



HOW COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN HELP TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE *Keeping Children Safe is Everybody's Business*

“The community partnership approach is a concerted effort to change the way we think about protecting children and to reform our nation’s child welfare system. It starts with the premise that children’s safety depends on strong families, and strong families depend on connections with a broad range of people, organizations, and community institutions. The community partnership approach engages community members and agencies to reach out and support families before they face crises; intervene more rapidly, comprehensively, and effectively when abuse and neglect occur; and join in a partnership with the public child welfare agency to improve child protection policy, programs, and practice in ways that more reliably strengthen families and more aggressively safeguard children.”¹

- **Community partnerships get help to families earlier.** Many of the community partnership sites have developed a differential response to child abuse and neglect reports so that families have the opportunity to get help earlier, rather than waiting for a formal child protective service investigation, which too often ends up with no services going to the family. The alternative response helps families learn who they can go to when they have problems. In Louisville, First Call refers cases that are not accepted for investigation to the full-service neighborhood school, which can link the family to appropriate services. In St. Louis, special steps are taken to train staff in early childhood and pre-school settings to recognize child abuse and neglect and to offer special supports to families in elementary schools.
- **Community partnerships promote a better understanding of individual families’ needs.** Family team meetings and individualized course of action plans are key to fully understanding what individual children need, what families need to keep their children safe, and the strengths families have to build on. All the partnership sites use these methods. Families can bring family members, others in their support network, and service providers of their choice to the family team meeting. The action plan developed at the meeting specifies services that are individualized to build on strengths and to address the individual needs of the child and the family.
- **Community partnerships call upon formal and informal resources in the community.** A network of neighborhood supports and community resources is a centerpiece of the partnerships. In many of the sites, volunteers and paraprofessionals

are teamed with child protection staff to support local families. In Cedar Rapids, neighborhood partners reach out to families in their immediate area to offer help and support before problems intensify. Patch Teams at the family resource centers in Cedar Rapids bring together child protection staff and representatives of other child serving agencies in the community. In Louisville, a community liaison spearheads the Community Resource team. In Jacksonville, child protection staff and other community partners use Community Support Agreements to connect families to persons in their extended family or community who volunteer to help them keep their children safe. Several of the sites have teams that are geographically assigned so they can be familiar with neighborhood resources and be more efficient and timely when linking families to what they need in their own communities. Often services are located together in the community in “hubs,” in schools or local communities. Several child protection workers in St. Louis are out-stationed at the Siegal Community Education Center. In addition to family and other informal family supports, the networks include community resources such as faith-based organizations, Head Start and other early childhood organizations, Boys and Girls Clubs, scouting programs, and a range of social and health services agencies.

- **Community partnerships give more attention to preventing children from being re-abused.** One of the goals of the community partnerships is reducing the risk of re-abuse of children. Most sites offer special outreach to those families determined most “at-risk.” In Cedar Rapids, a risk profile has been developed so more targeted help can be provided to certain families. Cases are handled by a team that can continue working with the family while in the care of the agency. St. Louis designates special family support workers to assist families who have had reports of chronic neglect in order to decrease the risk of isolation and offer intensive supports to the family.
- **Community partnerships increase access to treatment for families challenged by substance abuse and domestic violence.** A number of the partnerships have developed working agreements and deliver services jointly with providers who have expertise in substance abuse and domestic violence, problems that bring many families to the attention of the child welfare system. Sometimes child protection workers are placed in family support centers with other community resources so they can work more closely with staff that offer specialized services. In Jacksonville, domestic violence and child protection staff have been jointly trained. Child protective service teams in Jacksonville also include a domestic violence advocate. Co-location of staff allows referrals to be made more appropriately and efficiently and enables staff to better communicate about case planning. In Cedar Rapids a specialized network of staff and families with domestic violence and child protection concerns has been developed.
- **Community partnerships strengthen communities to better help keep children safe.** All of the community partnership sites have conducted community asset surveys on which they can draw to help children and families. Some have plotted child abuse and neglect reports and overlaid those findings with police reports of domestic violence calls. Others have gone door-to-door to identify community problems and to attract

community resources. The importance of child protection and child abuse prevention is highlighted at special community events, often planned and implemented by community members themselves. Some sites offer small monetary rewards for “Great Ideas” to help keep children and families safe or raise visibility of child protection in the community. There are special projects too. “Families Helping Families” conferences and Parents Anonymous groups bring parenting support to parents and their children. In some cases community residents have become involved in the “Front Porch Project®,” developed by the American Human Association, which help individuals identify and respond to situations where child abuse or neglect may be involved. Special efforts also are made to engage community residents in the partnership. “Talkshops” in St. Louis have been successful in engaging residents and answering their questions about services and supports available to them on a range of different topics, such as parenting, relationships and stress management.

This fact sheet was prepared by the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) from the many useful materials available about the Community Partnerships for Protecting Children. For further information about the Partnerships, visit the Web site for the Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, part of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, at www.cssp.org or call (212) 979-2369. For additional information from the Children’s Defense Fund, contact jchang@childrensdefense.org or (202) 662-3629.

¹ Francie Zimmerman, *Doing Business Differently: Changing Policy and Practice in the St. Louis Division of Family Services* (The Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2003)