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# Realizing Permanency, Well-Being through Authentic Engagement

This paper was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.  
We thank them for their support for this project.



# Realizing Permanency, Well-Being through Authentic Engagement

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The Alliance Children and Families is an association that provides a variety of networking opportunities, services and supports to nonprofit human-serving organizations throughout the United States and Canada. Alliance members are organizations dedicated to serving and advocating for children, families, older adults, and communities.

The Alliance works with and through its national network of members to achieve long-term social impact, where impact is defined as:

- Reducing the number of people living in poverty
- Increasing the number of people having opportunities to live safe, healthy lives
- Increasing the number of people having opportunities for educational and employment success



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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## FOREWORD

As a former state child welfare director, I have long wondered why a values driven strategy like Family Finding is not used more widely when what lies at the heart of Family Finding is a belief that family engagement, shared decision making, and the relationship between a caring relative and child will positively impact the overall well-being of children and youth throughout their lives.

Although for years, as a field, we focused solely on safety and permanency as the primary outcomes of child welfare policy and practice, I now believe child well-being is, and should be, our paramount goal; never losing sight that safety and the experience of permanency are inherent in the well-being of a child. Over the years, I came to the conclusion that the success of values driven models like Family Finding can only occur if the values of being child- and family-centered, and strengths-based are the foundation upon which all practice and policy is created and hardwired into all aspects of our day to day work and the larger child welfare system. Until all of us, as leaders in child welfare who interact in the lives of children and families, transform our systems and organizations from the “inside out” to truly reflect the values of authentic child and family engagement, we will continue to be dissatisfied with our results.

This paper began with a singular question: Would the consistent use of family search and engagement tools achieve greater success if they were used in a system that reflected a larger culture and values orientation towards authentic child and family engagement? To tackle this question, the Alliance for Children and Families engaged the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and enlisted the expertise of Dr. Fred Wulczyn, Kerry Monahan-Price, and Dr. Sara Feldman at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to conduct a literature review and interviews with key informants and to prepare a paper on where family search and engagement initiatives currently stand. This report later served as a common platform to bring together key leaders of child welfare who are passionate about engaging, strengthening, and supporting the important role of families in a developing child’s life. At this convening, we discussed how we can build upon the accomplishments being made across the country in child- and family-centered policy and practice. We also candidly identified the system barriers that keep child welfare systems from moving towards a truly transformative and sustainable change that not only achieves the outcomes of safety and permanency, but improves a child’s well-being and through experience puts them on a pathway for healthy development and a life of productivity and happiness.

The framework under development in this paper is the result of the convening in December 2012 and interviews with leaders of private child welfare providers from within the Alliance member network who have embraced values driven child and family engagement and in doing so have experienced true organizational transformation. We hope that this paper will elicit crucial conversations, self and organizational reflection, and a deepening commitment to shared responsibility across child welfare system stakeholders. It will take all of us doing our part each and every day to hardwire authentic engagement values into the actual experience of children, families, and caregivers. Taken further, this commitment to authentic engagement will also need to transform us as leaders, organizations, judiciary, employers, and partners.

Our hope is that you view this paper as the Alliance’s commitment to being a catalyst of change within the nonprofit voluntary human-serving sector, and as a partner with you. We believe that being person- and family- centered and strengths-based is a key characteristic of high impact organizations and we are committed to working with and through our national network to help more of our agencies, and the overall sector, emulate these qualities both organizationally and in practice. Regardless of your role in the child welfare system, will you join us in leadership to share responsibility and promote authentic child and family engagement within all practice and policy and throughout the organizations and systems you influence? Let’s stop thinking that the way we will “reform” the system is always from the “outside in.” It will only occur if we do it from the “inside out.”



Susan Dreyfus  
President and CEO  
Alliance for Children and Families

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### OVERVIEW

This paper seeks to showcase the strengths of a child and family engagement values system in which engagement isn't simply about activating family as a response to fill a placement challenge, but rather about respecting and empowering families to share responsibility for the safety, permanency, and well-being of their children.

Over the last few decades, policy and practice have moved towards emphasizing kinship care and family-centered practices (i.e. Family Finding, concurrent planning, family team meetings) as tools and resources for working with children and their families. With more than 100 years of history and experience in child welfare and child, family, and community engagement through our national network, the Alliance believes these approaches, while positive, will only be able to achieve the long-term results when they are practiced within a system that truly embraces person- and family-centered, and strengths-based values in every aspect of system policy, organizational culture, and day-to-day practice for every child, every time.

### APPROACH

This paper combines nearly 12 months of reflection and discussion across the Alliance, its network of high-performing, private providers of child welfare and colleagues and partners from other sectors committed to continuously improving the child welfare system through a clearly articulated and lived values orientation.

A commissioned literature review of family search and engagement practices was conducted by researchers at Chapin Hall. This paper served as the foundational literature to guide a discussion, which was held at Chapin Hall in December 2012, of more than 20 leaders from the private and public sector about the partnership needed to realize successful welfare reform. As we formulated the framework for a child and family values-led engagement approach, we spoke with five organizations within our network of private providers who we believe are making significant progress on their journeys of transformation anchored in this values orientation and share their experience through case examples.

### CHILD AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

When an organization is living out a culture of authentic child and family engagement, they ensure that:

- Each child's experience is one of feeling and being safe, the experience of permanency in all aspects of their lives, and a sense of consistency and belonging
- Children will be involved in defining family on their own terms
- Children and families will feel listened to, respected and included in all aspects of decision making in their own development or in the development of their child
- Priority will be placed on family search and engagement, not as a program but rather as a matter of standard policy and practice for every child unless a clearly identified risk to the direct safety of the child exists
- Children will recognize that their family is being respected and engaged

To bring these experiences to life, we believe private providers of child welfare need to transform their organization through leadership, professional development of staff, coordination of programs and policies, and engagement in research and development through the measurements and evaluation of practices that promote and authentically engage children, youth, and families.

### ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

In the first part of this paper, we briefly summarize the findings of the foundational work of Chapin Hall and the engagement values system coming out of discussions at the Family Search and Engagement Convening held in December of 2012 with leaders from across sectors and disciplines in child welfare. This section highlights the importance of child welfare reform led through a child and family engagement framework in promoting healthy development and the well-being of children and youth.

We then offer up five core beliefs about how children, youth, and their families should experience the child welfare system when it is aligned to a child and family engagement values orientation. In this section, we showcase examples of successful organization practice and policy transformations.

In the next section, we compile the core characteristics of organizations that are necessary to shape policy and practice around a child and family engagement values orientation. These are the commonalities and elements from each of the diverse communities showcased where child and family engagement has resulted in greater well-being for children and enhanced impact and strategy of organizations leading this movement.

Finally, we provide recommendations for the nonprofit human-serving organizations who are increasingly engaged through their missions, partnerships, and contracts in the child welfare system to further their leadership role and shared responsibility to continuously improve the child welfare system.

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- Each private provider of child welfare services should assess and continuously measure and improve their organization's authenticity in providing child- and family-centered, strength-based care and make an intentional decision to align their strategy along this value system in the interest of each child and family they serve.
- All organizations with responsibility for children and youth should become knowledgeable of the evidence-base behind the proven value of child and family engagement and be innovators in service provision. This can be accomplished in part by moving towards a measurement system that holds providers of care accountable not only for contracted outcomes but for the provision of a values-led care model that connects children to positive adult relationships and opportunities for healthy development and lifelong success.
- Each agency, within their local jurisdictions, should engage not only in internal realignment of a value driven system of care, but engage in macro-level opportunities to align local, state, and federal policy around child welfare with the goals of consistent and values driven family engagement and aligning our goals for safety and permanency through the lens of healthy child development and well-being.
- All providers should participate in a movement and advocate for child welfare policy and practice in which fit and willing relative placement is the presumed best interest for a child until there is absolute proof to the contrary. Policy and budget should include supports for training for child welfare staff, relative search, authentic engagement and supports for relatives providing placement in equal standing to, if not greater than, non-relative adoption and placement.
- A national center on child and family engagement should be created to support policy and practice cross sectors and disciplines that are anchored in child and family centered values.

## INTRODUCTION

***When children in foster care knew that their families were engaged, their behavior improved. This is what they wanted, and they were happy that people were listening to them...When a child sees their family strengthened, the child's identity is strengthened. They get the message they are worth it.***

Mary Stone Smith

Vice President

*Catholic Community Services of Western Washington*

The welfare of children is not just the responsibility of the public sector, and it extends far beyond child protection. Providers agree that the child welfare system, while full of good intentions and having made major progress, still has room for improvement on behalf of America's most vulnerable children. Research consistently shows that the outlook for youth who age out of care is marked by heightened rates of unemployment, homelessness, mental health challenges, poverty, substance abuse and criminal justice involvement<sup>1</sup>. Children who spend a long time in care are at risk of moving into adulthood without the sense of self and the supports necessary to pursue the quality of life they desire and deserve.

Safety and permanency are critical to children, as are family identity and attachment. In 2012, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) set forth a policy position that child welfare must operate with child well-being as its fundamental outcome. This outcome extends far beyond placement. Child well-being includes the life experiences of children and opportunities to interact with the world in healthy, positive ways<sup>1</sup>. According to ACF, well-being is not a new outcome, but should be integrated across the child welfare system. To move toward this goal, providers will need to take positive, evidence-based, child welfare interventions to scale that affect the positive development and well-being of children.

Over the last few decades, policy and practice across health and human service delivery systems are increasingly moving toward person- and family-centered and strengths-based policy and practice models including the use of Wraparound, Family Finding, concurrent planning,

and family team meetings. The Alliance for Children and Families believes these approaches are positive, but not enough on their own. In order to achieve desired long-term results, the Alliance argues that these practices must be integrated in a system that embraces and applies person- and family-centered and strengths-based values at every level, including policy, organizational culture, and day-to-day practices and decision making at the individual child and family, organization or systems level.

This paper unites person- and family-centered and strengths-based practices as part of the child and family engagement values system through which engagement is not simply about activating family (defined as any positive, caring adult with whom a child can establish a lifelong relationship) as a response to fill a placement challenge, but rather about respecting and empowering families to share responsibility for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children (see Figures 1 and 2). These child and family engagement values are meant to complement, not replace person- and family-centered and strengths-based systems of care. The Alliance believes that child and family engagement, if led through coordinated, values driven, sector-wide leadership, will be best positioned to realize the well-being outcomes sought in child welfare reform.

Through repeated dialogues and in conversation with the Alliance’s network of child welfare leaders over the last year, the Alliance found that when organizations believe that government systems are no place to raise a child, permanency and well-being are developed through authentic engagement, and that all children deserve to benefit from wraparound principles and approaches, child welfare goals of safety and permanency are met. Clinical research supports these leaders’ beliefs.

Studies show that children who have positive relationships with caring adults and identify with family transition more successfully into adulthood and experience greater well-being<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, research and professional experience also tell us that many youth will seek to connect with family at every opportunity, whether those relationships are positive or not<sup>4</sup>. This knowledge suggests that child welfare will be most successful when both policies and practice support positive and healthy family engagement.

This paper is written to encourage all child welfare providers to embrace the transformative process of embedding child and family engagement values throughout all aspects of their organizations. It contains concrete strategies to align organization policies and practices to truly “walk the talk” and live these values. It also proposes recommendations for moving forward. These recommendations will further strengthen the need for deeper partnerships across the sectors and disciplines that touch the lives of children and families involved in the child welfare system. It is the hope of the Alliance that anyone reading this paper will understand that we all have a stake in the child welfare system and we all must share this responsibility—individually as organizations, and collectively as partners—if we are to fully realize the goals we all share for children.

## **AUTHENTIC CHILD AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

Imagine the following scenarios, then ask yourself what would you do...

- A) Your organization’s staff is called to act on a situation in which two young boys need a safe and stable home because their parents cannot ensure their safety. There is a loving family member out of the state who could provide for their care, but it will take time to make this arrangement workable. During these children’s first three days in the child welfare system, the boys are withdrawn. Though they are quite quiet, the children ask about the safety of their two dogs and two cats. These animals were placed in the custody of animal control and are scheduled to be euthanized under local ordinances.
- B) At a family care team meeting, a parent requests an additional two hours be added to a scheduled four-hour visit for the upcoming holiday. However, organization policy states that the child, who has only been in care for 30 days, is not eligible for a six-hour pass for two more weeks.

The current standards and best practices in child- and family-centered care state that the child and his or her family must be more than just cursorily included in child welfare decision making. These standards of care have been shown, through evaluation, to be key ingredients to the success of wraparound case management approaches across multiple systems.

<sup>1</sup> Wulcyn, F., Monahan-Price, K., & Feldman, S. (2012). Family Finding: An Overview. [unpublished manuscript]. Available from the Alliance for Children and Families, [research@alliance1.org](mailto:research@alliance1.org).

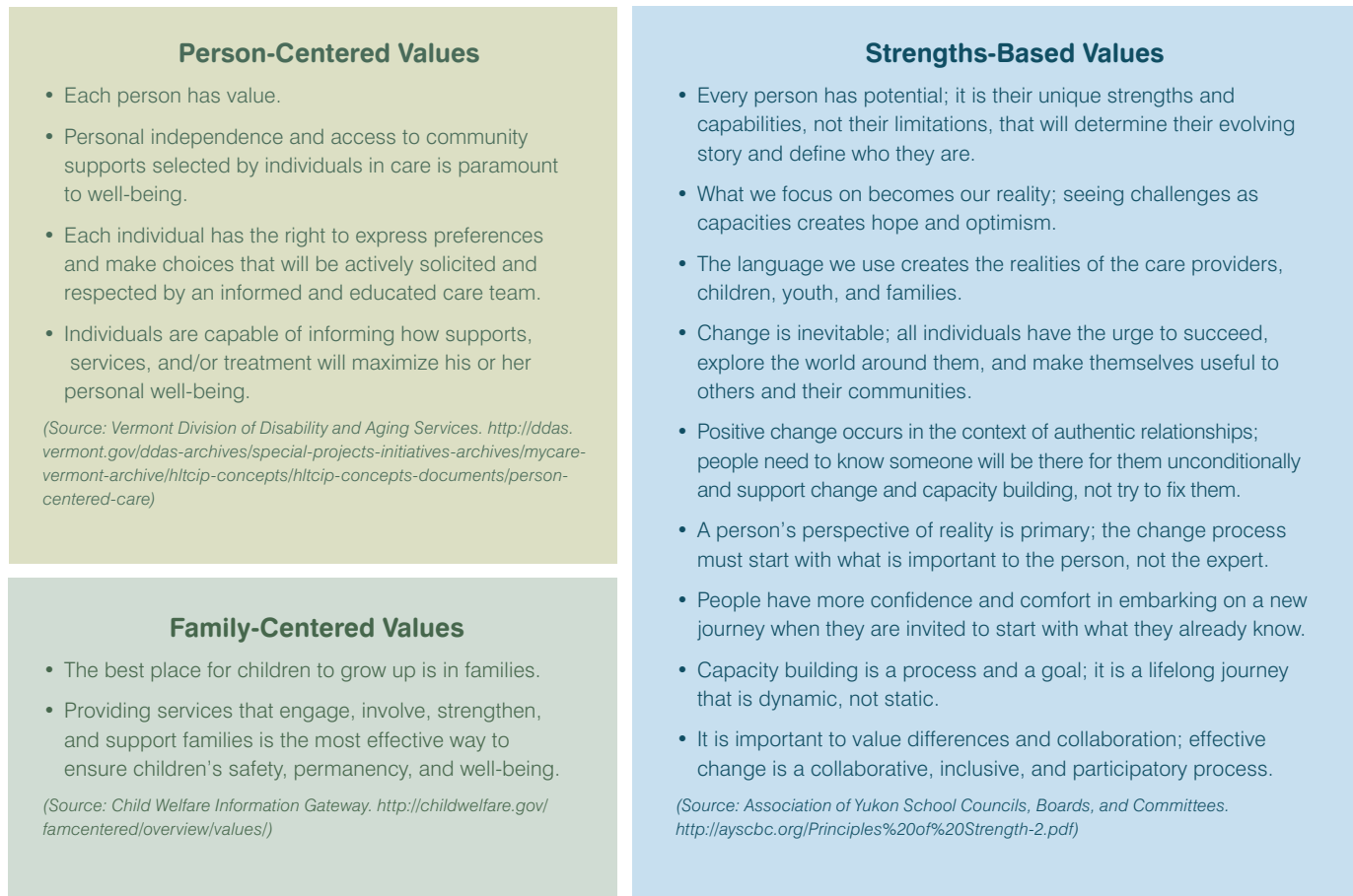
<sup>2</sup> U.S. department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (2012). Information Memorandum (Log No. ACYF-CB-IM-12-04). Retrieved from [acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1204.pdf](http://acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/im1204.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J. & Rapp, M. (2009). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 23 and 24. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago as cited in Wulczyn et al. (2012).

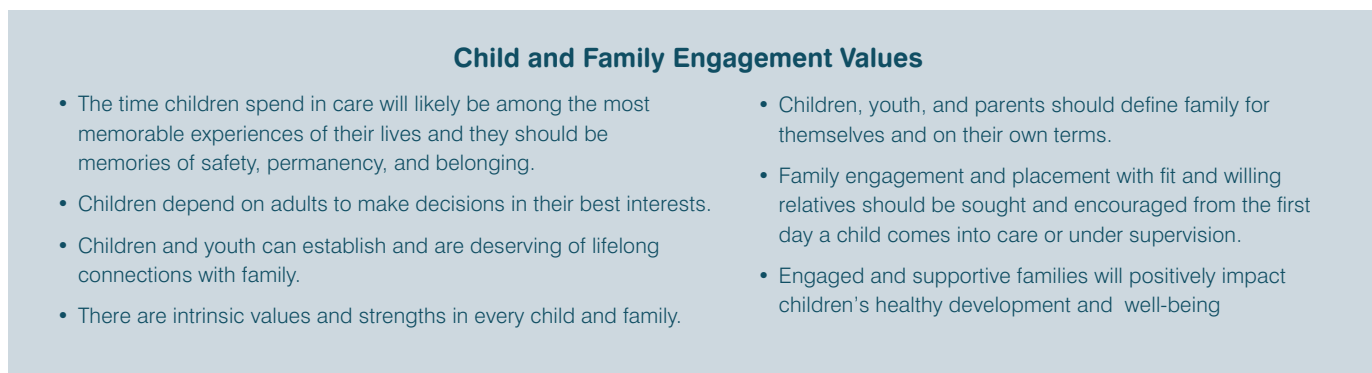
<sup>4</sup> Collins, M.E., Paris, R., & Ward, R.L. (2008). The permanence of family ties: Implications for youth transitioning from foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 78(1), 64-62.

Providers often follow through by including parents in team meetings, placing children with relatives, keeping siblings together whenever possible, completing strengths-based assessments, and conducting satisfaction surveys with children and families. However, there is a big difference between how system level stakeholders conceive of engagement practices and how they are actually experienced by the children and families involved. Until these practices are seamlessly incorporated into how every child is treated every time, as opposed to one-off instances of good engagement, it is still only well-intended practice.

**Figure 1: Values Frameworks Guiding Child and Family Engagement**



**Figure 2: Child and Family Engagement Values**





In these scenarios, a great organization, public or private, working from a family-centered care model would focus on achieving safety and permanency through timely placement with a fit and willing relative whenever possible. A provider operating in an organization and child welfare system led and driven by a child and family engagement values orientation would assure child safety and permanency through the maintenance and development of positive, safe family connections that would facilitate critical healing and will develop into lifelong relationships between a caring adult and a child. A child welfare system truly aligned with these values would understand that acts, such as reuniting a child with his or her pets or extending a family visit by two hours play an important role in ensuring that the child is experiencing permanency in their day to day lives and has the opportunity to foster relationships that can lead to permanency with no further involvement of the child welfare system.

When child and family engagement values are hardwired into all aspects of organization practice and policy, entire families, entire practice models, and in fact, entire organizations are transformed. When an organization is living out a culture of child and family engagement, it ensures that:

- Each child's experience is one of feeling and being safe, the experience of permanency in all aspects of their lives, and a sense of consistency and belonging
- Children will be involved in defining family on their own terms
- Children and families will feel heard, respected, and included in all aspects of decision making in their own development or in the development of their child
- Priority will be placed on family search and engagement, not as a "program" but rather as a matter of standard policy and practice for every child unless a clearly identified risk to the direct safety of the child exists
- Children will recognize that their family is being respected and engaged

### Engagement Response to Scenario #1

Driven by a value of child and family engagement, Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe in Florida., recognized that the family of the children being placed into care included their two dogs and two cats. The organization worked as a team to locate the animals and prompt an attorney to issue a court order to release the pets into their custody. Two staff members volunteered to care for and house the dogs and cats. The organization ensured the pets received the health care they needed and arranged for the boys to visit them immediately. Once the boys reconnected with their pets, they began to talk more about the trauma that brought them into care. A caseworker also found the boys a home with a family member. The adults in contact with the children and within the agency continued to talk without judgment of the family and found safe ways to maintain a sense of contact. Although pets are not typically included in an organization's definition of family, they were important in providing familiarity and constancy during the traumatic time. The boys, their dogs and their cat are now in a permanent and stable home with a family member.

### Engagement Response to Scenario #2

Person-centered values ensure each child is viewed as an individual and each request and circumstance is respected. A values-driven approach to care would ensure that organization policy gave care teams the flexibility and authority to make a decision about the visit based on the criteria of well-being. Hathaway-Sycamores in moving from family-centered practice to values oriented care would ensure that this mother was included in structuring visits around their joint goals for her child. As disagreements surface, the team (inclusive of the parent), talk openly and honestly in the same room, at the same time. Unless there was a clear and present risk, the visit would be granted.

So how does an organization have confidence that they will consistently respond with their stated commitment to child and family engagement values amidst the day-to-day realities of child welfare? Starting from the assumption that a family can handle most situations, child and family engagement does not suggest turning over all provider responsibilities to families, but rather that staff work with families through each and every step, even if this is not the quickest or most efficient way. When this orientation prevails, not only is each and every child better off, but the organization moves toward a more sustainable community role by investing in the strengths of each and every member of the community, strengthening families and building partnerships with the many resources and natural supports a child will need to grow into healthy adulthood.

Each of the five cases offered up below demonstrate an approach to organization transformation that is resulting in positive changes for children, families, and organizations as a whole. As you read the case examples, try to locate your organization and envision how through the hardwiring of child and family engagement values a change process could emerge.

## **CASE EXAMPLE: The Children's Village, Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.**

The philosophy of best practices in child welfare has shifted dramatically in recent years. It was once considered to remove children from troubled families and communities and place them in residential care for their treatment and safety. Today, in most cases children do best when they are with or close to their families and communities. Organizations that once saw residential care as the solution are dramatically realigning their standards of care with better outcomes for children and families.

Under the leadership of Jeremy Kohomban, president and CEO of The Children's Village (CV) in New York, CV emerged as an early innovator in this area. Recognizing that government systems of care are meant to be a temporary safety net for children had become a trap for far too many, Kohomban and his senior staff dramatically shifted practices in what is one of the oldest and largest residential programs in the country.

CV's transformation began with the process of trying to understand why it was not seeing long-term success among the children served in residential care. Staff looked at system research and analyzed their own data and found that, when children are connected to families, outcomes are dramatically better. Children want to be with their families. But even when family is not an option, children still need someone to belong to. CV recognized the need to help create this new family or place of belonging. In their numerous conversations with families and youth they listened carefully and heard that sometimes, the organization was seen and experienced as the source of their separation from family, not necessarily as a trusted protector. The conclusion: If CV would work through children and their families to develop a sense of belonging, it could create safety and permanency for the future. To do this, CV needed to be trusted and respected, not feared.

Building trust and respect is challenging in a system that has long operated from a position of power and control. When an organization attempts a shift from within a system that operates from the belief that "family is the bad guy" and "providers are the good guys" to one in which "family is not the enemy", the road is bumpy. When it began this shift, CV found that there were many that simply could not resonate with this change in values. There were also individuals who simply could not believe in the inherent worth of families for children in the child welfare system. However, strong leadership, consistent values, and policies aligned with these values supported this transition.

CV did not start with a grand strategy to create this shift in values, but rather came to it through trial and error. After articulating a clear message, CV moved forward with real policy change so that all could experience the ways in which their engagement values are meant to work.

CV hired parents with success in the child welfare system, called them Parent Advocates and invited them to serve as full members of care teams engaged in decision making and treatment. Youth were also invited to engage in the decision making process. In fact, anyone and everyone invested in a positive outcome for the child and family were invited to have a voice.

Kohomban began an open door policy so parents could call any time, and more importantly, when they did call they received a response that was open and transparent. Families were told honestly about the challenges of working through the system, what staff is working on, and what can be expected throughout the process. Changes were made to visitation hours and structures so that siblings and working family members could actually engage with their children and structure a visit that offered a positive experience. Trust, respect, and well-being began to come about authentically with families through this level of engagement.

CV has taken additional steps to dig deep looking for family members "lost" to the child. This includes hiring a former NYPD detective to help search for family members. This has led to exciting outcomes where teens languishing in residential care are surprised to learn that they have interested family sometimes close by and sometimes far away. Most recently, they found family in Florida for a teen who believed that he had no one.

All of these changes sit within a framework of multi-system programming and services from in-home services to transition services that create opportunities to position youth for success in adulthood. At CV, this framework of care is backed by a connection to research and measurement. For example, between 2007 and 2010, 94.6 percent of the 245 children in foster care at CV returned and remained home.

It has been nine years since CV began this process of values transformation. As testament to how deep family engagement sits within the organization is its partnership statement developed with the CV Parent Council. The CV values system is reflected in the rights of families and the responsibilities of staff in manageable and articulate ways that set organizational policy.

CV is no longer a home for children, but a place where they are prepared for future success. In 2012, more than 10,000 children and families engaged in family support services. CV is a site of nonprofit human services excellence and has saved the public more than \$10 million in support of children. Their next challenge, developing a Social Impact Bond strategy that promises to completely undo existing residential care lengths-of-stay.

## **CASE EXAMPLE: Family Support Services of North Florida**

The Family Support Services of North Florida (FSS) was born out of State of Florida's child welfare privatization movement. FSS became the lead agency for child welfare services in Duval County in July 2002 and in Nassau County in September 2007. As a leader under this reform, FSS manages to be results-oriented, strengths-based, and family-centered. The organization does this through a focus on a strong community-based network of partnerships.

Lee Kaywork, CEO of FSS leads an approach to care that is driven by a value of family as the best place of permanency for a child and the belief that you cannot reunify a family until they are engaged. FSS first began a change towards values-driven care five years ago when they realized that they needed to convince the child welfare system that safety and family engagement could coexist, and more importantly that engagement led to child well-being.

At FSS change required deliberate, on-going reinforcement and training around the value system not just the practices of family-centered and strengths-based care. This process of embedding culturally sensitive, strengths-based and family-centered approaches is aided by a comprehensive wraparound model of care. When staff sees the success of these practices and can connect this to their learning, the result is greater buy-in and a more natural practice of the organization value system.

Because value systems are customized, training and staff development are customized as well. FSS created a unique course for caseworkers that result in case work sensitivity to the values orientation. This course helps caseworkers recognize where a family is at so that the appropriate type of care is provided, but also provides staff with multiple tools at their disposal to guide them in addressing needs as they arise.

Supervisors enforce that staff are successful when the care provided, regardless of where, follows the values orientation of the organization. Caseworkers are trained to challenge day-to-day practice and ask questions to drive out whether the philosophy is in operation (i.e. Who was involved in making the decision?, Did both the youth and parent have a say? Have we done everything possible to keep this family member engaged?)

Like The Children's Village, at FSS a multidisciplinary, system of care helps develop an approach to family where all pieces of the puzzle are concurrently reinforced and staff has the resources to make them work. What also makes FSS child and family engagement stronger is their position in partnership within the child welfare system. As a private provider of care, they maintain the independence and nimbleness of other private nonprofits but through its partnerships with the state, involvement with research, and collaboration with the courts, FSS is an influencer of the entire child welfare system; impacting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in care throughout Florida but also providing a model for care across the nation.

Through an intentional child and family engagement value orientation, FSS serves children and families in their home and communities whenever ever possible, creates natural connections to helping networks within the neighborhoods, and provides wraparound care. Their success is evidenced through an emphasis on prevention/diversion. They not only focus on engaging families while in care, but before care. FSS reduced removal rates by 70 percent. In keeping children out of care, resources can be better allocated to applying the principals of engagement with families in care resulting in expedited permanency.

## **CASE EXAMPLE: Hathaway Sycamores, Pasadena, Calif.**

Today, Hathaway-Sycamores Child and Family Services provides a comprehensive continuum of services to thousands of children and families across greater Los Angeles. In 2000, the organization recognized the wraparound model so successful in the child welfare system should not be a boutique program but an orientation of care throughout the agency experienced by every child. William Martone, president and CEO, Debra Manners, senior executive vice president, and a program leadership team from Hathaway-Sycamores that included a Parent Peer Support staff member launched a major change initiative that would hardwire values-driven care throughout the organization.

The change initiative started with clarity of vision and the development of four big ideas to guide their practice model. The organization enlisted the support of a trusted facilitator to guide them through the process and help tap into the value system to drive organization policy and practice.

Key to this orientation was moving beyond "whatever it takes" as slogan to the acknowledgement that sometimes what it takes is sometimes providing families with basic needs and natural supports. At Hathaway-Sycamores practice is 24/7—one family at a time. This means that on a practical side, organization policy and resources that support staff accessibility and availability also need to exist. To work in the community, staff needs cell phones and laptops, as well as work schedules that care for the care providers.

The organization changed in other ways. Parents were hired into Hathaway-Sycamores as staff and change agents. Engagement at this level, challenges staff and engrained value systems to think in new ways about children and families, and better understand the strengths of families through the lens of a parent with a child in care.

Not only are there staff who have experienced the child welfare system, but youth who have graduated from the program come in as a peer support partner for other youth. This peer-to-peer relationship is built on the unique experience between children in care.

Hathaway-Sycamores is a leader in children's mental health, residential, wrap-around, and community-based care because of their attention to evidence-based practice. Accountability is part of this practice model. Care teams that include a clinician, partner, case manager, youth specialist, and care coordinator work together with children and families in care on monthly goals that are revisited and adjusted short-term. The focus of the care team is on how the values play out in care and the progress made on the child's short-term goals not exclusively on the long-term contracted outcomes. Leadership serves as the advocate for case-by-case progress, not just aggregated outcomes.

Change is challenging enough when working at the micro level and supporting a one child at a time philosophy. Organization change is deepened and strengthened through external engagement in state and local policy and practice that supports greater child and family engagement as a values approach. Hathaway-Sycamores develops relationships with child guardians and decision-makers that have powerful influence over a child's care. The organization also takes responsibility at a macro-level by becoming involved in the political and legal structures that shape child welfare policy and in research that supports knowledge gains in how engagement optimizes outcomes for children.

Last year, Hathaway-Sycamores touched more than 9,000 clients and engaged 97 percent of children in planning their own treatment. In the past 12 years of their residential history, Hathaway-Sycamores has effectively decreased their length of stay in residential treatment from 40 months to less than 9 months. Youth are being discharged to permanent home-like settings at a higher rate (46 percent vs. 27 percent) when the residential program has a family finding component that searches for permanent placements in combination with placing discharged residential youth into community-based programs to ensure lasting success in the community.

#### **CASE EXAMPLE: Lawrence Hall Youth Services, Chicago**

For more than 140 years, Lawrence Hall Youth Services has served children and families across metropolitan Chicago. Like many leaders and innovators in residential treatment, Lawrence Hall is re-visioning care for children in ways that can offer safe, stable, and loving environments while keeping families connected and engaged. Under the leadership of Mary Hollie, CEO of Lawrence Hall, the organization is experiencing a true transformation from the old paradigm of permanent residential care. Lawrence Hall operates around a child-centered set of core beliefs in which children have a say in their own care and development. Through evidence-based, community-embedded, family-centered, strengths-based care, youth are returning home.

The value of child and family engagement surfaces for Lawrence Hall each and every time staff witness the impact of the absence of family at a visit or event on a child. When family cannot make a visit, behavior problems tend to follow. When family attends an event children grow and develop in positive and healthy ways. As an organization that is values-driven in their approach, the question it asks is not how do we stop the family from disappointing the child in the future, but how do we engage them in re-stabilizing the child's behavior today?

The capacity for staff to respond in this way is deeply rooted in the culture at Lawrence Hall. Children have a strong voice through the Youth Advisory Council but also in defining for themselves "family." Staff know and respect that children, of any age, have thoughts about who the primary supports are in their lives—this is not always "Family" with a capital "F." Who kids reference as their support networks are the relationships that need to be nurtured and supported in positive ways in order to give children a sense of safety and permanency.

To support positive and healthy relationships with family, Lawrence Hall maintains an open door policy. This creates culture for families and staff alike. Much how the experience of authentic engagement inspires families to move towards creating a safe and stable environment for a child, staff too are inspired to pursue child and family engagement approaches each time a family visits or attends an event. According to Jeff Blythe, COO at Lawrence Hall, the real test of the organization's culture of engagement is that they have reached a point where it is not even notable that a dad would attend a school day presentation or come to have dinner with a child—it simply is the culture.

Not only has this transformation changed the way Lawrence Hall's children and families' experience their time in care, but has changed the way in which they recruit and retain staff. Lawrence Hall employs staff whose title and job description is to monitor and facilitate engagement approaches across the organization. It is also not the sole requirement of designated staff to ensure the value system. Each potential hire is asked about how they engage and their beliefs about family. With each new staff hired into the shared value system, the culture of child and family engagement strengthens.

#### **CASE EXAMPLE: Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, Fla.**

At Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe, family centered care was a practice model, but child and family engagement is becoming the core value orientation that allows them to work in a way that promotes empathy, healing, and trust. Our Kids is a private nonprofit corporation

in Florida that responds to the need for local control and leadership over the child welfare system. Our Kids responded to more than 5,000 cases in 2012.

The natural and quick response seen from Our Kids in the first scenario not only reflects quality standards of care, but also an organization whose culture is driven by a common set of values. The response would not have occurred if Our Kids had not taken the time to clearly articulate their values to all staff, and create organization policies, practices and relationships that made it possible to be adaptable, nimble and responsive to the needs of the child..

To develop its values, the organization focused not just on current clients or caseloads, but rather on staff's own experiences as members of families—sisters, parents, brothers, children—and how they would want the people they cared about to experience the child welfare system. When challenged to view care through this lens, staff realized that how they wanted to be treated—with care, respect, inclusion, honesty—is equally valid from the perspective of the children and families they serve. As a group, they became keenly aware that how they choose to respond to any child in care would be the experience that would stay with that child for a lifetime.

Having a common values system is not in and of itself new, but bearing responsibility for those values to be experienced by every child and family, every time, and throughout the system is not as wide spread as it needs to be. Our Kids ensures shared values and thus, consistent practice of those values, through recruitment and continuous development of employees whose support for child and family engagement is genuine. This commitment can be found at all levels of the organization from the CEO, Fran Allegra and her board of directors all the way down the line.

Our Kids infuses its values through its quality and performance measurement processes. Every month, Our Kids meets to talk about its measures of success, not only as an aggregated whole, but also as each child's individual progress and outcomes. It is the job of leadership to reconcile the aggregated outcomes—positive or not—within their network of contracting collaborators, and for staff to focus on the goals of the children in care.

Connecting outcomes to values also means Our Kids can course correct and has the tools to make this happen. The culture and policy require supervisors to check quarterly on the reality of family engagement in the field. Each supervisor goes out with each caseworker to assess, mentor, and coach how to truly engage families. Supervisors provide real examples from case notes about what genuine engagement looks like and how engagement values are lived out. It's not about perfection. It's about continuing growth, honest reflection, and going slowly and deliberately to ensure that families are engaged authentically each step of the way.

## **CUSTOMIZING A POLICY AND PRACTICE FRAMEWORK FOR ENGAGEMENT**

Across child welfare providers there is an unwavering desire to heal, support, and prepare children for a future of hope and promise, as well as an understanding and willingness to invite children and families to be an integral part of the agency at a policy and practice level. Yet, every day the realities of high caseloads, lack of resources and the realities of children living with complex life circumstances, including the stresses of poverty, and serious behavioral and mental health conditions make authentic child and family engagement sometimes seem impossible and overwhelming. This sense of powerlessness, hesitancy, and total risk avoidance cannot remain as reasons to refrain from moving towards a values-driven system of practice that can positively alter the life trajectory of a child.

Private nonprofits must understand that policy does not only come from the public sector. Nonprofit community based organizations are also policy makers and influencers and must do their part to hardwire the values orientation into their entire organization and advocacy responsibilities. As evidenced in the case examples, many organizations begin change at the moment they witness the status quo is not producing the results children deserve. Often, the next step is to seek the answers in research and best practice and move from program thinking to systems change thinking. As these tools are applied, the difference practitioners see in children who experience the system when child and family engagement is consistently practiced serves as the final catalyst for moving towards true transformation and policy change. The early adopters of values driven child welfare policy and practice stumbled many times on their journey, but in the end can reflect on how they were able to achieve positive results. These organizations do not suggest their transformation is complete, but a great improvement over where they once were. The second wave of adopters of child and family engagement values will benefit from starting this journey of transformation now.

The commonalities across the case examples suggest there are many capacities of organizations that must be aligned for policies and practices to result in the level of transformation necessary for kids to receive the care they deserve. All five organizations operated within a culture of innovation and with the agility to change and adapt. Additionally, they shared these characteristics:

- Values-driven leadership including at the governance level
- Clarity, alignment, and measurement of values and beliefs

- Deep child and family engagement that is authentic
- True evidence-based wraparound approaches to care
- Staff development, inclusion, and support
- Flexibility and agility to adopt
- Commitment to Impact and Accountability

### ***Value-Driven Leadership***

As with all successful change movements, leadership is critical. Each of the five case examples are led by leadership teams that embrace wraparound systems of care practices and principles, that believe that each and every child and family brings assets that can be activated to strengthen the child welfare experience, and that it is their responsibility to create the best experience possible for children and families. When leaders of child welfare organizations embrace child and family engagement values, effective policy and practice frameworks follow. These leaders set and negotiate contracts with partners around this common vision, advocate for staff when the outcome of well-being is obtained but placement is delayed, and support staff with policy that makes practice of the values both required and possible.

### ***Clarity of Values and Beliefs***

To truly lead for child and family engagement, organizations must commit to a values system that moves policy and practice toward a set of beliefs that confirm the organizations commitment to children and family. Very few organizations actually have the capacity to achieve a definitive value system on their own. Several of the organizations in the case examples used outside facilitators to help capture, unite, and articulate a common value system involving all levels of the organization and the communities they operate from within. The statements capture how the organization will shape the experience of children and families through engagement and respect, one child at a time. These values are manageable and articulable in ways that can inform organization policy and staff accountability. For example, The Children’s Village created a statement of expectations in partnership with the Parent Council. This statement, consistent with their values, articulates levels of transparency, respect, and business practice. Values statements need to be visible, but they also need to be used.

### ***Deep Child and Family Engagement that is Authentic***

For child and family engagement to be authentic, relationships based on trust, respect, and empathy need to be the driving force. The practice of engagement cannot simply be transactional. Children and families do recognize the difference. When a child sees that their family is respected, they in turn feel a greater sense of safety and permanency. Rick Lockwood, Family Finding program supervisor at Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin Community Services, and Deb Rosen, director at the Institute for Family Connections at Hillside Family Agencies, both agreed that simply bringing families to the table is not enough. Both say staff must also make it clear that they are ready to listen and are open to being challenged, because together plans are formed, decisions are made, and the best interests of the child are paramount.

### ***Wraparound Approaches to Care***

Although not all the case examples explicitly employ the Wraparound practice model,<sup>5</sup> each organization has aligned a comprehensive set of approaches to working with children and families within their homes and communities and at various levels of intervention and design. For example, Lawrence Hall Youth Services no longer focuses on a year-long program, but rather on multiple phases of care individualized to meet a child’s needs. These practices are often evidence-based, child- and family-centered, and strengths-based.

Comprehensive services aligned internally are only half of the equation. Values-led organizations do not attempt to meet all needs alone, but rather seek the optimal outcome within partnerships and collaborations as part of this wraparound care. Other sectors (i.e. court systems, government offices, lawyers, etc.) that work within child welfare are also providers of care and responsible for the outcomes of children. Values-led organizations invest in developing these relationships. For example, Hathaway-Sycamores found that relationships with guardian ad litem can be a powerful resource in cross advocacy for children’s needs when it is time to go before the courts and make decisions about placement. In the case with Our Kids, a network with attorneys and businesses brought the necessary tools to facilitate hope and healing.

### ***Flexibility and Agility to Adopt***

Wraparound approaches to care require policy support to work. At Hathaway-Sycamores, the adoption of community-based and home-based services required new infrastructure including providing cell phones, laptops, and office accessibility, which in the days of residential care were non-issues because all care was provided on-campus at hours conducive to a professional staff work day. Hillside

Family of Agencies, as they moved towards child- and family-centered values-driven care, also found that the operations of the business, including work hours, flex time, and telecommuting, needed to be restructured to accommodate their commitment to this values alignment. When an organization adopts a transition in values but does not address the very tangible barriers that inhibit flexibility and accessibility, the policies and practices left in place not only alienate families from getting engaged and make it difficult for families to provide safe and permanent support for children, but make it challenging for staff to achieve their goals as well.

### **Staff Development, Inclusion, and Support**

Leadership goes a long way in creating a culture of engagement within organizations. Each leader, however, found that transformation could not succeed without buy-in and support at the staff level. Change in organization policy and practice can be as threatening to some staff as a change in home environment can be to children. The leadership teams in each of the case examples approached this transformation through the same engagement value system they sought to infuse throughout their agency. Jeremy Kohomban at The Children's Village captured this as a "hearts and minds" game with staff in which they need to be trained in practice success but also experience it to be successful. Multiple leaders shared that it is important for staff to understand that the traditional practices of child welfare were not wrong at the time, but rather that research and practice continues to show us ways to do it better.

Buy-in from existing staff is important, as is the actions taken during recruitment of new staff, which must continue to strengthen a values-led culture. Values need to be cross-walked with job descriptions. Once values are clearly articulated, competencies and capacities can be outlined and identified for job candidates.

### **Commitment to Impact and Accountability**

Impact and performance need to be viewed as one in the same. Accountability and fidelity are equally as important in embedding a child and family engagement values strategy as they are in assuring the quality of a specific program or practice. The challenge is in matching accountability measures and performance indicators across a disjointed system of care, and then using this information to improve the quality of care given based on what is learned. An organization that is committed to child and family engagement values will account for the metrics that are required by their contracts, but will also prioritize and monitor, at multiple levels, how the value system is applied for every child.

Authentic engagement requires flexibility and individualization. This means coordinated goal setting and the continual examination of all processes that lead up to goal attainment. It also includes how to hardwire these values-aligned processes throughout the DNA of the organization. At the five organizations contributing to this report, team meetings to review a child's progress are now standard. What also is now standard is the role of supervisors in monitoring and enforcing the child and family engagement philosophy. For example, at Our Kids supervisors go out in the field quarterly with each staff member to be sure that they are working the family engagement model authentically. Additionally, staff is provided with real examples of where engagement has succeeded or been less successful as part of their regular training and development.

Being accountable to the consistent application of this values orientation also means advancing the science and knowledge of authentic engagement. Several of these organizations are actively engaged in evaluation and research studies to examine how their practices can change overall well-being. They also utilize data to drive decisions and continuously improve their organization policy and practice and inform their larger education and advocacy role within the larger system.

All of the case examples are clear that the change process the organization is involved in is slow and imperfect but that the outcomes for children and youth in their care are far better than they were before they began this transformation. They not only have changed the lives of children, shortened stays in care, connected youth with positive relationships with family and adults, and opened up more pathways for success for youth, but their organizations are sustainable places for leadership and innovation in their communities and across the industry.

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of Wraparound in Milwaukee County see the *Alliance for Children & Families Magazine*, 2013 Transformational Values, Issue 1 pp. 19-21.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the Alliance's hope is that this paper is helpful to all sectors and disciplines that are part of the child welfare system, our emphasis is the nonprofit, human-serving providers who are stewards of a sector whose history is steeped in a strong belief in the strength and resilience of individuals, families, and their neighborhoods, and who work towards achieving their missions in society. Within the child welfare system, private providers are much more than providers of programs and services under contract with government; they are transformational agents of change and innovation through partnerships within communities. It is in the way they provide programs and services, leadership, creativity, advocacy and through the many and varied partnerships that they strive to achieve more than contract compliance and contract outcomes. The engagement values that are the focus of this paper should be natural to nonprofits because it was upon these values this sector was built to help solve society's toughest problems.

Because of this history, it is the sector's responsibility to help move the child welfare system towards a broader definition of safety and permanency, supported by the indisputable science of healthy child development. The following recommendations are made to advance the voice of the private sector in the larger child welfare reform dialogue.

- Each private provider of child welfare services should assess and continuously measure and improve their organization's authenticity in providing child- and family-centered, strength-based care and make an intentional decision to align their strategy along this value system in the interest of each child and family they serve
- All organizations with responsibility for children and youth should become knowledgeable of the evidence-base behind the proven value of child and family engagement and be innovators in service provision. This can be accomplished in part by moving towards a measurement system that holds providers of care accountable not only for contracted outcomes but for the provision of a values-led care model that connects children to positive adult relationships and opportunities for healthy development and lifelong success
- Each agency, within their local jurisdictions, should engage not only in internal realignment of a value driven system of care, but engage in macro-level opportunities to align local, state, and federal policy around child welfare with the goals of consistent and values driven family engagement and aligning our goals for safety and permanency through the lens of healthy child development and well-being
- Participate in a movement and advocate for child welfare policy and practice in which fit and willing relative placement is the presumed interest for a child until there is absolute proof to the contrary. Policy and budget should include supports for training for child welfare staff, relative search, authentic engagement and supports for relatives providing placement in equal standing to, if not greater than, non-relative adoption and placement
- A national center on child and family engagement should be created to support policy and practice cross sectors and disciplines that are anchored in child and family centered values

To truly achieve the results that decades of reform efforts have not, the private sector will need to maintain its primary commitment to safety, yet keep its promise to children, families and communities, and co-create with them and their families the relationships and experiences they deserve. Authentic child and family engagement must become the driver that orients all of our practice and policy. It is from this lens that we believe our best outcomes will be achieved.

Achieving successful child welfare outcomes is not just the responsibility of the public or private sector. Child welfare is a shared community responsibility with many partners. It is critical that all partners believe in and practice child and family engagement values in all aspects of their policy and practice. A child and family engagement orientation reframes a solution for child welfare from one that creates dependencies on a formal system of care that is not sustainable, to one that creates a strong network of support and relationships that can carry children successfully into adulthood.

The Alliances network of nonprofit, human-serving organizations is committed to increasing the capacities and influence of high impact organizations. We will do our part to bring child and family engagement values to life for every child, every time. We hope that all others in child welfare will also do their part to embrace and embed these values in everything they do and in all aspects of their organizations.



The Alliance would like to thank the many experts who touch the lives of children and families through the child welfare system that joined us in leadership and dialogue over the last year. Their contributions were critical in developing and refining a value system for advancing system reform from within private, nonprofit organizations. This paper reflects all of the expertise and insights of those below.

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