

NRCOI FACT SHEET

Assessing and Enhancing the Service Array in Child Welfare

What is the service array in child welfare?

When children are victims of abuse and neglect, efforts to strengthen and support their families are critical. Historically, services to these children and families were largely limited to a “menu” of categorical, slot-based services from which caseworkers could draw. In many jurisdictions, caseworkers had to limit plans and goals due to the small array of available services. Communities were less likely to have a sense of ownership for child outcomes or to provide long-term support for families since key stakeholders were not involved in building solutions. The resulting inability to craft individualized case plans made long-term resolution of family risk and safety factors less likely.

In the past 10 to 15 years, local, State and national child welfare reform efforts, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), have been guided by core values similar to the principles behind System of Care models in children’s mental health. Broadly stated, system of care casework practice assumes a highly individualized case plan and tailored services that build sustainable, wrap-around solutions from the strengths and needs of the family. This strengths-based approach to case planning provides jurisdictions with a mechanism to respond to the unique needs of children and is more likely to increase local capacity for a responsive service array.

More importantly, working with families from a strengths-based, rather than a deficits-based, approach through provision of services that support family members is proven to promote parental motivation and engagement.

The array of services available to children and families within a jurisdiction should be grounded in the following practice principles from the CFSR:

- Services must be family-centered, working with the family as a collective unit.
- Services must be community-based, mobilizing community resources for the support of the family.
- Services must be individualized to meet the needs of each child and family.
- Services should enhance parental capacity so families can care for their own children’s safety, permanency, and well-being.

In the CFSRs, States are evaluated on the achievement of seven outcomes and the functionality of seven systemic factors—the infrastructure needed for an effective child welfare system. One of the seven systemic factors assessed is the service array. Here are the criteria States must meet:

- The State has in place an array of services that assess the strengths and needs of children and families and determine other service needs, address the needs of families in addition to individual children in order to create a safe home environment, enable child-

ren to remain safe with their parents when reasonable, and help children in foster and adoptive placement achieve permanency (Item 35).

- The services in item 35 are accessible to families and children in all political jurisdictions covered in the State’s Child and Family Services Plan (Item 36).
- The services in Item 35 can be individualized to meet the unique needs of children and families served by the agency (Item 37).

The Service Array Process

Two National Resource Centers (NRCs) in the Children’s Bureau’s Training and Technical Assistance Network—the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement (NRCOI) and the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT) — developed and field tested a process for assessing and enhancing the service array in child welfare. This process has now been used in multiple States and jurisdictions.

The process is designed to help a State at the community, regional, and State levels (1) assess its capacities to meet the individualized needs of children, youth, and families; and (2) based on this assessment, create and implement a Resource and Capacity Development Plan. The NRCs have identified 39 capacities a State/jurisdiction must have, based on the CFSR’s seven outcomes, to meet the needs of children, youth and families who come into the child welfare system.

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This process can be used at any time by a State/Tribe/jurisdiction as a means to fully assess and address its capacities. In addition, since the process is designed to address the requirements for the service array systemic factor of the CFSR, it can also be incorporated into preparations for the CFSR or as a strategy in the State's Program Improvement Plan (PIP) if the review shows the service array as an area needing improvement.

Most jurisdictions will not want or need to assess all the child welfare capacities listed in the accompanying document. For example, in the CFSR, if a State's Statewide Assessment and/or On-site Federal Review has identified outcomes, items, and systemic factors which are not in substantial conformity or which have been rated as an Area Needing Improvement, the State may decide to adapt this service array process as part of its Program Improvement Plan to assess only those non-conforming outcomes/capacities and create and implement a Resource and Capacity Development Plan to improve capacities in those areas. Another example is a jurisdiction that wants to build capacities to impact portions of its system. For instance, a desire to reduce a high rate of residential care often dictates enhancing those capacities required to successfully return children home and keep them home safely.

This service array process can be adopted at the State/Tribal level and implemented incrementally at a site

or jurisdiction level. Typically, after the initial training of State staff, this process is piloted in one jurisdiction, with technical assistance by the NRCOI and the NRC-CWDT, while simultaneously training State and local leaders to replicate the process throughout the State or in other jurisdictions in the State.

In the service array process, four assessments related to building the jurisdiction's capacities are completed:

- current services,
- current practices,
- current leadership and systemic culture, and
- service and practice gaps.

The results of these assessments are used to create the Resource and Capacity Development Plan to enhance the jurisdiction's capacities, which is then implemented by the agency in partnership with its community stakeholders (see below). This Plan entails:

- enhancing current services,
- reforming current practice,
- improving the systemic culture,
- establishing utilization estimates for new services and practices needed, and
- incorporating a continuous quality improvement process to evaluate the effects of changes on outcomes for children and families.

The Resource and Capacity Development Plan also identifies the strategies to be developed and the organizations/persons responsible for the action steps, benchmarks, and timelines.

Community Stakeholders

For the process to result in an enhanced service array in a given jurisdiction, community stakeholders must be involved throughout all the steps. Key stakeholders include:

- public and private sector providers of child welfare services;
- birth parents, family caregivers (resource, foster, kinship care, and adoptive families), and youth, who have experience with the child welfare system;
- court, legal, and law enforcement officials, including staff of the Administrative Office of the Court and the Court Improvement Program, and CASA volunteers;
- Tribal representatives;
- mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence service providers;
- educators, health care providers, home visiting program staff;
- child abuse prevention advocates and staff;
- other key providers (e.g., housing, food resources, transportation, recreation);
- elected officials and administrators, including legislators and legislative staff;
- representatives of business, faith, labor, and media communities;
- other public sector employees, community-based organizations, and representatives of entities such as the United Way and local foundations.

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