System of Care Definition

For more than 20 years the system of care philosophy has comprised a central strategy of service reform in children's mental health at the federal, state, and local levels. Clarity about the meaning of the system of care concept facilitates our understanding of the purpose, goals, and objectives of this system reform, our expectations for system implementation, and the evaluation of system impact. This has practical implications for administrators, service providers and families to the extent that concepts are translated into structures and processes that support service planning and delivery.

As *Case Studies of System Implementation* commenced in 2004, the research team determined that establishing a shared understanding of this concept would support careful and thoughtful adherence to the site selection criteria as well as reliability in the collection and analysis of data. The research team believed that it would be useful to capture the dynamic nature of organizational settings faced with shifting constraints and demands as well as incorporate definitional properties that explicitly address the growing understanding of systems as socially constructed and reflective of multiple perspectives and contexts.

The research team identified essential properties of systems of care, and these properties were defined and linked to relevant literature (see Table 1). The product of this undertaking was a definition for systems of care that expands, yet remains consistent with, the 1994 Stroul and Friedman definition. The research team's definition states, **"A system of care is an adaptive network of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions"** (Hodges, Ferreira, Israel, & Mazza, 2006).

The research team applied this definition to systems participating in the study as part of the site selection process and determined that each met the system of care criteria specified in the definition. Findings from this study indicate that local understanding of the system of care concept has influenced interagency collaboration, family partnership, and evaluation in established system of care communities. For example, a common understanding of system of care values and principles in Santa Cruz County, CA helped define interagency collaboration by incorporating parallel reform processes across key partner agencies. These include balanced and restorative justice in juvenile probation; federal and state child welfare reform, including Differential Response efforts; focus on educating students in the least restrictive, most normative environment; and substance abuse reform initiatives. In Region 3 Behavioral Health Services, NE, developing a shared definition of system of care concepts has strengthened efforts to involve families at all levels of planning, development, implementation and evaluation of the local system of care. These concepts establish system expectations of working together as equal partners to achieve positive results for the individual child and family as well as the child and family serving system. Hawaii's definition of a system of care, operationalized through the Hawaii CASSP Principles, has impacted their use of data in service planning and delivery and supported the concept of data as a way to ask meaningful questions about system performance.

Although discussion of the benefits, accomplishments, and challenges of systems of care has been rich over the past 20 years, there has not been an ongoing discussion about how core definitional concepts impact system implementation. The research team believes that a public discussion of the content and scope of the system of care concept will support system of care implementation. We invite readers to critique the system of care definition presented in this Issue Brief and challenge them to consider how their own definitions have influenced system of care implementation and evaluation.

> **Center researchers offer an expanded definition of systems of care to facilitate discussion about system implementation and evaluation of impact.**

Study 2

Case Studies of System Implementation is a five-year national study of strategies that local communities undertake to implement community-based systems of care. The purpose of the study is to understand how factors affecting system implementation contribute to the development of local systems of care for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families.

Methods

This study uses a multi-site embedded case study design. Participating systems were identified through a national nomination process and were selected on the basis of having: (1) an identified local population(s) of youth with serious emotional disturbance; (2) clearly identified goals for this population that are consistent with system-of-care values and principles; (3) active implementation of strategies to achieve these goals; (4) outcome information demonstrating progress toward these goals; and (5) demonstrated sustainability over time.

Data collection includes semi-structured key informant interviews, document review, site-based observation, and documented aggregate outcome data related to system implementation in communities with established service systems. Analysis uses an intensive and iterative team-based approach. The study will include a total of eight cases.

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A system of care is…

an adaptive network of structures, processes, and relationships grounded in system of care values and principles that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families with access to and availability of necessary services and supports across administrative and funding jurisdictions.

Table 1

Elements of System of Care Definition	Shared Meaning of Elements
An adaptive	Incorporating action, reaction, and learning over time (Holland, 1995)
network	A set of linkages across people, organizations or communities (Capra, 2002; Schensul, LeCompte, Trotter, Cromley, & Singer, 1999)
of structures,	Specified roles, responsibilities, and authorities that define organizational boundaries and enable an organization to perform its functions (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Plsek, 2003; Thierry, Koopman, & de Guilder, 1998)
processes,	Methods of carrying out organizational activities often involving sequences or a set of interrelated activities that enable an organization to perform its functions (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Plsek, 2003; Thierry, Koopman, & de Guilder, 1998)
and relationships	Trust-based links creating connectedness across people and organizations (Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005)
grounded in system of care values and principles	As defined by Stroul and Friedman (1994), and Hernandez, Worthington, and Davis (2005)
that provides children and youth with serious emotional disturbance and their families	An identified local population of children and youth and their families (Center for Mental Health Services, 2002; Hernandez & Hodges, 2003)
with access to	Ability to enter, navigate, and exit appropriate services and supports as needed (Center for Mental Health Services, 2003, 2004; Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003)
and availability of	Sufficient range and capacity of services and supports (Stroul, Lourie, Goldman, & Katz-Leavy, 1992; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003)
necessary services and supports	Necessary emphasizes the provision of whatever services and supports are needed for an individual child and his/her family and include formal and informal, traditional and non-traditional assistance (Burchard, Bruns, & Burchard, 2002; Lazear & Pires, 2002; Hernandez, Worthington, & Davis, 2005)
across administrative and funding jurisdictions.	Unrestricted by categorical administrative and funding boundaries (Pires, 2002; Stroul & Friedman, 1994; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003)

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