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Challenges Implementing and Evaluating Child Welfare Demonstration Projects

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In recent years, there has been an increasingly loud and vociferous demand for results-oriented or *outcome* data on the effectiveness of child welfare demonstration projects. Such data have profound implications for child welfare practice and policy, not the least of which is the impact on services that are funded, implemented and replicated. Yet, myriad and complex challenges exist in implementing and evaluating child welfare demonstration projects as a result of the unique nature of both child welfare and evaluation research. These challenges are routinely overlooked and unfortunately, stakeholders—including policymakers, federal agencies, funders, social work students, non-child welfare researchers, the media and the lay public—are left with the impression that child welfare interventions are clean and straightforward and that they lend themselves easily to implementation and evaluation. Indeed, child welfare researchers frequently are faced with the question, "Does it work?" If only it were that simple. The fact of the matter is that often, it is not even clear what "it" is, or what is meant by "work."

Evaluations of child welfare services are inherently applied, dynamic, contextual, interdisciplinary, political and emotional. Thus, traditional and sterile approaches to evaluation, and simple answers, may be neither appropriate nor possible in child welfare. Indeed, it is the presumption of this special double of *Children and Youth Services Review* that child welfare services in general and more particularly innovative child welfare services or child welfare demonstration projects, demand innovative approaches with regard to their evaluation. The purpose of the issue is to initiate a pre-

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liminary, concerted discussion of the challenges associated with implementing and evaluating child welfare demonstration projects. In so doing, it is hoped that on-going dialogue will result, thereby contributing to the development of a *child welfare evaluation knowledgebase* that will build on relevant theory and research methodologies from both the child welfare and program evaluation literatures. Such a knowledgebase would support systematic evaluation within and across programs and agencies nationally, and thus provide a more realistic picture of *what* services work with *which* populations under *what* circumstances than is currently available.

The issue begins with an article by Barbara Solomon (2002) that emphasizes the need for an evaluation approach in child welfare that incorporates both accountability for service resources and services outcomes. Solomon argues that child welfare program evaluation has failed to demonstrate effectiveness due to a lack of fit between the underlying model of causation that drives outcome-oriented research and the reality of public child welfare program development and implementation. She then presents a reality-based model linking program theory, specification, and evaluation.

Next, Holden, O'Connell, Conner, Brannan, Foster, Blau, and Panciera (2002) present an examination of multi-level evaluation of outcomes, implementation fidelity, and costs using a randomized experimental design. The complexities of implementation evaluation associated with informed consent, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of clinical and functional outcomes are highlighted. The authors encourage use of random assignment to services conditions, but caution researchers about evaluation fidelity that may be disrupted by shifting local and state policy changes. More generally, the authors emphasize evaluation that fully articulates underlying principles of services provision, utilization of both process and outcome measures, and use of quality assurance feedback loops to enhance development of effective community-based services.

Further exploring methods of outcome evaluation, Foster and Holden (2002) present an explanation of the often neglected use of benefit-cost analysis. Utilizing a hypothetical evaluation of a Waiver IV-E demonstration project, the authors present an overview of benefit-cost analysis methodology and highlight how an analyst might summarize and calculate data and present a program's net benefits. Benefit-cost analysis is used to determine achievement of cost neutrality, shifts in expenditures of particular services, identify the impact of the waiver program on other government programs, and provide valuable knowledge to policymakers planning fu-

ture expenditures. Two pitfalls associated with benefit-cost analysis include over-reliance on net benefits as criteria for success and an exaggerated sense of precision in relation to the net benefits outcome. Although there are methods to avoid the pitfalls discussed, benefit-cost analysis requires substantial resources unless researchers limit the sources of data, the analytic horizon, the scope of the benefit-cost analysis.

The complexities of program evaluation teams are discussed by Simmel and Price (2002) who present a case study of an innovative county program to illustrate the unique challenges encountered by evaluation teams operating in a dual role offering both technical assistance and program evaluation. Program diversity across sites further complicates effective evaluation during both formative and summative evaluation processes. The authors conclude with several concrete recommendations for both implementation and evaluation of collaborative community-based demonstration projects.

Webster, Needell, and Wildfire (2002) further the discussion of evaluation teams by illuminating the critical components of fostering self-evaluation in child welfare agencies. To move staff and administrators beyond the typical levels of skepticism experienced by so many child welfare professionals, the authors emphasize processes of attitude adjustment, creating self-evaluation teams, and harnessing technology for outcomes measurement in order to better understand the value of data for immediate planning and practice needs. Webster and his colleagues share the challenges and triumphs in transitioning administrators and front-line staff into a self-evaluation team. They recommend regular intra-agency self-evaluation team meetings and express caution about possible effects of changes in departmental structure and policies based upon political climate and shifts in leadership.

In light of the high growth of social service agency partnerships, increasing demands for accountability, and limited resources for program evaluation, Ortega, Mundy, and Perry-Burney (2002) stress the need for practical and useful methods for evaluation of collaborative initiatives. They describe an innovative evaluation collaborative of stakeholders called *coteries*. Evaluative coteries are formed to make major, practical decisions regarding the methodology and focus of evaluation efforts. The authors emphasize the value of coterie group dynamics that lead to new ideas, a sense of shared responsibility, and evaluation team support. Criteria for successful forma-

tion and maintenance of evaluative coteries include member commitment to evaluation and use of findings, attendance at meetings, investment in completion of multiple tasks as preparation for decision-making, and the ability of members to influence their respective organizations.

The NSCAW (National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being) Research Group (2002) reports on implementation of a complex national probability study of children in foster care. They Research Group utilizes multiple methods and informants that incorporate the tremendous diversity of state and local agency procedures, record-keeping systems, and legal and ethical regulations via use of state-of-the-art sampling procedures and instrumentation and recruitment procedures. Interviews with biological and foster parent caregivers and investigative child welfare workers and on-going service workers and an annual teacher survey provide a wealth of data. The authors describe the many successes as well as numerous on-going refinements necessary to support field research within a national organizational framework.

Wind and Brooks (2002) close the special issue with a summary of the lessons learned by the contributors to the issue. They then develop and present a preliminary model for implementing and evaluating child welfare demonstration projects. The authors emphasize the need for (a) consistent and realistic definitions of outcomes and success that apply across child welfare programs and agencies; (b) comprehensive assessments of the needs and strengths of children and families; (c) effective and user-friendly management information systems; and (d) sufficient resources for carrying out complex, dynamic, and multisystem long-range evaluation.

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