



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

July 15, 2013

Community-Based Organizations: A Place at the Child Welfare Table

We bear the expectation of providing resources for families involved in child welfare without having a place at the child welfare table.” – CCN.

The Child and Family Services (CFS) Community Network (CCN) was started in January 2012 as an initiative of the West Central Women’s Resource Centre’s Parent Mentor Program. The group was formed as a result of an expressed need from community agencies to better understand Manitoba’s child welfare system and work more effectively to support families involved in the system. Community agencies play a unique role in supporting families and bridging the gap that often exists between families and the child welfare system. CCN members come from a wide range of service sectors, including family and women’s centres, health providers, child and youth programs and residential facilities. They generally share a common experience of supporting families involved in child welfare as they navigate the system and have come together to find ways to assist in bringing all parties together for the health of children, families and communities.

The way the child welfare system functions impacts communities, children and their families daily. CCN members have seen the hard work and sincerity of many professionals involved with families, as well as the limits of child welfare system structure and resulting barriers to inter-systemic collaboration.

One common issue is that child welfare workers will require clients to attend programs run by community-based organizations (for example, parenting classes, anger management, addictions treatment, etc.) as part of their case plans but are unable to provide vital information regarding the case to community workers or do not communicate with them at all. Furthermore, community workers who have a long history of working with a certain client are not consistently brought in on these case plan discussions. Because of the non-adversarial, trusting relationships that have been built by community workers with their clients, these workers are sometimes in a better position to help families understand what is expected of them and help them work through a clear and appropriate response to the situation they are in.

Often community workers see a need for preventative resources, but find that it can be difficult to work collaboratively with child welfare agencies to put these services in place. The recent turmoil in the child welfare system with the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry has had an impact on front line services, making it even more difficult to access services. Some families have recently experienced a shift to a more risk-management focused service delivery, possibly due to liability issues highlighted by the Inquiry. Focusing on risk alone limits strength-based approaches; the network is interested

there is an alternative.

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in learning how to help increase collaboration in child welfare case planning and build on family strengths, to reduce the number of children removed from their families. This is especially important as Manitoba has one of the highest rates of children in care in the world.

Another issue they confront is that clients will often turn to community workers for help dealing with the child welfare system because of the relationship they have with them, but some community workers feel they do not have the necessary training on how the child welfare system works to be able to knowledgeably support families through it. Both families and community workers without experience in child welfare found the system complicated to navigate. Since identifying this as an issue, CCN has consulted with Child and Family Services about access to training, and has since hosted several educational sessions facilitated by the General Authority, the largest branch of CFS, in addition to receiving a commitment from them for some ongoing training. CCN plans to request training from all four CFS Authorities as well as other key child welfare system contacts. As the members of CCN learn more about how the child welfare system works, they will be in a better position to help families navigate the system and share the community experience with child welfare to effect positive change in the system.

Recently, CCN has become interested in learning more about Signs of Safety, a strength-based, safety-organized approach to child protection that was developed in Australia. One aspect of Signs of Safety is the concept of community-based safety networks. This idea is starting to be implemented in parts of Manitoba's child welfare system. The safety network approach is a shift from risk-based child welfare practice as it involves developing a naturally occurring network of family, friends, and other formal or informal supports focused on the safety of the

child. The child protection agency and the safety network, including parents, work together to develop a rigorous safety plan to demonstrate over time that the behaviour that brought the family into child protection does not occur in the future. Safety networks create accountability, more effective and coordinated use of natural and mandated resources and support, setting the stage for a stronger continuum of service and care.

Now more than ever, with Manitoba's child welfare system shaken by devastating loss, while at the same time experiencing dramatic increases in the number of families involved in the system, there is no question that changes need to be made to better support families and children. Community workers who have been providing preventative and support services to the families in their communities, like those represented in CCN, hope their experience and knowledge can be used to improve the child welfare system, and subsequently enrich the communities and families they work with. The system can progress only when all those involved, including child protection agencies, community support agencies, and the families themselves have their voices heard and have a seat at the table.

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