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From Family Capacity Building to Family Well-being

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The Children's Bureau, celebrating its centennial year in 2012, was honored for its attention to families and for leading the nation in promoting practices and policies that strengthen and support families. Building on this theme of family-centered capacity building, there is a need to generate more evidence-based policy and practice. This special issue contributes to family centered goals with articles that help to inform the knowledge base for practice and policy.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* we address family assessment, engagement, support, and capacity building. We recognize that families do 90% of all counseling, education, caregiving, health care and norm enforcement for their members. While they are a vital backbone for services provided to their members across the lifespan, families often lack requisite skills, resources, and supports. Despite being challenged or overwhelmed, they may still be blamed for poor outcomes. This special issue examines an array of approaches to assess and build family capacity through innovative programs, interventions and measurement tools.

In the sections that follow, articles address an array of aspects of family strengthening approaches from multiple perspectives. Two papers provide a frame for the various perspectives that follow. Jones and Charles highlight both the challenges and strengths of young parents living in poverty. Communication and problem-solving skills and wrap-around support prove beneficial in strengthening these vulnerable families, but poverty proves an on-going challenge. They point to the need for combining typical family-strengthening efforts with focused efforts to enhance family members' human capital and employment opportunities. D'Aunno, Boel-Studt, and Landsman review a staple of family-centered child welfare practice; in-home services. They identify key elements of evidence-based in-home practice and review five specific practices that utilize these elements to strengthen and sustain families involved with child welfare services.

The services children and their families receive while involved with child welfare services are critical to achieving the of safety, stability, and well-being. Neglect is the most common type of child maltreatment. Corwin and colleagues report on their Family Asset Builder, a strengths-based intervention designed for families in which chronic neglect is occurring. Their analysis and discussion illuminates both their successes in engaging families and the challenges of interrupting chronic neglect. Gopalan and colleagues also report early findings on their peer-based intervention for caregivers involved with child welfare services. They find that supportive and educational interventions delivered in a family group context produced some initial promising results in removing barriers and enhancing families' engagement. James, Rivera, and Shafer also report results from a peer-based intervention for child welfare-involved parents who are also in substance use recovery. Peer recovery coaches improved engagement and length of treatment compared to professionally-based recovery services, but not completion outcomes. Madden, Aguiniga, and Zellman report child welfare involved mothers who attended religious services regularly were less likely to experience depression, further illuminating the value of social (and perhaps material) supports for mothers involved with child welfare services. Taken together, these studies provide a stimulating base for additional research to more fully understand how, when, and with whom, family-based services may be most valuable. Lize and colleagues cap off this discussion of new research by addressing the issue of implementation of a family-based

intervention. They find that evidence-based interventions for parents requiring high financial and human resource costs are likely to be modified when deployed by providers 'in the field' (i.e., outside of the more resource-rich research setting) and discuss the implications of this reality.

Children with special needs present challenges to both their families and to professionals. Child care is an important part of many pre-school age children's lives and the Children's Bureau has highlighted the important role it plays in the lives of child-welfare-involved children. Collins, Fischer, and Lalich report research on parents' experiences when children are referred for behavioral, developmental, or similar needs and assistance. Their results show both the importance of collaboration among the professionals involved, but also the need for greater engagement of the child's parents as they often were reported as being disengaged (by professionals) and feeling excluded (by parents themselves).

The Indian Child Welfare Act mandates that Native American children receive culturally relevant services and that decisions regarding assessment and placement be made with, if not, by tribal communities. Both Caringi and Lawson and Barron-McKeagney and Cummings emphasize systemic, family-centered approaches to intervention. Caringi and Lawson analyze and discuss the need for a vigorous trauma-informed child welfare system in the context of tribal child welfare. Barron-McKeagney and Cummings report findings from the Educare model of early child care in a tribal setting. Their work emphasizes the importance of viewing the child as part of the family and tribe as well as deploying not merely culturally sensitive, but culturally-infused, care for children.

A great deal of family strengthening work resides with our child welfare systems. Some requires more capacity building with staff and systems; others addresses improved engagement and services including those that focus on disparities. Coakley, Kelley and Bartlett address father involvement in child welfare systems. They delineate the kinds of barriers that impede full inclusion of fathers in case planning for their children and families. Kirven offers Holistic Integration Techniques (H.I.T.) as a method for father engagement and empowerment. Both articles underscore the importance of more inclusive practices involving fathers and ways to address barriers to engagement.

Clairborne and colleagues report on the empowering role that design teams play in participatory management and organizational redesign in child welfare systems. They show the effectiveness of design teams as they impact retention of front line staff. Cheung and Leung address racial disproportionalities in child welfare through a methodological tracking and data analysis process. Their study illustrates methods for helping a state track improvements and to pinpoint areas for more interventions.

Refugees and immigrants face enormous barriers to inclusion and high quality of treatment by the institutions that could be major sources of support to them and their families. The article by Bezette-Flores and Lazzare depicts a strengths based approach to generating information about the needs and solutions to the challenges faced by immigrants and refugees in the City of Houston. Using appreciative inquiry the authors delineate an exploratory outreach and data generating process. Schools play key roles in the capacity building process for children and families. Schools represent key access points for services for immigrant families and their children. The case study by Huber-Smith and Williford through a school finds that building trust, communicating and

empathy are key requirements along with cultural competency to support Latino immigrant families.

Families' interactions with the criminal justice system offer opportunities to further support and build capacity. Lloyd and Brook explore hallmark features of family drug courts. They analyze some of the core practices involved including interdisciplinary teams, higher intensity in court services, collaboration with service providers, and a family centered approach to wellbeing and safety. Harris and Herring offers special insights into the needs of mothers in jail through a pilot program in Houston. This addresses the needs of pregnant and post-partum women.

Knowledge promoting culturally competent, family centered practices in multiple settings is advanced by the array of articles in this special issue. Attention to systems issues through workforce development and tracking of systems change may also be a necessary condition for improved practice and policy outcomes.

The majority of articles in this special issue focus on the most vulnerable families and their children. This is reflective of the residual and crisis driven nature of family services and supports in the US. Perhaps future agendas involving the promotion of family wellbeing, through more prevention oriented resources, supports and services will emerge in the 21st century. Such prevention oriented policies and practices characterized many of the innovations of the Children Bureau in 1912. The advancement of family wellbeing remains an arena for more intensive development in the decades ahead. Absent a national family support policy framework for the US, preventable vulnerabilities and harms within families may persist.