evaluation

OF THE CAPACITY BUILDING COLLABORATIVE

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# Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an evaluation of the services delivered by the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative (Collaborative) funded by the Children’s Bureau (CB), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. CB established the Collaborative in 2014 to help state and tribal child welfare agencies and Court Improvement Programs (CIPs) meet federal mandates; enhance child welfare practices; and improve child and family outcomes related to safety, permanency, and well-being. The Collaborative is a partnership among three Capacity Building Centers (the Centers): the Center for Courts, the Center for States, and the Center for Tribes. Building on lessons learned from its previous training and technical assistance network, CB restructured its service providers to improve efficiency and promote consistent service delivery (Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, 2015) via common processes and practices.



Covering federal fiscal years (FYs) 2015 through 2019, the findings here stem from the cross-center evaluation conducted by a team of external evaluators led by James Bell Associates and ICF. Included are the types of capacity building services offered, the common service delivery approach the Centers used, and efforts to collaborate within and across Centers. This report details the universal and constituency products and services developed and disseminated by the Centers, the tailored services Centers provided to CIPs and state and tribal child welfare agencies, and the evaluation and outcomes of these services. The report also examines factors that influenced jurisdictions' decision to use services, their satisfaction with Center services, the nature and quality of relationships between Center service providers and recipients, and the outcomes of services. Finally, the report explores implications for future work by the Collaborative and for evaluation processes. Although the multimethod evaluation examined capacity building services designed for child welfare systems, including the courts, some of the lessons learned may be useful for program administrators, evaluators, and service providers in other fields.



## Collaborative Service Types

Each Center in the Collaborative serves a target audience, maintains its own administrative structure, and conducts its own evaluation:

- The Center for States supports state and territorial title IV-B and IV-E public child welfare agencies and assisted title IV-E waiver demonstration projects prior to their completion.
- The Center for Tribes serves title IV-B and title IV-E tribal child welfare agencies and organizations.
- The Center for Courts provides services to state and tribal CIPs.

All Collaborative services aim to enhance professional skills and build organizational capacities of the child welfare system and courts so they can achieve better outcomes for children, youth, and families. The Centers develop and offer three types of services—universal, constituency, and tailored:

- Universal and constituency services seek to build the capacity of professionals across multiple jurisdictions. Centers create content and disseminate information and materials that are broadly relevant to child welfare and court professionals; they also generate content specific to the roles of different stakeholders in the child welfare system.
- Tailored services offer customized support to meet the unique capacity building needs of an individual state, tribe, or CIP. Centers partner with jurisdictions and use an assessment process to identify strengths and needs; they then develop a work plan for those jurisdictions that decide to engage in services. The work plan outlines the activities of the jurisdiction and the services provided by the Center to achieve the desired enhancements in organizational capacity and practice improvements.



## Data Collection

The cross-center evaluation used a mixed-methods, longitudinal approach to answer evaluation questions about the Collaborative's services. The evaluation design was participatory and utilization-focused, with Center leadership, local Center evaluators, and federal staff actively involved in all phases of the study. Together the team learned what aspects of the evaluation approach worked well and where improvements could be made in evaluation design, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and analyses.

## Key Findings

The cross-center evaluation yielded an array of valuable insights into the functioning and service outcomes of the Collaborative. The evaluation produced findings on the nature



of services provided to jurisdictions, satisfaction with those services, knowledge gained about effective practices in child welfare, and the extent to which services improved understanding of change management and implementation and supported capacity building. Eight broad evaluation questions framed a mixed-method, longitudinal study that drew on multiple data collection strategies to capture rich quantitative and qualitative information. Some data were collected by the cross-center evaluation team, while the Centers and their evaluators provided other data. A summary of findings from the study follows.

## Universal and Constituency Services

Universal and constituency services seek to convey to the field key information on best practices in child welfare. Some information and materials target a broad, national audience of child welfare professionals (universal services), while other services target specific groups of professionals (constituency services). Universal and constituency services are not tailored to the needs of a specific jurisdiction. Centers produce three major categories of universal and constituency services: products, events, and learning experiences. To measure outcomes of products and events, the cross-center evaluation team relied on shared datasets of Center-administered satisfaction surveys. Important findings on universal and constituency services follow:

- Topics of products and events frequently aligned with Center and CB priorities.
- Universal and constituency services supported numerous constituency groups, including older youth, Indian Child Welfare Act specialists, and family leaders.
- Center learning experiences were accessible to participants via CapLEARN.<sup>1</sup>
- Centers used a variety of dissemination strategies to promote their products and services.

<sup>1</sup> [CapLEARN](#) is a password-protected, searchable site that provides users with a single location for accessing recorded webinars and learning experiences.

- Most universal and constituency services were intended to increase awareness and knowledge.
- Across all Centers, most respondents viewed the content of universal and constituency services as relevant to the values and context of their agencies and their communities and reported satisfaction with the products and services.
- Learning experiences yielded participant knowledge gains, as evidenced by results from pre-post knowledge tests administered by two Centers.

## Tailored Services

### Assessments and Work Planning

To identify jurisdictions' strengths and capacity building needs, the Centers engaged jurisdictions in assessments and developed work plans to address jurisdictions' needs. Key findings about assessment and work planning follow:

- Interviews with jurisdiction leadership revealed assessment and work planning services were perceived by most respondents as being beneficial.
- Some jurisdictions offered recommendations, such as simplifying the work plan, making the work plan more focused, changing the format of the work plan to be more interactive, and reviewing the work plan more frequently.
- Few CIPs indicated active involvement in their state child welfare agency's assessment. CIPs reported a desire for more collaboration between states and CIPs.

### Tailored Services Projects

Following assessment and work planning, Centers engaged jurisdictions in tailored services to address the identified capacity needs and support jurisdictions in making organizational changes and practice improvements. Key findings about the tailored services follow:

- Centers delivered most of their direct contact hours<sup>2</sup> in person, which enabled Center staff to use intensive service approaches more readily such as facilitation, coaching, and consultation.
- Centers focused most direct contact hours on strengthening organizational capacities in the areas of knowledge and skills, infrastructure, and engagement and partnership.
- Coaching was a particularly effective service strategy: the greater the proportion of direct contact hours delivered in the form of coaching, the faster jurisdictions achieved their implementation milestones.
- Service providers and jurisdiction project teams agreed organizational capacity increased in the capacities they targeted in their work plans.

<sup>2</sup> Hours of direct contact describe in-person or virtual communication between Center representatives and members of a jurisdiction that are intended to build capacity. The hours do not include time spent on indirect activities, such as preparing for a site visit, planning calls between Center staff and consultants, or activities not intended to build capacity such as making logistical arrangements for onsite visits.

- Jurisdiction project teams reported increases in their knowledge and skills related to change management and the implementation process.
- Service providers reported project teams completed most of their targeted milestones by project close.
- Project outcomes were influenced by the work of the Center service providers and the jurisdictions' organizational factors and foundational capacity.
- Jurisdictions with stronger foundational capacity were more likely to achieve their milestones than jurisdictions with less capacity.
- A greater number of hours of direct contact was associated with achievement of milestones and capacity enhancement.





## Collaboration

The three Centers are expected to collaborate. Collaboration of two or more Centers occurred most frequently in areas of federal priority and on topics shared by all Centers, such as the Indian Child Welfare Act, continuous quality improvement, and Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). The evaluation revealed collaboration within each Center happened often and was perceived positively by Center leadership and service providers:

- Of the 251 products the Collaborative developed, 40 (16 percent) involved collaboration with another Center.
- Many of these jointly developed products were recorded webinars and resources from the virtual expos and included topics most frequently related to safety and risk assessment, permanency planning, recruitment and retention of workforce, and federal reporting.
- Centers collaborated on more than one-fourth of tailored services projects.
- The Center for Courts collaborated with other Centers on 40 percent of their tailored service projects.
- Facilitators to collaboration across Centers included in-person and regularly scheduled meetings and frequent meetings of Center directors.

There were, however, barriers to collaboration across Centers including insufficient time to collaborate, limited opportunities for collaboration, differences in Center size with respect to annual funding and number of employees, insufficient resources to collaborate, and lack of structure to facilitate collaboration across Centers.





## Implications of the Evaluation

Although this multimethod evaluation involved capacity building services for child welfare, some of the lessons learned may pertain to other fields. Federal, state, tribal, and county program administrators; evaluators; and providers with other backgrounds may find relevant information related to preparing for and delivering services, facilitators and barriers to accessing capacity building services, and methods for evaluating training and technical assistance services.

### Implications for the Centers and Jurisdictions

- The Centers have benefited from consistently using a common change management approach to guide their work, which could be enhanced even further through greater operationalization and development of more consistent strategies.
- There appears to be an opportunity for cross-training among Centers on the change management and implementation approach, including opportunities for sharing techniques and unifying methods.
- Collaboration could be increased with improved communication and information sharing across Centers.
- Centers provided fewer direct contact hours related to the capacity building areas of culture and climate and resources. Further investigation is needed to understand why.
- By proactively following up with jurisdictions, Centers would have more opportunities to support late-stage implementation efforts, including installation and evaluation of interventions.
- Coaching was shown to be an effective service strategy; opportunities should be explored to determine when it can be used more often.
- If Centers played a more active role in promoting and facilitating collaboration between state agencies and CIPs during a state's assessment for tailored services, the CIPs could potentially enhance their role in state child welfare planning.

### Implications for Future Evaluations of Capacity Building Services

- Future evaluators of capacity building efforts should gather more information to assess how well jurisdictions understand the change management approach and assess its utility as a guiding framework for understanding and approaching capacity building service delivery.
- Future evaluations of capacity building efforts need to more thoroughly assess tailored services focused on CFSR and Program Improvement Plan development and implementation.
- Future evaluations should work to identify opportunities to assess tailored services outcomes related to practice (behavior) change.