

State Leadership, Policy and Practice in 2011



Through the Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP's) Strengthening Families Initiative, more than 30 states are working to promote five protective factors that research shows build family strengths, promote optimal child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. This summary of annual reports from 24 of those states demonstrates that the depth and reach of the Strengthening Families approach continued to grow in 2011.

Inspiring Collaborative Leadership

Collaboration across service systems is central to the Strengthening Families approach. State and local leadership teams are typically made up of multiple agencies and partners, including community and parent leaders. The majority of state leadership teams include representation from the state children's trust fund and/or other child abuse and neglect prevention agencies, early care and education, home visiting, maternal and child health and public health. The median number of agencies represented on leadership teams is 12, but at least seven state teams involve 20 or more agencies. Fourteen states report that parents and/or community members are on the state leadership team.

Leveraging Investment Opportunities

Nineteen states reported allocating a collective \$80 million to support Strengthening Families activities in 2011, mostly through existing sources such as federal Community Based Child Abuse Prevention dollars and state agency funding. An additional \$1 million came from private sources and in-kind contributions (volunteer time, meeting space, materials, etc.) Of all contributions, \$73.5 million was spent on direct support or incentives for implementing programs, \$3.4 million on professional development activities and \$1.2 million on leadership team and planning. Nearly \$1 million was allocated to evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of Strengthening Families activities.

Strengthening Program Practice

Strengthening Families increases the capacity of programs serving young children and their families to build protective factors through practice changes. These changes are captured in the Strengthening Families self-assessment, developed based on an in-depth study of exemplary program practice. More than 1,500 programs operating in 45 states are using the online version of the self-assessment. Collectively these programs have created 3,621 individual action plans to improve their Strengthening Families practice and invested \$1.4 million to put the plans into action. Five states are using the system in a structured way. For example, by encouraging and training programs to use the system, but the number is expected to rise to as many as 15 states in the coming year.

Strengthening Families is a research-based, cost-effective strategy to increase family stability, enhance child development and reduce child abuse and neglect. It builds five protective factors:

Parental resilience

Social connections

Knowledge of parenting and child development

Concrete support in times of need

Social and emotional competence of children

Through the Strengthening Families Initiative, more than thirty states are shifting policy, funding and training to help programs build these protective factors with the children and families they serve. Many states are also using the Strengthening Families approach to integrate state prevention strategies, focus on families in the child welfare system and engage parents and communities.

Nationally, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) coordinates Strengthening Families and works with more than a dozen national partner organizations to create a new vision in which communities, families, institutions, service systems and organizations:

- focus on building protective and promotive factors
- recognize and support parents as decision-makers and leaders
- value the culture and unique assets of each family
- are mutually responsible for better outcomes for children and families

For more information, visit
www.strengtheningfamilies.net

Building Momentum through Key Levers for Change

Using small investments, state and community leaders have found three “levers for change” key to growing and sustaining Strengthening Families over time.

1. Policy and Systems Implementation

States are using the Protective Factors Framework to define a shared set of desired outcomes for families across systems. To support quality early care and education opportunities, at least 19 states are working to integrate Strengthening Families into their Quality Ratings and Improvement Systems. Thirteen states are working to build partnerships between early care and education and child welfare and 17 states are integrating Strengthening Families into child welfare practice models, trainings or assessments. Twenty states are integrating Strengthening Families into home visiting policy and planning at the state or local levels. State Children’s Trust Funds (CTFs) continue to lead efforts and cultivate new partners while also deepening application of the Protective Factors Framework into their own core efforts. At least 20 CTFs have incorporated the protective factors into training for prevention providers and the same number has integrated the factors as the outcomes framework for local grantees. CTFs are also integrating the protective factors into their public awareness campaigns, mandatory reporter training and family support programs.

2. Parent Partnerships

Leadership from parents at every level encourages policymakers and practitioners alike to value parents as decision-makers and leaders. The Protective Factors Framework applies to all families and focuses on building strengths, which offers a positive starting point for family engagement. Program strategies built on the framework are intended to be adapted to the cultures, traditions and values of participating families, since protective factors are built and expressed differently in different contexts. Seventeen states are using the Community Café and/or the Parent Café models to engage parents in direct, parent-to-parent conversations about building protective factors. Parents are involved as members of the

statewide leadership team, working committees and/or parent advisory councils in 15 states. Nineteen states offer supports to encourage parent participation, most often in the form of training and leadership development, travel reimbursement and/or stipends.

3. Professional Development

Infusing the Protective Factors Framework into training for those who work with children and families builds common knowledge, goals and language across disciplines. Twenty-one states report reaching a total of 40,000 individuals through professional development, outreach and training on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework in the fields of early care and education, child abuse and neglect prevention, child welfare, home visiting and/or parents/community members, among other sectors. The most common delivery form was workshops/presentations at professional conferences. Twelve states offer Strengthening Families as a stand-alone course for in-service professionals, while 18 states have integrated content into other training course(s).

Conclusion

The Strengthening Families’ protective factors continue to resonate with state decision-makers as a commonsense approach to supporting families with young children. The framework’s broad relevance and firm basis in research have contributed to its rapid uptake, deeper implementation within programs and systems and expanded application across service sectors. As the national initiative continues to grow and evolve, states remain critical partners and innovation leaders in testing new ideas and contributing to the knowledge base of what works for families with young children.