



## Supporting Systems Change in Texas Child Welfare:

**Key Processes in Three-Way Partnerships between Casey Family Programs, Child Protective Services, and Third-Party Vendors**



## About the Partners

### **The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)**

Founded in 1930, is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization of state and local human service agencies and individuals who work in or are interested in public human service programs. Our mission is to develop and promote policies and practices that improve the health and well-being of families, children, and adults. APHSA educates Congress, the media, and the general public on social policies and practices and help state and local public human service agencies achieve their desired outcomes in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, child care, child support, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, child welfare, and other program areas and issues that affect families, the elderly, and people who are economically disadvantaged. Our Organizational Effectiveness (OE) Department implements our mission by providing management consulting products and services to help agencies continuously improve their performance and capacity.

### **The American Humane Association (AHA)**

Founded in 1877, the American Humane Association is the only national organization dedicated to protecting both children and animals. A nonprofit membership organization, American Humane is headquartered in Denver.

Through a network of child and animal protection agencies and individuals, American Humane provides national leadership in developing policies, legislation, curricula and training programs—and taking actions—to protect children and animals from cruelty, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

### **Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS)**

The mission of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services is to protect children, the elderly, and people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation by involving clients, families and communities.

### **Casey Family Programs**

Casey Family Programs is the largest national foundation whose sole mission is to provide and improve—and ultimately prevent the need for—foster care. The foundation draws on over 40 years of experience and expert research and analysis to improve the lives of children and youth in foster care in two important ways: by providing direct services and support to foster families, and by promoting improvements in child welfare practice and policy. The Seattle-based foundation was established in 1966 by UPS founder Jim Casey.

**This publication was written for the partners by Karl Chan-Brown**

## Section 1: Introduction

This document describes key processes in two partnerships convened by Casey Family Programs' (Casey) Texas Strategic Consulting (TSC) in 2007 to help implement legislative mandates, support Texas Child Protective Services (CPS) leadership vision for systems change, and meet Casey objectives to reduce the number of children and youth in care.

The first partnership was a continuous improvement effort in which the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) developed leadership and organizational effectiveness capacity at CPS's regional management level. The second was a workforce development effort in which the American Humane Association (AHA) trained CPS staff on three Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) models. TSC played a critical role in the inception, development, and implementation of both efforts, which took place in the context of a vision of agency-wide culture change to which senior leaders at CPS are highly committed.

While the work of APHSA addressed an ongoing crisis in one CPS region, it also helped create systems and processes that develop leadership and responsibility at all levels of the agency and foster that development in new staff. The work of AHA served not only to train CPS staff on programs but also to shift thinking among broad segments of the agency toward a family-centered, family-focused, strength-based philosophy. Both three-way partnerships shared certain characteristics that contributed to their success:

- Highly motivated and skilled partners with shared values around improving outcomes for children and families and the systems that serve them.
- Sponsor groups composed of leaders from each partner prepared to remove barriers to project progress.
- A third party capable of providing context, facilitating communications, resolving conflicts, and filling resource and process gaps.
- Detailed but flexible project management that left room for responsiveness while resisting reactivity.
- Processes that built high levels of trust between partners.

This report is based on interviews with and documentation provided by TSC, CPS, APHSA, and AHA.

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**Section 2** of this report provides an overview of recent reforms, related challenges, and TSC support to CPS.

**Section 3** of this report provides an overview of the two development efforts.

**Section 4** of this report details the key processes and structures that guided the two efforts.

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## Section 2:

### Overview of Reform

#### Background and Reforms

Texas CPS has a history of family engagement that reaches decades back, but as foster care entries soared in the 1990s, investigations practice moved toward an incident-based model. Like many public child welfare agencies, CPS operated under a steady reduction in funding while caseloads increased. By the early 2000s, the agency recognized it was approaching a crisis, but it could not forestall the inevitable: A series of high-profile cases in 2003 made CPS the focus of intense public, executive, and legislative scrutiny.

Before being named assistant commissioner in April, 2004, Joyce James had successfully engaged communities and used data to drive practice change. Both foci were important in shaping effective responses to legislative inquiry. Because community stakeholders and advocates were organized and engaged, they delivered a consistent message about high investigation caseloads; and because CPS had been gathering data on pilot programs, it was able to demonstrate their effectiveness. In 2005 and 2007, the legislature passed and funded reform bills that allowed CPS to hire over 1500 new regional staff, with a particular emphasis on investigative workers. The bills also expanded CPS's FGDM-based transition planning program, Circles of Support (COS); expanded Family Group Conferencing (FGC), which CPS had piloted regionally since 2003; and mandated the addition of a pre-removal Family Team Meeting (FTM) program.

#### Challenges

The allocations and mandates improved resourcing but also put new pressures on a system already struggling for equilibrium. Position-specific funding limited managers' ability to distribute staff to areas of need; increased specialization created a lack of continuity in casework; an automated HR system helped streamline hiring but lacked quality controls.

Two other major issues presented potential stumbling blocks for CPS. First, the large infusion of new staff led to accelerated promotion of case managers to supervisor roles, while high turnover rates exacerbated succession-planning challenges. Second, CPS faced the need to implement a statewide FGDM program in a matter of months without funding for the development of practice models and policies or for training. TSC helped CPS address both of these challenges through the collaborative leadership development and workforce development efforts described below.

#### TSC Support to CPS

Casey Family Programs began its relationship with CPS in 1984 as a direct service provider and moved into systems improvement work in the 1990s. Beginning in the early 2000s, Casey supported what may be the largest undoing racism and disproportionality effort in child welfare in the nation. After the 2002 CFSR identified kinship and transition as areas needing improvement, TSC was formed and supported relative placement programs and efforts to improve services for transitioning youth. In 2003, it provided peer technical assistance matches critical to the inception of the FGC pilots. An annual review identifies projects to be

supported by TSC and ensures they align with Casey's 2020 Vision, central to which is the safe reduction in the number of children in foster care and reinvestment of any savings in sustainability efforts.

All of the major efforts supported by TSC in Texas have in common a commitment to family involvement, and they have contributed significant momentum toward a cultural shift endorsed by Joyce James. Attaining her vision of a CPS program in which all areas of practice are guided by tenets of family involvement will require not only implementing programs but also embedding ownership of such principles at every level and in every staff member. When CPS and TSC agreed to collaborate on leadership development and FGDM training in 2007, they were addressing two of the key challenges of reform, but they were also moving the program toward the deeper, systemic goal of culture change.

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## Section 3:

### Overview of Development Efforts

#### Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership Development

APHSA has partnered with CPS since 2003 to help shape and provide targeted leadership development for senior CPS staff. Supported by TSC, this training initially focused on creating, clarifying, and communicating a stronger mission, vision, and values for the agency. Based on their experience with the training, James and her direct reports made a commitment to fostering leadership at all levels of the CPS program and they expect that consistent training, quality tools, and development opportunities for leaders and managers in each of the state's eleven regions will lead to overall organizational improvement.

Early in 2007, CPS and TSC explored a direct approach to training supervisors and their managers, but with nearly a thousand supervisors alone, the sheer scale of the task far outstripped available resources. The effort refocused on the mid-level managers responsible for the regions' day-to-day performance, and APHSA was engaged to provide them with training, technical assistance, and implementation support on its continuous improvement model, including:

- Intensive fact finding and organizational development work in one region in crisis
- Leadership team development work in three regions with recent changes in leadership
- Statewide continuous quality improvement institutes for all regional management teams

Analysis in Section 4 of in this report is based on the first two efforts.

#### FGDM Curriculum Development and Training

CPS has three FGDM programs. First, CPS initiated FGC pilots in 2003 in five regions (then called districts), and Peer TA matches convened by TSC included Washington, DC, where AHA had helped implement a system-wide FGC program. Pilots were developed autonomously by regional staff, were guided by general policies, and were implemented in a grass-roots manner highly dependent on stakeholder and staff interest. Second, CPS modeled the COS transition program on FGC principles and housed it under the

FGDM umbrella in the agency structure. Finally in 2007, the legislature added a third program, pre-removal Family Team Meetings (FTM). Legislators also mandated that COS meetings be held for all eligible youth, that FGC be expanded to all regions, and that FTMs be conducted in 12 percent of confirmed investigations. (From September 2006 through August 2007, CPS conducted 163,471 investigations and confirmed 42,445.)

With a launch date of October 1, 2007 for the new and expanded programs, CPS had the spring and summer to hire new FGDM staff, write and revise policy, develop a training curriculum, and train staff across the state. While an internal workgroup had begun curriculum development in anticipation of some program expansion, the scope of the effort exceeded its capacity. CPS and TSC engaged AHA to conduct a seven-part effort that included:

Reconvening the internal workgroup to gather information on existing programs and intended policy

- **Developing a Texas-specific training curriculum**
- **Delivering training to over 250 participants across the state**
- **Revising the curriculum based on feedback from the trainings**
- **Developing an overview training for auxiliary staff who do not directly conduct meetings**
- **Providing individualized consultation to each region**
- **Training CPS trainers to deliver FGDM trainings in the future**

Analysis in Section 4 of this report is based on all but the final phase.

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## **Section 4:**

### **Key Processes and Structures**

#### **Introduction**

CPS and both vendors, APHSA and AHA, acknowledge that neither effort could have succeeded without the active participation of TSC staff. Far beyond funding, TSC was the origin and steward of many of the processes and structures that ensured each collaborative effort achieved its goals. This section of this report identifies key process elements that contributed to success. Although these components are presented as discreet items for the sake of clarity, they are all closely interrelated and together formed a nexus of relationship management activities that helped sustain the two projects.

#### **Vendor engagement and project scoping**

Vendor procurement: Legislation did not include appropriations for external support of curriculum development or staff training, nor did CPS have funds for extensive leadership development efforts. With CPS funding, vendor identification would have been subject to standard bid-based procurement processes, which would have added 9-12 months to the time it took TSC to engage the vendors. In the case of the FGDM training, a timely program launch would have been impossible.

Vendor selection: Each vendor has an outstanding national reputation, deep expertise, and previous experience with Texas CPS, all of which enhanced staff confidence in vendor competence and reduced initial orientation times and learning curves. By bringing preferred vendors to the table, TSC guaranteed a high quality of service and cohesive project initiation.

Scoping: Initial scoping of both projects with the vendors was performed by TSC staff. This had a twofold effect. First, TSC was able to translate the core needs of CPS while the agency worked to identify an exact focus, hire staff, and write policy. Second, it established the central role of TSC in the partnership, which would be critical to project management and communications functions.

Contracting: Contracting with CFP guaranteed the vendors swift payment and provided exceptional flexibility with regard to unforeseen changes in scope and products. However, negotiations about intellectual property rights were longer and more arduous than expected by APHSA, which credits TSC staff with exceptional diligence in resolving the issue.

## **Partnership Structure and Roles**

Working environment: Both efforts were three-way collaborations, and while TSC had worked in this capacity with CPS in the past, the arrangement was unusual for both vendors. TSC and CPS experience and comfort with the structure provided a foundation that accelerated project initiation and development, while vendor willingness to engage in the partnership structure and adapt to it was critical to effective collaboration.

Commitment: Senior leaders at CPS demonstrated extraordinary commitment to the projects, ensuring their continuation despite major crisis, prioritizing sustainability, engaging a wide range of staff and work units, actively and directly participating in the sponsor groups that guided the work, and attending in person key trainings to underscore its importance. Both vendors demonstrated high levels of professionalism, exceptional responsiveness and flexibility, and a remarkable level of productivity under at times extremely tight timelines.

Roles: CPS was the client, the vendors were responsible for deliverables, and TSC functioned as funder and coordinator. Both vendors adapted their roles to the collaborative structure, transferring to or sharing with TSC parts of project management that they customarily take on. Each partner organization had clear accountabilities, but the exact role of TSC was not always explicit for the other organizations, allowing TSC staff to take on the functions that were most critical to project success under changing circumstances. At times, staff performed formal project management roles; at others, they negotiated compromises within or between the other parties, coached key participants, modulated communications between parties, provided feedback to trainers, strategized with CPS about project direction, or fostered responsiveness between partners. Negotiating these roles without always formalizing them gave TSC staff latitude to address critical needs, but it also required an elevated degree of internal accountability. Both vendors and CPS expressed high levels of trust in and respect for core TSC staff.

Project continuity: While all of the partners shared in problem solving, TSC had a unique role in securing project continuity. In several instances, staff changes or crises at CPS created potential gaps in continuity. Through their existing relationships and knowledge of CPS structure and culture, TSC staff were able to mitigate impacts and obtain guidance for vendors.

## **Communications and Relationships**

Initial planning and oversight: Both efforts were directed by sponsor groups made up of lead staff from each agency. Sponsors met regularly to conduct initial planning, review progress, and make adjustments to implementation strategy and timelines. Besides providing overall project direction, the sponsors also ensured organizational support for the efforts and consistent communication between the partner organizations. Both projects underwent significant changes in training content and format, and the sponsor groups were critical in identifying the need for changes, identifying solutions, scoping their impact, planning their implementation, and communicating about them.

Project communications: Almost all project communications in the planning stages ran through TSC. Despite the complexity of the efforts and the pressures under which they were executed, neither CPS nor either vendor identified significant miscommunications involving TSC staff. In the implementation stages of each project, vendors communicated directly with training participants, but even in those cases, TSC was often called upon to clarify purpose and identify appropriate channels.

Context setting: TSC's history with CPS was critical to the success of the each project, enabling TSC to provide background information and context to the vendors, especially around factors unique to Texas and CPS, including demographic information, agency structure, program history, and political environment.

Conflict resolution: Because communications were handled proactively by TSC staff, very few differences escalated into conflicts. When areas of disagreement did develop, TSC staff often facilitated offline discussions that helped clarify positions and balance the merits of expert opinion with the exigencies of historical direction at CPS, current politics, and legislative mandates.

Responsiveness: Both vendors encountered significant shifts in scope or content and responded to resulting pressures with rapid and creative solutions. In instances in which CPS was delayed in responding due to ongoing crises or staff movement, vendors relied on TSC to find alternate channels of communication. In turn, CPS participants occasionally sought clarification from TSC about the purpose and structure of upcoming meetings with vendors.

## **Project Management and Decision Making**

Project management: The two efforts differed significantly in this area, and in ways that reflect the driving forces.

For the leadership development effort, the driving force was the logic of progression, a sequencing of developmental stages that teach and illustrate improvement concepts. While APHSA provided project management, TSC staff were both formal and informal facilitators, advisors, and strategists, and they are credited by CPS and APHSA with ensuring the project had the cohesion central to its success. Their tenacity in resolving divergent opinions, their input on major shifts in direction, and their ability to manage feedback productively were especially valued.

For the FGDM training, the mandated timeline added an enormous urgency that called for a TSC project manager who could hold both vendor and client accountable. Extremely careful scoping at the outset proved

critical, and TSC kept the project on track by cultivating responsiveness on all sides. AHA and CPS reported that the project would not have been completed without diligent and detailed TSC project management.

**Decision making:** While key decisions in different areas belonged to different organizations—CPS made policy decisions, TSC made funding decisions, and vendors determined staffing—most decisions were made with input from other partners, and many were made collaboratively. Vendors pushed CPS to consider more progressive policies, CPS feedback informed vendor staffing decisions, and TSC agreed to fund additional work based on CPS needs and vendor recommendations. Negotiations around decisions made by the sponsor groups were often facilitated by TSC, which stayed in close contact with CPS and the vendors, frequently conducting offline conversations that helped finalize decisions and push work forward. This process made use of the diverse expertise in the sponsor group and promoted buy-in during decision implementation. Generally, it made the work efforts more efficient, but in some situations, the consensus orientation may have contributed to communication and timing challenges because it required more conversations and relationship building than in expert- or authority-based decision-making processes.

**Non-project time:** Both vendors acknowledged the complexity and scope of the efforts and concurred that the projects could not have been completed without TSC process and issue tracking. However, both also reported that they spent more time than during other projects on tasks and conversations that were not directly related to deliverables or that required extensive completed work to be revised on very tight timelines.

**Capacity:** The scale of the projects stretched the capacities of both vendors and CPS. CPS leadership and regional staff remained committed to both projects in the face of significant crises, and staff for both vendors displayed a high level of dedication in responding to emergent needs. TSC staff absorbed a significant amount of facilitation and project management work that might otherwise have further strained vendor capacity.

**Flexibility:** CPS and both vendors at times had to engage in processes well outside of their comfort zones. Concurrent development of training and relevant policy in the FGDM project and a re-sequencing and re-scoping of organizational work in the leadership development project put unusual demands on all of the partners. CPS's commitment to rapid development and implementation combined with vendor responsiveness and TSC partnership management to create successful outcomes.

## **Next Steps and Preliminary Results**

AHA and APHSA continued to provide additional trainings after research for this report was completed. In both cases, the ultimate goal was to build sustainability into the new programmatic or organizational processes CPS has acquired.

While evaluations are far from complete, there is broad agreement at CPS that the region in crisis when APHSA began its work there has shown a decline in turnover as well as improved outcomes for children and families. Family Group Decision Making programs are also proving effective: CPS experienced an estimated 17-20 percent reduction in intakes as well as changes in investigator attitudes towards FGDM concepts across the state, both attributable to the FTM program based on AHA's training.



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fostering families. fostering change.®

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