

## SECTION I

## The Premise and the Promise of Interagency Initiatives

### Behavioral Health Needs of Children and Families Involved with the Child Welfare System

Children come to the attention of the child welfare system for many different reasons. Many have experienced abuse or neglect; and a social worker, law enforcement, or the court has determined that they need protection. In other families, parents have turned to the child welfare system as a last resort to gain access to extensive mental health services for their children that they have not been able to get through other child-serving systems. Children in both of these groups tend to be extremely vulnerable and are at high risk for health, mental health, and developmental problems.

For children in foster care, the trauma of separation from their families and the experience of multiple moves within the foster care system itself frequently increase their vulnerability and compound their behavioral health problems. Many parents, who experience the stresses that lead to involvement with the child welfare system, also need mental health services and supports, as well as substance abuse services. Through the federal Child and Family Services Review process, states are expected to provide the services needed to meet the physical health, mental health, and educational needs of children in the child welfare system. They are also charged with helping birth parents develop the capacity to meet the needs of their children.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, when the child welfare system participates in interagency initiatives to meet the behavioral health needs of children and families, it is very important that these initiatives understand the extent of behavioral health needs of both parents and children and the importance of adequately addressing these needs within the initiative.

### The Premise of Interagency Initiatives

Interagency initiatives to serve children with serious and complex behavioral health needs and their families are based on the following premises:

- Individualized and customized care within an interagency process can be designed with input and agreement from all systems serving the child and family.
- Integrated planning addresses service gaps, avoids duplication and redundancy, and is potentially more cost-effective.
- One integrated system reduces fragmentation and confusion for families seeking services and support.
- Children and families fare better when their care is coordinated and offered to the “whole” child and family.
- By increasing families’ involvement in services design and in determining their own care, services are more meaningful and more suited to family needs
- Shared planning, implementation, and evaluation will lead to services and delivery systems that better meet the needs of children served by the partner agencies and systems.
- Any “untreated” aspect of a child’s or family’s needs costs each service system more.
- Resource sharing – such as pooled, blended or braided funding – provides more flexible opportunities for financing services in general, creating new services, and paying for services that may otherwise be outside of the scope of any one particular service system.

<sup>3</sup> In March 2000, regulations went into effect for a new approach to federal oversight of state child welfare programs, known as the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). Overseen by the Children’s Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, the review process consists of statewide self-assessment as well as an on-site review, conducted by a team of federal, state, and peer reviewers. Information gathered through the review is used to examine the states’ success in meeting the major goals of the child welfare system—child safety, permanency and well-being. When states do not achieve “substantial conformity” with the required outcomes, they develop Program Improvement Plans to describe how they will reach substantial conformity.

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- Managed care strategies can be applied to interagency initiatives and support clinical decision-making, access to care, and cost effective service delivery.

### **The Promise of Interagency Initiatives-Making Interagency Initiatives Work for the Child Welfare System**

The hope for interagency initiatives, from the perspective of the child welfare system and the families it serves, is the promise of:

- appropriate and accessible services for children and families with the most complex and challenging needs,
- behavioral health services for the whole family as well as the identified child,
- a commitment to understanding and meeting the special or unique needs of children and families in the child welfare system,
- coordinated and continuous care, and
- access to behavioral health expertise that may be missing in the child welfare system itself.

From a systems perspective, the child welfare system hopes for expanded accountability and cost savings through shared responsibility in serving children and families with these special needs. Ultimately, the child welfare system strives for permanency—safe children, strong parents, caring homes, in the community—with no need for child welfare services.

#### **■ Commitment**

Interagency initiatives promise a shared commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of all children across service systems. Each agency has a voice in service design, development, and delivery. Agencies also commit resources to support the initiative and achieve full stakeholder investment. The child welfare system has the opportunity to describe the particular needs of the children and families they serve; insert its mandates, policies, and procedures into the mix of working with other child serving systems; and influence service design and delivery.

#### **■ Access to Services**

Interagency initiatives promise services that are accessible, appropriate, and adequate to serve children with serious and complex behavioral health needs and their families. Through tailored eligibility, streamlined enrollment, clinical decision making, and the use of intentional managed care strategies to maximize resources and support, children with serious and complex behavioral health needs and their families involved with the child welfare system can be accommodated.

#### **■ Coordinated and Continuous Care—A Plan and a Place for Children**

Interagency initiatives promise integrated service planning and more creative, individualized service plans for children with serious and complex behavioral health needs. They offer formal partnerships and opportunities for cross system communication on many administrative and service levels between systems. For the child welfare system, it is those children who have not benefited from traditional behavioral health services and need so much support who have the most to gain from the interagency, cross-system cooperation and resources.

#### **■ Whole Families, Stronger Families—Children Back Home and in the Community**

Interagency initiatives promise alternatives to out-of-home placement—by virtue of adequate non-traditional support services and improved child and family functioning. Wraparound support services, built across systems, can link families to community supports, services, and one another so that family functioning can improve and children can return home and to the community. For the child welfare system, this promise can help to address the ultimate goal of safe children in a permanent home with caring adults.

#### **■ Expanded Accountability**

Interagency initiatives promise a shared, cross-system responsibility for serving and supporting children with complex needs and their families. Each system brings its own expertise and services to offer appropriate behavioral health care, and families have voice as empowered and active partners in charge of their own care. For the child welfare system, this shared

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accountability eases its sense of sole responsibility for all services to these children and their families.

**■ Cost Savings**

Children with serious and complex behavioral health needs and their families who are involved with the child welfare system are those most at-risk-for involvement with multiple systems (e.g. child welfare, mental health, early intervention, special education, substance abuse, juvenile justice, etc.) and represent “high utilizers” of services in terms of level, amount, and cost of care. They are more likely to receive inpatient services, require therapeutic foster care, and utilize residential services. The child welfare system hopes to see fewer children in residential services (particularly out-of-state placement), lower cost of care, and better care per dollar per child in need.

**■ Permanency**

Ultimately, the child welfare system hopes to find permanent homes and reduce the number of children

involved with the system as children and families have appropriate access to behavioral health services, improve and grow stronger, and no longer require supervision, protection from abuse and neglect, or out-of-home placement to receive mental health services.

**The Challenge to Interagency Initiatives**

The challenge, of course, is to make good on the promise. To fulfill the promise and to create, implement, and sustain interagency initiatives that are effective in all of these ways require significant risk, commitment, creativity, patience, hard work, and proof. Those engaged in interagency initiatives take on the risk of new ways of doing business. We selected three study sites that demonstrate successful strategies for keeping the promise. All three have utilized strategies to accommodate the needs of children with serious and complex behavioral health needs and their families who are involved with the child welfare system. Each initiative is described in Section IV.