

# System of Care



## **BUILDING CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: *Involving Families In Program Evaluation***

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The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is dedicated to meeting the human services needs of county residents, particularly the county's most vulnerable populations, through an extensive range of prevention, early intervention, crisis management and after-care services.

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Glossary

CCF	Community Connections for Families
CET	Community Evaluation Team
DHS	Department of Human Services
OBH	Office of Behavioral Health
PYT	Partnerships for Youth Transition
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SET	Starting Early Together
SOCI	System of Care Initiatives
High Fidelity Wraparound	A process of individualized care planning for youth with serious emotional and behavioral issues. Its ten core principles include a team-based approach, intentionally guided by the family’s view of its needs and priorities; recognizing and building on the family’s strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses; and incorporating reliance on “natural supports” such as relatives, community resources, and places of worship that can remain involved with the family after the professional treatment providers have gone.

### **SYSTEM OF CARE INITIATIVES**

Between 1993 and 2011, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded 126 grants across the country to implement systems of care designed to support youth with serious emotional disturbances who were involved in multiple child-serving systems. The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) received three of these grants – Community Connections for Families (CCF), Partnerships for Youth Transition (PYT) and Starting Early Together (SET). Known collectively in Allegheny County as the System of Care Initiative (SOCi), and based upon 12 core values listed in Appendix A, the three programs served more than 1,000 families and youth (ages 0-24) from nine communities in or around Pittsburgh (East End, Hill District, McKeesport, Sto-Rox, Wilkinsburg, East Hills/Penn Hills, Northside, South Pittsburgh, and Triboro: Rankin, North Braddock and Braddock).

A critical piece of SOCi was the evaluation component. The goal of the SOCi evaluation, which spanned all three programs, was to collect, analyze and disseminate vital information regarding system of care performance and effectiveness in ways designed to ensure that the information is used to improve the quality of the system of care. The core values charge systems to involve family members at all system levels. Incorporating parents and families into this process presented a number of challenges and rewards to the program developers.

Researchers looked at three areas of family involvement:

- Family Members as Evaluation Staff
- Family Members on Evaluation Committees
- Providing Training and Technical Assistance Opportunities for Family Members

### **Involvement in Evaluation**

Challenges were faced in each of the three areas, but benefits were clearly identified. Although involving family members often required policy adjustments and training, as well as creative ways to address the financial needs of low-income families asked to participate (e.g., child care, transportation), family involvement proved to add an important layer to the evaluation component of SOCi.

## Background

In 1998, Allegheny County's Department of Human Services (DHS) received the first of three grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. Over a period of 13 years, DHS received funding to implement three programs designed to serve children and families with serious emotional disturbance who are involved in multiple child-serving systems; the grants were administered by DHS' Office of Behavioral Health (OBH). Known collectively as the System of Care Initiative (SOC), Allegheny County's SAMHSA grants served over 1,000 families in nine Pittsburgh communities.

The first grant, known as Community Connections for Families (CCF), ran for six years and targeted children ages 6 to 18 years of age in five neighborhoods with high rates of poverty. The second grant, awarded in 2002, created Partnerships for Youth Transition (PYT), which targeted young adults between 14 and 25 years of age in two similar neighborhoods, and the third grant, Starting Early Together (SET), began in 2005 and targeted children between birth and 6 years of age in four additional neighborhoods. Based on a core system of values intended to inform service delivery (see Appendix A), program enrollees obtained comprehensive and individualized service coordination including family- and community-based supports with an emphasis on child and family strengths.

The funding cycle for CCF and PYT ended in 2003 and 2006, respectively, but the primary practice model of wraparound was maintained, with local funding, through July 2009. At that time, the fiscal environment prohibited continuation of these programs, and services were transitioned to an existing billable model. The funding for SET ended in September 2011, and efforts are currently underway to determine the future of services and philosophy for the target population.

As stated on the SAMHSA website, "System of care is not a program – it is a philosophy of how care should be delivered." (<http://systemsofcare.samhsa.gov>). In addition to its programmatic component, SOC strove to demonstrate how system of care values could be implemented to enhance how child-serving systems plan for and provide services to children and families. Charged with a desire to involve families at all levels of the grant

demonstration, SOCI tested various models of involvement, from having families and youth drive their service planning meetings to having them as full participants in the program planning, policy development and evaluation aspects of grant implementation.

Evaluation was a critical component of all three demonstrations. In addition to the requirement of participating in a national longitudinal outcomes study, SOCI designed, implemented and reported results for evaluations focusing on the process of service delivery implementation, satisfaction and quality improvement. This report focuses on how the family-driven value was put into practice in the program evaluation aspects of the grants and recommendations for further adoption of these practices in the system at large.

There are three primary examples of how the family driven value was demonstrated by SOCI in the area of program evaluation: hiring a family member as part of the grant's evaluation team, creating and supporting a parent evaluation committee, and offering training for family members at large about evaluation concepts.

### **Family Members as Evaluation Staff**

Hiring a family member as an evaluation staff member can be a rewarding experience for both program staff and family members. There are several evaluation positions a family member can fill as a full or part-time employee. For example, some system of care grantees hired family members as data collection staff to conduct interviews for their national evaluation study component. Others, including Allegheny County, hired a full-time Family Evaluator to work directly alongside other evaluation staff. For some positions, the person is hired because s/he is able to participate in discussions and evaluation activities from the perspective of living in a family with a child involved in the system. On the other hand, some family members may be hired as professional evaluators, a job which requires them to set aside their experience as family members and bring objectivity to the job.

There are several challenges which systems may face in order to hire a family member as a staff person. One is that the hiring entity may require specific credentials or educational requirements which the family member does not have. In this case, it is important to keep advocating for system change which places value on family experience and considers it an important credential for certain positions. One way to help family members is to provide training on how to prepare a résumé that describes their family involvement in terms that demonstrate the skills and abilities developed in that role. For example, members who are advocates for their children utilize data and information frequently for those activities. If that is creatively included on a résumé, this knowledge and experience can translate into the qualifications necessary to be hired as an evaluator.

Another challenge for families hired as evaluators is working alongside professionals who may feel threatened by their presence. Most program evaluators have completed extensive college training in the areas of statistics and research and may not view the experiential learning of family members as equal in value to an academic degree. This is especially true when family members are involved in more than the data collection phase – moving into

the area of data interpretation and reporting of results. To meet this challenge, program evaluators must be trained in the ways in which involving family members can be beneficial to the evaluation. They need to understand the specific role in evaluation the family member will play. Although s/he may not be running the statistics or choosing a study design, with appropriate training s/he can be meaningfully involved in those activities in ways that will enhance the evaluation overall. Training for family members is also an important key to success. This is discussed extensively below.

Another area of challenge can be defining the job description for a family evaluation role so that it is clear to all involved. Family members can be hired as evaluation staff to help spread the word about the importance of evaluation, the purpose of the research, and ways in which they can participate. They can draw from their own personal experiences and teach others how data can be an important and useful aspect of their advocacy efforts. Family evaluators can also help to review programmatic and evaluation forms and questions for family friendly language. Hiring family members as data collectors can add a level of trust to the interview process so that the data collected is more reliable and valid. Finally, family members as formal evaluation staff can effect system change by educating and advocating from within.

Professional evaluators have much to gain from this partnership. They will experience a new appreciation for the data they are collecting as the family member helps them to see the questions and results from his/her viewpoint. Surveys designed by parent-professional partnerships allow for monitoring of questions for language and content, theoretically improving the likelihood that respondents will understand and respond to the survey questions. Professionals are able to better implement best practice in the field when a family evaluator pilots survey questions before they are widely distributed. Also of benefit is family member participation in planning survey distribution methods. In the end, hiring a family member evaluator can be a win-win situation for both parties involved.

### **Family Members on Evaluation Committees**

Another way to involve family members in evaluation is to form an evaluation committee where family members and system partners have the opportunity to come together to evaluate and interpret data. A committee structure can also provide opportunities for staff to form ad hoc or standing sub-committees pertaining to specific evaluation or quality improvement issues. In SOCI this is called the Community Evaluation Team or CET.

The first step to forming a CET is to define its purpose and frequency of meetings. One of the activities an evaluation committee can take on is deciding what information is needed to guide the decision-making process. This involves prioritizing and monitoring what type of data is collected and how it is collected. The committee could also provide a forum for reviewing program materials, surveys and focus group questions for family-friendly language and also help with interpretation of outcomes gathered through the data collection process. Based on data results, the committee could brainstorm ways to improve the quality of services and supports for children and families and make recommendations to stakeholder groups. This information can also be used by family committee members to let policy makers and system funders know what is working and what should be supported.

If there are specific activities that are time limited, a subcommittee structure may need to be developed. Subcommittees could be assigned specific evaluation projects tasks such as social marketing with data, involving youth in evaluation, presenting data, training others about evaluation, creating a specific outcome report, helping to hire evaluation staff members, and writing proposals to find funding for evaluation studies and activities.

There are several challenges to establishing and maintaining an evaluation committee. The first is funding. Providing childcare and transportation is a best practice that will increase the opportunity for family members to attend. Further, if the means are available, the offering of refreshments at meetings can help to “break the ice” among members and offer an incentive for attendance. However, these items can become costly, especially if the committee meets frequently. Some strategies to meet this challenge could include partnering with a local family organization, soliciting food donations, combining evaluation meetings with an existing committee, having fund raisers, and seeking funding through a grant or foundation.

Another challenge is the recruitment and retention of committee members. Some family evaluation committees set “term limits” on committee membership so those who are recruited have a clear idea of what they are committing themselves to. Time of day is always a factor as some parents need to work during the day and others at night. Finding family members who are interested in evaluation can also be a challenge. It is important to provide training about evaluation concepts for new members so they can be full participants in the meetings (discussed below) and understand the personal benefits they may get from attending. Some creative ways to address issues of recruitment and retention include rotating meetings in various locations that are accessible to a variety of participants; holding some meetings in the day and others at night; partnering with a local family organization and other

providers for recruitment; holding an “open house” with parent presenters to discuss what the committee does and why it is important; and sending out meeting reminders and birthday or holiday cards if appropriate. This also is an opportunity to think about how to make meetings fun. Including end-of-year celebrations, ice breakers or raffles for attendees can provide an engaging atmosphere and can promote group team building which may help with retention.

Finally, there is the challenge of preparing meeting agendas and staffing the meeting. Often, the person who plays this role also arranges for the meeting location, refreshments, recruitment of new participants and other meeting logistics. This may be one of the primary roles of the family evaluation staff member. Alternatively, some family evaluation committees elect to have parent and professional co-chairs who take the lead on these tasks.

There are several benefits to establishing and maintaining an evaluation committee with family membership. First, the partnerships that form between professionals and family members often cross over into other areas of the system beyond the evaluation component. Working with the committee also affords a richer evaluation as multiple voices are heard in the process. Committees can review questions and evaluation reports for content to make them more reader-friendly. They can also help collect data and design studies that will best meet the needs of the population, ensuring a greater chance of successful implementation and the likelihood of participation. Finally, participating in an evaluation committee is a learning opportunity for professionals and family members alike. Each party learns something about the other’s perspective which in turn can help change systems for the better.

### **Providing Training and Technical Assistance Opportunities for Family Involvement in Evaluation**

In order to do any of the things mentioned above, it is critical that evaluators offer training for families about what evaluation is and why it should be important to them. Many local and national organizations offer these types of training. For example, the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health offers three levels of evaluation training which parents can attend. Allegheny County used system of care funds to send family members to this training which helped jump start an evaluation committee. Systems could also design their own evaluation training and eventually have parents co-train.

Another opportunity for family members to be involved in evaluation activities could include co-presenting at conferences on data and evaluation topics. Evaluation staff can also be available for technical assistance to families who need help with data for advocacy or for their own evaluation studies.

Again, funding can present a challenge to providing extensive training and technical assistance opportunities. However, many conferences and training events have stipends for family member attendance. The role of trainer can also become a part of professional evaluation staff job descriptions to ensure that family participation continues. Recruiting family members to learn this topic can sometimes be challenging (many find data and evaluation to be a somewhat boring topic or irrelevant to what they do); however, it is the responsibility of the trainers to make the topics relevant and interesting to those they want to involve. Data is a powerful tool for advocacy and system change. Framed this way, many family members and professionals are likely to want to learn more.

Without a comprehensive and regular training and technical assistance component for family members, their involvement may dwindle and even be non-existent. It is critical for professionals to “level the playing field” by ensuring that family members have the information they need to sit as equal partners at the table.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The lessons learned and the success achieved as a result of involving family members in evaluation has had a continuing impact on evaluation throughout DHS, which has embraced the principles of family involvement. When the SOCI funding ended, DHS hired two family interviewers who continue to inform system-wide evaluations with the perspective and skills that can only be provided by family members who have experienced the system first-hand.

As described above, there are several factors necessary for successful involvement of family members in evaluation. These include:

- Flexible hiring standards designed to value experience gained as a family member;
- Training of professional evaluators to involve family members in meaningful and productive ways;
- Training and technical assistance opportunities for family members; and
- Identifying funding or other resources for family member expenses, training, meeting refreshments and stipends.

DHS also learned many lessons about how to form and run a parent evaluation group, or CET, which may be useful to those who hope to start one:

- The group must have a clear focus on data, evaluation and quality improvement efforts; otherwise the group will typically drift into a parent support meeting;
- It is important to keep the focus narrow and the meetings well planned so that the group can be productive;
- It takes time (four – six months) and consistent relationship building efforts to develop a core team of parents dedicated to the process;
- It is natural that there will be turnover of membership. Therefore, it is imperative that the group continually monitors its purpose, activities and recruitment methods;
- Initial and ongoing training is a necessary first step for parents and professionals alike, ensuring full, meaningful participation; and

- CETs must have the support and buy-in of key administrators from each system involved.

The involvement of system professionals, while challenging, is a crucial component of the CET if parents and professionals are to learn and grow in understanding together:

- Form subcommittees if there are focused and time-limited activities that you want a group to accomplish between full membership meetings;
- Every member of the CET should be a champion for evaluation and continuous quality improvement; and
- Keep the meetings fun by including activities such as ice breakers and networking opportunities.

By incorporating these components, the inclusion of family members can enhance the experience for all involved and result in a meaningful evaluation process that results in a more effective service delivery system.

## Appendix A: SOCI Core Values

SOCI was based on 12 core values:

- Consumer/Family Focused and Driven
- Safety (Youth, Family and Community)
- Individualized
- Strengths-Based
- Collaboration
- Community-Based/Least Restrictive
- Cultural Competence
- Relentless Advocacy
- Outcome-Based
- Cost-Effective/Cost-Responsible
- Education/Vocation
- Physical and Mental Well-Being