

# Design for the Cross-Center Evaluation of the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative, 2020–2025

## Introduction

Child welfare agencies must function at an optimal level to meet their mandate of caring for abused and neglected children. The Children’s Bureau has provided training, technical assistance, and other supports to public child welfare jurisdictions—states, tribes, and courts—through a series of resource centers. These centers have varied in their structure and focus over time but were all designed to build the organizational capacity and functioning of jurisdictions to meet federal requirements, advance practice, and improve outcomes for children, youth, and families (Barbee, 2013).

For more than a decade, James Bell Associates and its partners have been contracted to design and implement independent, cross-center evaluations of these efforts in collaboration with the Children’s Bureau and service providers. This brief describes the rigorous, utilization-focused evaluation design developed to assess the activities, processes, collaboration, and effectiveness of the current training and technical assistance approach, the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative.

## About the Capacity Building Collaborative

The Collaborative began in its current form in 2015 as a partnership of three Capacity Building Centers, with each Center serving a distinct audience and maintaining its own administrative structure (James Bell Associates & ICF, 2020). The goal of the Collaborative is to build the capacities of jurisdictions to successfully undertake practice, organizational, and systemic child welfare and court reforms necessary to implement federal standards and achieve better outcomes for children, youth, and families.

The Collaborative comprises three Capacity Building Centers:

- **The Center for States** serves 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** serves state and tribal Court Improvement Programs (CIPs).

The Centers provide three types of services:

- **Universal services** are delivered to a broad audience of child welfare or court professionals to increase service awareness, understanding, engagement, access, and use.
- **Constituency/targeted services** are delivered to specific groups such as foster care managers or CIP directors to increase knowledge and skills about a topic or aspect of child welfare practice or policy. They also enhance peer connections and relationships of cohorts of child welfare and court professionals.
- **Tailored services** are the focus of the Cross-Center Evaluation. They are intended to increase knowledge and skills of child welfare or court professionals and foster improvements in organizational capacity and performance. Tailored services offer customized support to meet the unique capacity building needs of individual states, tribes, or CIPs. Centers partner with the jurisdictions, assess their strengths and needs, and develop a work plan for jurisdictions that decide to engage in services.

## Capacity Building

The Collaborative defines organizational capacity building as an ongoing, evidence-informed process intended to develop a system's potential to be productive and effective. Capacity can be built by applying the child welfare system's human and organizational assets to achieve its current and future goals. Organizational capacities are conceptualized as existing along five dimensions: resources, infrastructure, knowledge and skills, culture and climate, and partnership and engagement.

## About the Evaluation

James Bell Associates and ICF are conducting the second phase of the Cross-Center Evaluation of the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative under a 5-year contract awarded in 2019. The evaluation uses a mixed-methods, longitudinal design with a participatory and utilization-focused approach; the stakeholders whose efforts will be evaluated informed the design and are active participants in all phases of the work. The Cross-Center Evaluation dovetails with each Center's individual evaluation to produce a comprehensive examination of capacity building efforts and outcomes targeted to Center constituents. Developmental evaluation findings are shared with the Centers and the Children's Bureau during Collaborative meetings and through webinar presentations

to facilitate improvements in how service providers communicate, share information, and work together to meet the needs of states, tribes, and CIPs.

## Research Questions

The evaluation explores seven research questions developed with the Capacity Building Centers and the Children's Bureau. Evaluation topics address collaboration among the Centers and with federal staff, service interventions provided, service quality, and outcomes of tailored services interventions. The research questions are as follows:

1. How are Centers and federal staff collaborating? Are Centers meeting expectations for collaboration and achieving their shared goals?
2. What services are being delivered by Centers? To whom are services targeted and what outcomes do Centers expect to achieve? What is being delivered by Centers during tailored services (structure, quantity, duration)? How do Centers define their tailored service strategies and ensure there is consistency in this process?
3. How satisfied are service recipients with the quality of the Centers' services?
4. What are jurisdiction and federal staff experiences of tailored services assessment and work planning processes? Are these working as intended?
5. Are tailored services effective (e.g., building knowledge and skills, enhancing ability to complete targeted change management steps, enhancing capacity, achieving implementation milestones, changing child welfare practice behaviors)?
6. How are Centers applying change management steps/tasks in actual practice with jurisdictions? What is being adapted and how? How is change management progress/achievement being measured or assessed?
7. What factors affect engagement with the Centers and utilization of their services?

## Change Management and Implementation Approach

The work of the Collaborative is guided by the Change Management and Implementation Approach to service delivery across Centers. The CM Approach consists of five *phases* that describe work in early, mid, and late implementation: (1) identify and assess needs, (2) develop theory of change, (3) develop or select solution, (4) plan, prepare, and implement, and (5) evaluate and apply findings. Each phase includes *steps* (12 total) that research suggests will enhance the design and implementation of improvements to an organization's policies or practice. Phases and steps build on each other in a progression, with flexibility to revisit earlier phases to strengthen efforts in later phases when necessary. Each step features critical *milestones* that provide a common mechanism for Centers to measure and assess jurisdiction progress in meeting change management and implementation goals. Milestone achievement and capacity increase are key outcomes of interest in the evaluation.

# Measures and Methods for Evaluating Process, Implementation, and Outcomes

The key sources of data used to evaluate the Collaborative are shown in exhibit 1 and described below. This includes data sources to assess service delivery, satisfaction with services, and outcomes. The Cross-Center Evaluation team works closely with Center evaluators to ensure coordination of data collection activities and data sharing to reduce duplication and minimize respondent burden. Exhibit 2 displays the data collection activities and time frames.

## Exhibit 1. Key Data Sources and Associated Research Questions

Service delivery		Satisfaction with services		Service outcomes	
Data source	RQ	Data source	RQ	Data source	RQ
CapTRACK	1, 2	Assessment and workplanning process survey	3, 4	CapTRACK	5, 6
Collaboration and communication survey	1	Brief tailored services survey	3	Outcomes survey	5
Collaborative project team <sup>1</sup> survey	1	Tailored service quality and satisfaction survey	3	Brief tailored services survey	5
Interviews with Center leaders and federal staff	1, 2, 4, 6	Interviews with jurisdiction leadership	3, 4	Interviews with jurisdiction leadership	5
Interviews with Center staff and evaluators	5			Jurisdiction tailored services project team focus groups/interviews	5
Interviews with jurisdiction leadership and staff	7			Interviews with Center staff and evaluators	5
Jurisdiction tailored services project team focus groups/interviews	6, 7			Document review	5
Document review	1, 2, 4, 6				

### CapTRACK

CapTRACK is an online tracking system that allows Centers to record data about the amount and characteristics of universal, targeted/constituency, and tailored services they provide to states, tribes, and CIPs. Centers also record their perspectives on expected and actual outcomes of

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, the term “project team” refers to jurisdiction staff who are working on a tailored service project.

services, including the completion of milestones, achievement of capacities, and improvements in practice.

## Surveys

### *Collaboration and Communication Survey*

The Collaboration and Communication Survey is a key data source for the research question on collaboration. This online survey is administered twice to select Center and federal staff who are expected to interact with other Center and federal staff in their role. The purpose is to understand factors that support collaboration among Centers and with federal staff and whether they improve over time. Examples of constructs explored in the survey include shared goals for collaboration, shared resources, and communication among partners.

### *Collaborative Project Team Survey*

The Collaborative Project Team Survey examines whether collaborative teams for specific projects and/or communication teams exhibit signs of healthy communication. The survey includes the Collaborative Health Assessment Tool (Salignac et al., 2019), which measures dimensions of effective collaboration, and several background questions about the team. The survey is administered online to Center and federal staff when two or more Centers work together on discrete, co-created projects (e.g., tailored services projects). Examples of topics for projects include federal laws such as the Indian Child Welfare Act and Family First Prevention Services Act, Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) and Program Improvement Plans, and emerging topics such as COVID-19 and racial equity.

## Exhibit 2. Data Collection for the Evaluation of the Capacity Building Collaborative

Activity	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Center leadership and federal interviews	•	•	•	•
Center staff and evaluator interviews		•	•	
Collaboration and communication survey		•	•	
Collaborative project team survey		•	•	•
Jurisdiction leadership interviews		•	•	
Assessment and work planning process survey		•	•	•
Brief tailored services survey		•	•	•
Outcomes and tailored services satisfaction survey		•	•	•
Jurisdiction project team focus group/interviews		•		
Document reviews	•	•	•	•

## *Assessment and Work Planning Process Survey*

Centers engage jurisdictions in assessments to identify their strengths and capacity building needs, and then develop work plans to address those needs. The Assessment and Work Planning Process Survey captures information from Administration for Children and Family Regional Office staff about the process used by Centers to provide these assessment and work planning services to jurisdictions. This survey is administered annually to federal staff who were involved in this process, as identified by the Centers.

## *Outcomes Survey*

The Outcomes Survey collects data on jurisdictions' perceptions of change in key outcomes of tailored services: knowledge, skills, and capacities. The survey uses a retrospective post- then pretest design, asking recipients to report on their team's current levels of capacity, skills, and knowledge and the levels prior to the start of their tailored services work plan.<sup>2</sup> The survey identifies changes in organizational capacity along the following five dimensions: resources, infrastructure, culture and climate, knowledge and skills, and engagement and partnerships.<sup>3</sup> The survey also captures changes in project teams' knowledge and skills in managing organizational change.

## *Brief Tailored Services Survey*

The Brief Tailored Services Survey is used to capture jurisdictions' perceptions about tailored services with respect to changes in staff knowledge and skills, applicability to their work, positive effect on practice/performance, and alignment with needs. For the Center for States, the survey is administered to closed projects that received fewer than 5 hours of services and to those that received 5 or more hours but did not have a capacity dimension selected.<sup>4</sup> For the Center for Courts and the Center for Tribes, the survey is administered to closed projects that received fewer than 5 hours of services or received more hours but do not have a capacity dimension selected.

## *Tailored Services Quality and Satisfaction Survey*

Administered together with the Outcome Survey, the Tailored Services Quality and Satisfaction Survey assesses the perceptions of jurisdiction staff about the quality of tailored services received.

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<sup>2</sup> This method was preferred over a more traditional pretest/posttest data collection approach because the retrospective method (1) reduces burden on child welfare agency staff, because they are surveyed once instead of twice; and (2) minimizes response shift bias potentially introduced when agency staff revise their understanding of their "pre" capacity level over time as a function of their work with the Centers (Drennan & Hyde, 2008; Pratt 2000). This approach also tends to reduce missing data because the respondent completes the pre- and post-information in one sitting (Raidl et al., 2004).

<sup>3</sup> For more information about these organizational capacities and their selection as the focus of Center services, see [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/what\\_is\\_organizational\\_capacity.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/what_is_organizational_capacity.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Some jurisdictions do not target outcomes related to enhancing organizational capacity, but rather target achievement of change management and program implementation milestones.

The survey items capture perceptions of the expertise of the direct service providers, known as Center liaisons or child welfare specialists; the cultural responsiveness and respectfulness of Center liaisons/child welfare specialists; usefulness of services; likelihood of recommending services; and general satisfaction.

## **Interviews and Focus Groups**

### *Interviews With Center Leadership and Federal Staff*

Semi-structured interviews with Center leadership, federal stakeholders (e.g., Children’s Bureau regional and central office staff), and additional federal staff (depending on the topics being explored) are conducted annually. Interview topics vary each year and may address the context and focus of collaboration across Centers, similarities and differences in the focus and content of service development and delivery across years, and how the CM Approach is being applied in practice with jurisdictions. Emerging contextual issues that may affect the Collaborative and its services and questions of interest to the Children’s Bureau are also explored. Interviews are conducted individually or with groups when appropriate, by phone or videoconference.

### *Interviews With Center Staff and Evaluators*

Semi-structured interviews with Center staff who lead the development and implementation of tailored services and Center evaluators will be conducted in FY 2022 and FY 2023 to collect information on how Centers determine and identify outcome achievement. Areas of inquiry include whether Centers are identifying and establishing benchmarks for milestone and capacity outcomes, how these outcomes and benchmarks are documented in tailored service work plans, the Centers’ standards of evidence to determine that milestones and outcomes have been achieved, and who determines achievement of outcomes. Staff and evaluators will be interviewed together in Center-specific groups, by phone or videoconference. The number of staff will vary, based on those who serve in a lead role with respect to developing and implementing tailored services.

### *Jurisdiction Leadership Interviews*

Interviews with state and tribal child welfare directors and CIP directors or their designees will be conducted by videoconference in project years FY 2021 and FY 2023. These interviews will explore the jurisdictions’ experiences with tailored capacity building services provided by the Collaborative and factors that affect engagement with the Centers and use of their services. Some data also will be collected on outcomes achieved from the perspective of child welfare and CIP directors. Interviews are scheduled with all state child welfare directors and CIP directors and with a sample of tribal child welfare directors. Child welfare directors from a sample of territories also are interviewed.

## *Jurisdiction Tailored Services Project Team Focus Groups/Interviews*

Focus groups and interviews will be conducted in FY 2022 with project team members from a sample of 15 tailored service projects in state and tribal child welfare jurisdictions and CIPs. These interviews will explore the jurisdictions' experiences using capacity building services provided by the Collaborative from the perspective of those working most closely with Centers on tailored service projects. The interviews will address project teams' perceptions of the effectiveness and outcomes of capacity building services, perspectives on how Centers are applying the CM Approach in actual practice with jurisdictions, and factors that affect engagement with the Centers and use of their services.

## **Document Review**

Information from several types of documentation will serve as supplemental data sources. For example, Centers submit progress reports to the Children's Bureau as part of their funding requirement every 6 months. In collaboration with the Children's Bureau, the evaluation team created a report template to ensure consistency in reporting and will review the reports and extract needed information. The team will also review documents such as those related to annual convenings, reports and briefs, service descriptions, and protocols for essential information to assess collaboration, service delivery and definition, the assessment and work planning process, and application of the CM Approach.

## **Substudies**

### **Study of Liaison/Child Welfare Specialist Model**

The purpose of this substudy is to describe how each Center operationalizes the Center liaison/child welfare specialist model, highlight common approaches, and explore trends in service utilization and engagement by Center. The study explores five research questions:

1. How does each Center operationalize the liaison/child welfare specialist model?
2. What are the commonalities and differences in the liaison/child welfare specialist model among Centers?
3. How do tailored service recipients, contracting officer's representatives (CORs), Federal Project Officers (FPOs), Regional Office staff, CFSR team, and Center directors perceive the role of the liaison/child welfare specialist?
4. What do tailored service recipients, CORs, FPOs, Regional Office staff, CFSR team, and Center directors think works well when working with a liaison/child welfare specialist?
5. What do tailored service recipients, CORs, FPOs, Regional Office staff, CFSR team, and Center directors think could be improved when working with a liaison/child welfare specialist?



These questions will be answered using document review, interviews with Children’s Bureau and Center leadership, interviews with liaisons/child welfare specialists, interviews with a sample of primary state/tribe/court contacts, select data from satisfaction surveys, and data from CapTRACK.

## **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Exploratory Study**

This exploratory study will examine how the three Centers help child welfare jurisdictions build capacity within their systems to promote and advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The study explores three primary research questions:

1. What are the DEI technical assistance needs of the jurisdictions (i.e., states, tribes, and courts) supported by the Centers?
2. What capacity building services do the Centers deliver to jurisdictions that address DEI needs in states, tribes, and courts?
3. How and to what extent do Centers incorporate DEI research, knowledge, principles, and practices in their work with jurisdictions?

To minimize burden on Centers and jurisdiction staff, data collection for the DEI study will rely on methods being used for the broader evaluation. New DEI indicators will be added to existing protocols. For example, Center services data, which will include DEI-related questions, will be extracted from CapTRACK and added to leadership interviews with child welfare and court program directors. Data sources will include document review, CapTRACK, interviews with Center leadership and federal staff, jurisdiction leadership interviews, interviews with members of jurisdiction-tailored services teams when the project addresses DEI, interviews with Center liaisons, and DEI-focused discussions with up to nine Center evaluators.

## **Reporting and Dissemination**

The evaluation team’s strategy includes timely dissemination of meaningful findings. The team will develop reports, briefs, and presentations that foster application for program improvement and decision making. Per request, evaluation plans and findings will also be shared in meetings with the Children’s Bureau and stakeholders or presented via teleconferences, roundtable discussions, and other means. Findings will also be presented annually at the Collaborative meeting. In the final year of the evaluation, a comprehensive report will summarize the process, implementation, and outcome findings.

# References

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