

Request for Applications

Purpose

The Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center (NCIC) is soliciting applications from state and tribal child welfare agencies seeking intensive technical assistance to implement sustainable and systemic improvements to their child welfare systems. Selected projects will focus on implementing strategies to improve the quality and effectiveness of child welfare systems in increasing the safety, permanency, and well-being for children, youth and families. NCIC intends to partner with and assist states and tribes in developing projects that meet their needs and fit the scope of this RFA as well as in determining the appropriate time to submit a proposal based on the agency's readiness to begin a systemic change project.

Background

NCIC is a Child Welfare Technical Assistance Implementation Center funded by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (the "Children's Bureau") and its services are funded by the Children's Bureau. NCIC serves Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Regions 1 and 2. NCIC is housed within the Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. NCIC is part of the Children's Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Network. The T/TA Network supports best practice and promotes positive change in child welfare systems that receive federal funds. The role of the new Implementation Centers is intended to complement the existing T/TA Network by providing individualized, long-term, intensive technical assistance to produce systemic change in response to specific needs and problems.

Assistance Available

Selected states and tribes will receive intensive technical assistance in the form of direct service from NCIC and/or technical assistance through independent contractors coordinated by NCIC. In addition, NCIC funds may be requested to support a dedicated project manager, travel, materials, meetings, or other supports needed for a successful implementation project. NCIC will collaborate with state or tribal staff to facilitate and coordinate implementation project activities and NCIC will allocate those funds necessary to secure resources, plan systemic interventions, implement the change process and complete the project. NCIC intends that the technical assistance it provides will be individualized, strengths-based and highly responsive to the needs of the state or tribal partner.

States /tribes may submit only one application in any submission period. They should determine the project that best meets their needs and priorities and is the best fit with the scope and intent of this RFA. NCIC will work with successful applicants to determine an appropriate resource allocation to support their implementation needs. Assistance provided must be significant. At a minimum, NCIC will allocate resources worth \$100,000 per project per budget period. Assistance provided will not exceed \$700,000 per project per budget period. We anticipate that the annual budget for most projects will be funded at the

lower to mid-level of that range and that projects funded at the higher end will likely involve a Consortium (defined below), with careful consideration given to impact and feasibility. In general, the NCIC budget period is the federal fiscal year (October 1 through September 30). However, this RFA is soliciting applications for projects beginning in July 2009.

Results of the evaluation process will be synthesized and recommendations forwarded to the Children's Bureau for their final approval. The NCIC will provide comprehensive feedback on state and tribal applications not selected for a project and every effort will be made to assist these applicants in connecting with other resources available through the T/TA Network. These applicants will also be encouraged to participate in peer-to-peer network opportunities to promote information sharing across all jurisdictions in Region I and II. Consultation will also be available for developing applications in a future RFA cycle.

All implementation projects are to conclude by September 28, 2013. The minimum project period for an implementation project is 24 months.

This RFA is the first of several RFAs to be issued by NCIC. NCIC will select at least two of the applications received by May 29 to begin on July 1, 2009. Additionally, the NCIC may determine an application received in this cycle is not ready for a July 1 start date and could offer a delayed start date of October 1, 2009. A separate deadline for first round applications will be established for tribal agencies in conjunction with a planned gathering to be held in summer 2009.

Currently, we plan to issue other RFAs of comparable scope according to the following schedule. This schedule may change depending on the amount of funding remaining and other factors.

<i>RFA Issued</i>	<i>Project Start Date</i>
January, 2010	March, 2010
July, 2010	October, 2010
January, 2011	March, 2011
July, 2011	October, 2011

Who May Apply

An eligible applicant is:

- A state, territory or tribal child welfare agency (“Agency”) or a consortium of child welfare agencies (“Consortium”);
- Currently receiving formula grant funds (Title IV-B) administered by the Children’s Bureau.
- Located in NCIC’s service area (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Vermont, and the Virgin Islands).

A territory, tribe, or tribal consortium must be a formula grantee in order to be eligible for an implementation project. Federally-recognized tribes that are not receiving formula grant funds are not eligible to submit project applications.

Eligible Implementation Projects

Eligible implementation projects are those that are substantial enough to result in positive sustainable systems change. Although projects may vary in their intensity, duration, and approach, implementation projects must focus on systems, not discrete problems or issues. Implementation activities may impact organizational culture, policy, practice, processes, and other system or subsystem components. An applicant may pursue systemic change within the child welfare system or across other systems that are integral to successful child welfare practice. A project could also be proposed by a geographical subset of a state, tribe or territory or, in the case of a Consortium, multiple geographical subsets, crossing jurisdictional lines. For Consortiums, the project must be tailored, substantial, and capable of supporting implementation strategies that will drive sustainable change for each member of the Consortium.

Successful applicants may differ in their vision, objectives, scope and activities but their implementation activities must be intended to result in planned and measurable system improvements. NCIC does not require improved outcomes for children and families to be achieved during the term of the implementation project. However, the Agency should be able to show a reasonable relationship between implementation activities, the planned and measurable system improvements these activities will create, and anticipated improved outcomes expected to result for children and families. Implementation projects should include a plan for ensuring the sustainability of systemic change beyond the term of the implementation project.

Agencies should design their projects in a manner that addresses the elements most commonly associated with successful implementation. Those elements are reflected in the review criteria that NCIC will use, which is included in SELECTION CRITERIA AND PROCESS.

Project phases will include:

- *Project-Specific Assessment & Planning:* NCIC and the Agency or Consortium will assess organizational readiness and needs, refine the proposed project plan and resource request, develop an implementation plan, and negotiate and sign a Memorandum of Agreement.
- *Implementation:* The Agency or Consortium project leader, in collaboration with a cross-functional implementation team, will implement and monitor the project plan. NCIC team members will meet regularly with the project leader, the implementation team, and the executive sponsor to support their work, to help guide mid-course corrections, and to assist in accessing resources, as needed.
- *Sustainability Planning:* The Agency and Consortium will partner with NCIC to develop and implement a plan for sustaining systemic change beyond the term of the project.

Illustrative, Hypothetical Examples

The following are examples of implementation projects that would fit the intent of this RFA. These examples are provided only as illustrations of the range of possibilities. They are not exhaustive or prescriptive. Child welfare agencies are encouraged to submit applications that creatively address their individual circumstances, meet their objectives, and respond to the evaluation criteria specified below in SELECTION CRITERIA AND PROCESS. No duration is suggested since each of these could take from two to four years depending on the size of the state, number of partners involved, and the scope of the change.

1. The child welfare agency has identified improving supervisory practice as a core strategy for improving its permanency (reunification, adoption, guardianship) outcomes. In order to do so, it proposes to develop and implement a training curriculum to build supervisors' skills in using an array

of tools and strategies designed to manage towards outcomes. The training will be supplemented by peer coaching and mutual problem-solving. Supervisory peer leaders will be nominated by their managers and trained to provide leadership to their peers and area office colleagues. During specified phases of the project, regular supervisory responsibilities will be reassigned so that these peer leaders can immerse in and benefit from their new role. The agency believes that this will be a unique professional development opportunity that provides a break from the stress of day-to-day supervision as well as a critical strategy for building management capacity and supporting succession planning. The agency requests resources in the form of a curriculum developer and experts in supervisory best practices, coaches for the supervisory peer leaders, funding to backfill peer supervisory leaders, technology to support virtual meetings, and funding to support in-person meetings of the supervisors.

2. Assessing the presence of safety and risk factors has been identified by four child welfare agencies in Regions 1 and 2 as critical to their work with children and their families. Each agency has developed its own safety and risk assessment tool that it now wishes to implement. These tools are quite similar across the states, varying only in accordance with specific state laws and terminology. The agencies join together to request resources to provide in-depth training for front-line social workers and supervisors as well as orientation training for managers. They also request funding to support their collaboration throughout implementation, including via conference calls and in-person meetings. To ensure that the assessment policy and procedures are fully supported, each agency anticipates needing to examine and rewrite related policies, to reprogram components of their automated data collection and reporting systems¹, and to develop reports for inclusion in their quality assurance programs. They request funding to engage in joint problem-solving and mutual aid as well as to support their individual efforts in these areas. Funding is also requested to provide stipends to family representatives / advocates who will be engaged to ensure the new assessment practice and tools are appropriately supportive and respectful to families. In all aspects of the project, the agencies intend to examine the impact of the new assessment policy and practice on the disproportional rate of children of color being removed from their homes.
3. The child welfare agency has designed a comprehensive family-centered case practice model that builds on and incorporates family conferencing pilots. The new practice model focuses on engaging families more fully in treatment planning, with special concern about reaching non-resident fathers. A project team, led by a project manager for whom the agency requests funding, will assess the extent to which existing components of the practice model are working effectively and able to support the roll out of a full practice model. The project team will also assess the readiness of field offices to implement the practice model. Funding for a consultant with expertise in organizational readiness is requested to support this work. Because the project manager and project team will coordinate the implementation of the practice model statewide, funding is requested to support their meetings. The team's work will also include examining and rewriting agency policies and training as necessary to support the case practice model. The agency anticipates the need to access expertise from the Training & Technical Assistance Network to assist in this work and requests NCIC guidance in identifying specific resources.
4. The child welfare agency proposes to work with the Courts to improve the timeliness to permanency. The agency and the court have agreed to establish a joint workgroup, led by a project manager, to analyze the barriers to timeliness in regions of the state that have poor performance in permanency outcomes. In those regions, the team will look at samples of cases, identify court and agency barriers

¹ Changes to SACWIS require approval from the Children's Bureau Office for State Systems staff.

to permanency based on the case reviews, and develop and implement plans to address these barriers. Funding and consultation is requested for each of these activities.

5. The child welfare agency has advanced its own internal work in implementing a family-centered case practice model. It now intends to turn its attention and efforts to working with its contracted service providers to align their practice with that of the child welfare agency. A particular concern is reducing the time a child spends in residential / congregate care settings and enhancing family engagement by those programs. This requires parallel work to increase the capacity of community-based and in-home services to care for children with complex needs. The child welfare agency has engaged a provider trade organization and agreed to establish a workgroup with representatives from the agency, from service providers, and from families to advise this effort. Funding is requested for a project manager who will coordinate this group as well as work with expert consultants to develop training and organizational change tools for providers.
6. The Fostering Connections legislation has brought new focus and urgency to the child welfare agency's work with local school districts to ensure the educational stability of children in its care / custody. The child welfare agency proposes to work with the school districts in one of its counties to develop and test strategies that help ensure educational stability. Their intention is to identify and share with other counties the strategies that emerge as most effective. In order to identify the causes of educational instability, they propose to review cases in which educational stability was achieved and in which it was undermined. They will also hold focus groups with teachers and school staff, child welfare staff, families and youth, and placement providers. A project manager will lead a project team with representatives from each of these groups to examine case review and focus group data, fully examine the barriers to stability, and identify existing and develop potential successful strategies. In addition to implementing selected strategies in their own county, they also plan to present their work to child welfare and school leaders in other counties.

Applications

Deadline for Applications

To be considered for this funding cycle, a state agency's application must be received by email no later than 12:00 p.m. on May 29, 2009. Applications received after the deadline may be considered in the next funding cycle, if the applicant agrees. A separate deadline will be established for tribal agencies in conjunction with a planned gathering to be held in summer 2009.

Where to Send Applications

Applications must be sent by email in PDF format to Susan N. Kanak, NCIC Project Director at skanak@usm.maine.edu,² with one hard copy (with original signatures) to follow by mail or hand delivery at the address below:

Northeast and Caribbean Implementation Center
c/o Susan N. Kanak, Project Director

By U.S. mail:

Muskie School of Public Service
University of Southern Maine

² Alternative formats may be accepted with the approval of Susan Kanak, who can be reached by email at skanak@usm.maine.edu or by phone at 207.780.5840.

PO Box 9300
Portland, ME 04104-9300

By Hand Delivery:

Muskie School of Public Service
University of Southern Maine
333 Wishcamper Center
34 Bedford Street
Portland, ME 04104-9300

Application Elements

1. Cover Letter
2. Project Summary (a 200 word abstract)
3. Narrative (10 page maximum, single spaced)
4. Work Plan
5. Letters of Commitment

Application Content

The Agency's application must include:

1. A Cover Letter signed by the executive having the necessary authority to commit the Agency to completing the proposed project activities (*e.g.*, a department commissioner or agency office director); and describing the executive's support for and commitment to all aspects of the project. If the applicant is a Consortium, the executive for each member of the Consortium must sign.
2. A Project Summary
3. A Narrative that includes:
 - a. A statement of need and relevant information supporting their statement of need.
 - b. A description of the desired change or future state that will result from the proposed project.
 - c. The Agency's strategies for achieving and sustaining the desired change, including strategies for building on strengths and sources of support and strategies for addressing challenges and barriers. Applicants are encouraged to refer to the ELIGIBLE IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS section, above, and SELECTION CRITERIA & PROCESS, below, when designing their strategies.
 - d. The scope of the project, specifying who is expected to benefit from the project in terms of population, geographic region, and the target audience or systems component (*e.g.*, workforce) to be impacted by project activities.
 - e. The anticipated benefit or improved outcomes for children and families, the Agency, and others.
 - f. A description of how implementation will be managed, by whom and an organizational chart for project management showing the relationship between project management and Agency or Consortium executives. If the applicant is a consortium the narrative should explain how the consortium plans to manage the implementation project as well as how resources will be managed, allocated or shared across consortium members. For example, will one partner

serve as a “lead agency” who will manage the project for the consortium or will each member of the consortium be responsible for implementation in their state or tribe?

g. The Agency’s proposed approach for monitoring its progress against its work plan.

4. Work Plan for the project period, broken out by year.

5. Evaluation

Provide an evaluation plan for the project that includes: data that will be collected, specific benchmarks to measure success, and suggested measurement tools/instruments.

6. Resource Request and Justification

As part of the initial planning for each selected project, the NCIC will work with the leadership for selected projects to further develop and refine the resource request so that we can allocate sufficient resources needed for successful implementation. In order to assist in this process, please:

a. Complete the Resource Plan Request & Justification chart included in Attachment A; and

b. Provide a narrative as to how existing resources, including any local or state funded initiatives and efforts related to past, current and planned technical assistance, will be integrated to contribute to the systemic change effort.

7. Letters of Commitment from stakeholders whose participation is key to the success of the implementation project and who will have a specific role in the implementation workplan.

Application Format

To be accepted and reviewed in funding cycle, applications must:

1. Be on 8 ½ x 11 inch paper with no less than one-inch margins (top, bottom and sides).
2. Use a font size not smaller than 12-point and an average character density not greater than 14 characters per inch.
3. Include the required content identified above.

When a proposal is submitted it must be in final form and complete. NCIC is not able to make changes, insert or delete any pages or attachments contained in the proposal package after it is submitted. No proposal, or portion of a proposal, will be accepted if sent through a facsimile (FAX) machine.

Selection Criteria & Process

NCIC will use the following criteria for evaluating and selecting implementation projects. Each category below is worth 10 points. All proposals shall be reviewed using the rating system and criteria outlined below. Points will be awarded for each category as a total, not for each individual question with the category.

Rating	Finding
0	<i>Inadequate or unacceptable response:</i> The Agency did not respond to the question or the response reflects no understanding of the requirements.
1 -2	<i>Minimal:</i> The Agency demonstrates a minimum understanding of the requirements, but does not provide adequate detail or reflects more deficits than strengths.
3- 4	<i>Fair:</i> The Agency's response meets minimal requirements and demonstrates some strengths, but also demonstrates some deficits.
5 -6	<i>Good:</i> The Agency's response reflects a solid understanding of the issues and satisfies all the requirements.
7 -8	<i>Very Good:</i> The Agency's response satisfies all requirements; exceeds some.
9- 10	<i>Excellent:</i> The Agency's response is complete and exceeds all requirements.

1. The Agency's proposal provides a clear and compelling **statement of need**.
 - The proposed new practice / program / policy / approach is founded on a comprehensive needs assessment, which could include data analysis, research, CFSR findings, best practice approaches, etc.
 - There is a clear description of the desired change / future state that will result from the proposed project.
 - The proposed project is clearly integrated with the Agency's strategic plan, existing initiatives, and their PIP, as appropriate.

2. The Agency has assessed, and has a plan to enhance where necessary, the **readiness and capacity for change** in the identified geographic regions / organizational units involved in the project.
 - The Agency has considered the organizational readiness and capacity for change in developing the scope and scale of its proposed project.
 - The Agency has identified strategies for addressing the challenges and barriers to successful implementation of the project.
 - The Agency presents organizational change strategies that build on sources of support and acceptance and respond to sources of resistance to change.

3. The Agency's proposed **workplan and timeline** are feasible.
 - The workplan covers the operational details and processes required to align/re-align practice, policy, training, quality assurance, and personnel to support and sustain the identified change.
 - The proposed workplan indicates the primary project positions and identifies major roles and responsibilities of those staff.
 - The overall timeline is of sufficient duration to achieve the proposed change and the intermediary steps are reasonably paced.
 - The Agency is committed to creating and authorizing a cross-functional implementation team or taskforce to guide the project, manage its details, and solve problems that risk impeding success.
 - Specific communication strategies and mechanisms are identified in the workplan.

4. The **resources** requested by the Agency are necessary, reasonable and sufficient to implement the project successfully.
 - The request estimates the resources related to staff time, equipment, materials, access to expertise, and training needed for the project.
 - The Agency has identified the specific areas of technical assistance needed from the NCIC.

- The Agency’s provision of in-kind resources (e.g. staff time) is reasonable and appropriate.
 - The need for NCIC resources is clearly justified.
 - If identified by the Agency, the consultation needs from the T/TA Network and/or other organizations are reasonable and integrated into the proposed workplan.
5. The proposed project will result in **improved outcomes** for children and families.
 - The specific child welfare population expected to benefit from the project is clearly identified.
 - There is a clear description of how project activities will impact agency structures and processes, and how these will result in improved child and family outcomes.
 - The specific outcomes targeted for improvement are identified in measurable terms.
 6. There will be significant **benefits** to the Agency as well as the child welfare community resulting **from the investment of resources** in the proposed project.
 - The scale of the Agency’s proposed project (e.g., agency-wide, specific geographic region, multi-state, program division, subset of child welfare population) is both substantial enough to make an impact and feasible to implement.
 - The Agency will benefit from both the NCIC resources specifically and the connection to the T/TA Network generally.
 - The proposed project demonstrates innovation and creativity in addressing a significant child welfare challenge.
 - The lessons learned / evaluation findings from the proposed project will be valuable contributions to the child welfare community.
 7. The proposed project reflects a commitment to a **family-centered value system**.
 - The Agency has a plan for engaging representatives of the families and youth intended to benefit from the project in all phases of project development and implementation.
 - The proposed project reflects family-centered practice, community-based services, individualizing services, and strengthening the capacity of families.
 - The proposed project reflects a systemic view of child welfare work.
 8. The Agency’s proposal demonstrates a commitment to **involving internal and external stakeholders**.
 - The Agency has a clear plan for involving the middle managers and frontline supervisors and social work staff who will be impacted by the project.
 - The Agency has a clear plan for involving other child-serving systems (e.g., service providers, oversight agencies, schools, courts, youth advisory groups, university partners, juvenile justice agencies), as needed for the project’s successful implementation.
 - If the proposed project is a collaboration, the Agency provides evidence of their partner(s)’s commitment to the project.
 9. The Agency’s proposed approach for **monitoring and evaluating** its implementation project and its impact on performance and quality is clear, reasonable, and appropriate.
 - The expected impact on performance and quality is clearly identified in measurable terms.
 - The Agency has proposed project-specific feedback loops to ensure effective implementation and fidelity to the new program / practice.
 - The Agency has identified existing feedback loops and described how they will use them to connect the project to Agency-wide plans and outcomes.
 10. The Agency’s proposal includes a plan for **sustainability**.

- The Agency's commissioner and leadership team supports and is committed to the proposed project.
- The Agency has anticipated the need for and demonstrates the willingness to identify and commit resources to sustain the resulting organizational changes after the project ends.

All proposals will be reviewed and evaluated by a review committee comprising NCIC staff members and others, at NCIC's discretion. In order to ensure fairness in the scoring process, NCIC staff members who have worked closely with an Agency on the development of their proposal will not participate in scoring any proposals reviewed in that round of reviews. However, they could participate in review committee discussions in order to answer committee members' questions.

Agencies will have an opportunity to further describe their proposal and to respond to clarifying questions from the review committee through interviews or oral presentations in person or by phone. The interviews will not be scored separately but will inform NCIC's final ratings.

The review committee will use the application's total score to rank proposals and make its final recommendations. It may also consider additional factors (e.g., diversity in the types of projects, geographic distribution of projects) that reflect the overall intent of the Implementation Centers. NCIC will submit its recommendations to the Children's Bureau for final approval.

Post-Selection Information

Successful applicants will be notified of selection at the end of June with project initiation to begin on July 1, 2009. As part of project initiation, an NCIC team will conduct an on-site visit to work with the selected agency or consortium to coordinate existing system change initiatives, finalize the project plan and resources, develop a logic model, and define roles and responsibilities among all project partners.

Selected Agencies will be required to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with NCIC, through the University of Southern Maine, and subject to the approval of the Children's Bureau. The MOA will articulate the roles and responsibilities of both parties and the terms and conditions of their partnership. Under the MOA, the Agency will be required to comply with certain requirements including, but not limited to, reporting requirements and a requirement to participate in and cooperate with evaluation activities for its implementation project; for evaluation of the Implementation Center's work, and for a national evaluator evaluating the work of all five Implementation Centers. See Attachment B for background on the evaluation activities associated with implementation projects and the Implementation Centers. The terms of the MOA will be in compliance with and subject to the terms of the Cooperative Agreement between NCIC and the Children's Bureau.

For More Information

For questions relating to this Request for Applications, please contact Susan Kanak. She can be reached by email at skanak@usm.maine.edu or by phone: 207.780.5840. A question and answer session will also be held at the NCIC's regional forum to take place in Boston, Massachusetts and scheduled for May 6 to 8, 2009. For more information about the forum, contact Susan Kanak. Questions and answers will be posted on the NCIC's website: <http://ncic.muskie.usm.maine.edu>

Attachment A

Resource Plan Request and Justification Chart

The following resources may be supported as part of an implementation project. Please check all those that are anticipated to be needed. For each identified need, describe how you envision the resource being utilized, including an estimate of the cost of the resource and the level of fiscal investment needed. NCIC will review this request to ensure a sufficient level and alignment of resources based on the project scope and anticipated outcomes.

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Need (Yes/No)</i>	<i>Brief Description/Justification</i>
a. Local Project Management		
b. Training		
c. Consultation		
d. Project Related Travel (e.g., peer-to-peer learning)		
e. Family/Youth Participation Support (e.g., stipends)		
f. Outreach Materials/Supplies		
g. Meeting/Forum Space Rental		
h. Other (specify)		

ATTACHMENT B

NCIC Evaluation Approach

NCIC evaluation activities are designed to be formative and user friendly so that adjustments can be made to the project along the way and not after it is over. NCIC's approach to evaluation is to assess progress and impact through a clear feedback loop to ensure that the new practice or program is on target to accomplish its goals. NCIC will work with each state / tribe to design and conduct an evaluation for the implementation project that is useful to both the states and tribes and to NCIC.

The evaluation approach has three levels.

The first level focuses on whether States/Tribes develop and execute effective implementation projects. This will include whether the project plans are doable, properly resourced, and reflect the keys to successful implementation. For each of the implementation projects, NCIC evaluators will work with other members of the NCIC team and the state/tribe to develop an evaluation plan, tailored specifically to that project. The plans will include mechanisms to assess sustainability and likelihood of improved child and family and organizational outcomes.

The second level evaluates whether NCIC is able to build capacity of the States/Tribes. This will initially include focusing on the outreach and planning activities as well as the regional forum during the start-up of the project. This will also include assessing the quantity and quality of technical assistance that States/Tribes receive from NCIC in developing and carrying out the implementation plans. As time goes on, the evaluation will assess ongoing activities such as peer networking and technical assistance provided by NCIC and whether these activities are able to help States and Tribes achieve their objectives effectively in order to drive systemic change.

The third level of the evaluation is a cross site evaluation of the entire Children's Bureau T/TA network. This work is being lead by a national evaluator in collaboration with all of the Implementation Centers. The involvement of States /Tribes in this part of the evaluation will be minimal but critical. These plans will be shared as they become available.