



STRATEGY BRIEF

# SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

## How are child protection agencies partnering with **faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?**

There is growing recognition that no single entity can protect all children. The safety and health of children is a shared responsibility and everyone in the community has a role to play to keep children safe and thriving. As such, a multi-disciplinary approach leveraging the knowledge and resources available across the public, business, nonprofit, philanthropic, and community sectors is essential. Faith-based organizations (FBOs)<sup>1</sup> are vital community assets and have a long history of caring for the most vulnerable. Given their aligned values of supporting families, [FBOs are well positioned to partner with child protection agencies](#) to protect children and improve outcomes for families in need. Several established strategies may guide the development of a partnership between a child welfare agency and faith-based institutions.<sup>2</sup>



### **Why engage with faith-based organizations?**

#### **Faith-based organizations can serve as a bridge to the community**

Many communities have a long-standing history of mistrust of their child protection agency, and a perception of Child Protective Services as the entity that takes away

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

## JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: DC127

[DC127](#) is a collaborative of Washington, D.C., churches focused on working together to ensure the success of every child in foster care and those at risk of entering the child welfare system. DC127's goal is to empower churches to support families in their community, and works to provide churches with the necessary tools, support, and resources. It also connects individual churches to a larger network of churches, organizations, and communities mobilized around foster care and families in crisis.

Collaborating churches are asked to become a Partner Church, adopting DC127's vision and committing to at least two years of partnership. A Church Coordinator is identified in each Partner Church, to lead a team within the church.

DC127 works to both recruit and support foster and adoptive homes, as well as prevent children from entering the child welfare system by supporting their families. The initiative's Communities for Families component supports church members in assuming a variety of roles:

- **Parent Friends** commit to calling families in crisis once a week and visit them every other week in order to reduce isolation and let them know they're not alone.

- **Host Homes** provide safe, temporary homes for children whose families are experiencing a crisis (biological parents retain full custody, and average length of stay is 45 days, with a commitment to reunite the child and family as soon as the crisis has passed).
- **Community Coaches** facilitate the relationship between the host and biological families, coordinate communication and oversight of the host home, as well as provide regular outreach and support for the biological family.
- **Respite Caregivers** give parents much needed breaks or child care.
- **Resource and Support Providers** donate items such as diapers, car seats, and clothing, or professional services such as health care, hair styling, and house cleaning.
- **Support Groups** provide prayer, encouragement, and support to host and biological families through events such as playgroups, coffee talks, and meal gatherings.

children. As child protection works to change this perception, faith-based organizations have credibility in the eyes of the community and can help heal and bridge the relationship between a child protection agency and families. FBOs have established trust and fostered relationships built organically throughout the community. Often, the leaders of FBOs are respected and influential members of the community and can serve as ambassadors who advocate to the public on behalf of the child protection agency, especially during times of crisis.

For example, in Texas, the faith-based community became a strong advocate for child protection professionals. Local FBOs sought to change the public perception of CPS investigators, believing that they should be viewed as heroes, in the same way as firefighters and emergency medical service workers. The FBOs began a community-based program to provide a hot lunch for CPS offices every month in order to celebrate staff members' hard work and dedication to children and families. They also provided support to an "Adopt a Caseworker" program to enhance the visibility of CPS and assist staff in meeting the needs of the families on their caseloads.

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

## FBOs can play a key role in prevention

FBOs are in direct contact with families in their communities and are often aware of families that may be on the brink of crisis. With the right information, they can refer families to community supports that can help stabilize the family before it becomes involved with CPS. In many instances, the FBOs may already provide primary prevention services directly within their ministry. For example, FBOs run daycare centers, host parent support groups, provide mental health counseling, and offer respite care. FBOs also have access to a large network of members who can provide concrete supports for families in times of need, such as furniture, clothing, food, or financial resources to cover rent or utilities. Child protection agencies that tap into the resources offered through an FBO expand their service array and extend the community that can wrap around children and families.

The Martin Luther King Sr. Community Resources Collaborative targets primary prevention services in Atlanta neighborhoods where needs are greatest. It offers a one-stop shop where families may receive the help they need to become self-sufficient. All individuals, whether they are affiliated with the sponsoring Ebenezer Baptist Church, are eligible for services. Staff at the collaborative work with each family individually to create a personalized plan by identifying level of vulnerability in five key areas and then tapping into the collaborative partners to meet the identified needs and design an action plan to move the family toward economic stability and self-sufficiency. Some of the services provided include workforce training, housing assistance, GED preparation and testing, and life skills coaching. It also provides referrals to concrete supports such as transportation, food, furniture, and clothing.

A number of FBOs provide temporary relief and stability for families in crisis and in danger of disruption through respite care programs. In Washington, D.C., members of FBOs commit to hosting support groups and staying in contact with families in crisis. Some FBOs provide more intensive supports. For example, DC127 and Safe Families for Children allow parents to willingly place their children with host families for a short time

## JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: TRINITY FAMILY LIFE CENTER (VIRGINIA)

[Trinity Family Life Center \(TFLC\)](#) offers a community-based approach centered on advocacy, service delivery, and building bridges and relationships within the community to serve as a safety net for underserved children, youth, and families. In partnership with public/private organizations, TFLC targets three areas of need: a) foster care alumni support, b) family engagement, and c) community collaboration.

### Strengthening Families, Uplifting Communities

became part of TFLC's greater mission toward serving the community, and the center created a model of programs and support services for children and youth at risk of being put into foster care, children and youth already in care, youth transitioning out of foster care, birth parents, foster parents, and kinship caregivers. Trinity also provides family strengthening and supportive services to incarcerated parents.

In addition, TFLC's Positive Paths Alumni Center provides independent living skills training for youth aging out of foster care. The training includes workshops specific to their experiences as youth in care, one-on-one coaching on employability skills, support with housing research assistance, and access to education assistance.

period. Parents can visit and reunite with their children at any time, and host families participate voluntarily with no expectation of compensation or adoption. After the hosting arrangement ends, the goal is for the two families to remain in contact, further reducing a family's social isolation and expanding its network of ongoing support.

### FBOs can support reunification

In addition to preventing placement in foster care, FBOs also focus on supporting timely reunification. Many parents involved in child welfare are socially isolated, and often feel overwhelmed and discouraged when

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

## JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: TEXAS FAITH-BASED MODEL AND THE FIRST LADY'S NETWORK OF NURTURE

The [Texas Faith-Based Model](#) is a joint effort between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) and faith-based communities of all denominations and religious affiliations. The objectives are to: change the way DFPS collaborates with the faith community to promote positive outcomes for children and families; enhance the well-being of children by shortening their stay in the foster care system; and improve community relations. To date, DFPS has 14 faith-based staff statewide who help faith communities learn various ways they can serve children and families affected by the child welfare system.

As part of the model, DFPS provides data to local congregations about the needs of children and families in their area. The local congregation then decides what type of ministry to develop. Faith communities can pick one or several ministries based on their interest and the needs of the children in care. DFPS works with the faith organizations by providing technical assistance such as furnishing data, attending meetings, answering questions, and being a subject matter expert about the children and families needing help.

Congregations assist in many ways, such as daycare, parties for special occasions, and transportation. Congregation members may become respite care

providers, babysitters, foster parents, or adoptive parents. Congregations and communities offer various services that enhance permanency and well-being outcomes by providing goods, services, and supports to prevent children from coming into care, and also provide foster and adoptive services that decrease the time children stay in care.

DFPS has partnered with [CarePortal](#) to facilitate connections between child welfare staff, families, and churches, and streamline the donation process. The department has also partnered with Harvest Family Life to create a [Clergy in the Court for Kids](#) program in which clergy and faith communities attend court proceedings to increase awareness of the needs of children and families who come to the attention of CPS.

In 2017, DFPS and the First Lady of Texas launched [Network of Nurture](#), asking more than 800 faith partners across the state to find ways for their ministries and congregations to support children and families involved with the state's child welfare system. The Network encourages Texas residents to support vulnerable families through a range of initiatives, including providing babysitting, short-term child care, mentoring, support groups, and concrete donations of clothing, bedding, car seats and formula.

navigating the system to reunify with their children. FBOs may be able to provide parents with a positive and emotionally supportive social network during the reunification process and the successful transition of the children back home. For example, the New York City Faith Partnership pairs volunteer mentors with parents who have had their children removed and are on the path to reunification. Volunteer mentors attend court hearings, family team meetings, and other required meetings with the parents to provide emotional support and serve as a source of hope and encouragement.

### FBOs can provide older youth with critical supports

Many FBOs have prioritized utilizing their networks and resources to support older youth who are aging out of the system, in alignment with their mission to care for the most vulnerable youth in their communities. FBOs may offer a variety of services to assist youth in their transition into adulthood and achieve self-sufficiency, including mentoring programs, career development, and transitional housing.

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

The Trinity Family Life Center in Virginia realized that older youth in foster care in their communities often transitioned out of the system feeling isolated and without connections. To promote healthy life transitions with this vulnerable population, Trinity created a drop-in Foster Care Alumni Support Center in close proximity to the church for youth transitioning out of the foster care system, as well as for young adults ages 16 to 25 who have previously aged out. The program is dedicated to providing youth with life skills to be independent and successful adults, through access to a technology lab, resources, referrals, life skills assessments, monthly workshops, and other specialized programs.

## **FBOs can work as a collective to solve problems**

One of the advantages of an interfaith approach is that as a collective, faith organizations can form a strong coalition to identify systems barriers and work together to generate actionable solutions. For example, in Texas, a network of FBOs wanted to provide short-term babysitting for kinship and foster families but faced challenges given that the certification process was vastly different for each child-placing agency. DFPS partnered with Fostering Hope Austin and child placing agencies, and developed a simplified process. Now, interested respite care providers can attend a one-day training and become certified to provide respite care anywhere in the state, regardless of agency affiliation. In addition, FBOs and DFPS partner with CarePortal, an online tool that allows caseworkers to send requests to participating churches. Anyone associated with one of the partner churches can donate concrete goods or relational support, such as mentoring or parent coaching. To date, CarePortal has served more than 7,785 children.

## **FBOs can recruit resource families**

Faith communities can play an important role in expanding the network of resource families. Some FBOs excel at finding homes for hard-to-serve populations of children, such as children with special needs, older children, and sibling groups. As a result, the partnership between FBOs and child protection

## **JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: SAFE FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN (ILLINOIS AND NATIONAL)**

[Safe Families for Children \(SFFC\)](#) began in 2003 in Chicago and has since spread to about 65 cities across the U.S. SFFC is a faith-based partnership between churches and private child welfare agencies. The faith institution provides the volunteers that carry out SFFC services, while the private child welfare agency provides oversight of the SFFC program as well as permanent staff to train and supervise the volunteers.

SFFC's primary service is to connect families in need (called placing families) with host families. Placing families voluntarily place their children with host families until their need or crisis is resolved. Together, placing families and host families partner to care for the children, sharing decision-making and other responsibilities. Host families may also continue to support placing families after the children return home. Host families are approved and monitored according to state foster home requirements.

Family coaches serve as case managers and are responsible for monitoring and supporting the children in their host family placement. They also support the host family and the placing family as they develop their own relationship to care for the children together.

Volunteers known as family friends are also available to support families through parent mentoring, child care, transportation, job searches, or moral support.

SFFC facilitated 40,000 hosting arrangements over the past 15 years, 1,000 of which have been in Chicago.

agencies may allow children who would have otherwise remained in foster care or aged out of the system to find a forever family. FBOs can also offer support to families as they navigate adoption, or to parents who have adopted children with special needs. For example, one large county in Texas has launched a foster/adopt ministry in a church with the goal of placing 1,000 children in loving families within the church by the year 2026.

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

## What are some implementation considerations?

For child welfare leaders interested in building a strong partnership with FBOs in their communities, there are a number of promising strategies to consider. Additionally, [Building Communities of Hope through Effective Faith-Based Organizations: A toolkit for action](#) is a resource for FBOs seeking to improve family well-being.

### Adopt an interfaith approach

Collaborations between FBOs and child welfare should be inclusive of all faith communities. Most frequently, partnerships have been developed with Christian churches, and in many instances, with churches located far from the very communities in which children and families live. However, when religiously affiliated organizations work together in multi-faith partnerships, and do so locally, it affirms the value that all children are the responsibility of the collective community, and that all families are welcomed and supported, which can in turn foster greater social cohesion and build more robust and broader networks of collaboration based on mutual respect.

To facilitate an interfaith approach, child protection agencies will want to conduct outreach with FBOs that historically have not been included in child welfare partnerships, and make concerted efforts to find areas of intersection. For example, Texas created performance measures in its faith-based office to track outreach and follow-up with different types of FBOs, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. This data was used to build awareness regarding the parts of the state that most needed additional targeted outreach to various faiths. The central office worked with faith specialists in those regions to identify creative outreach strategies tailored to specific faith communities.

One approach that has been successful in New York City is to identify an FBO affiliated with a particular religion in order to have it assist with outreach to other

## JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: MARTIN LUTHER KING SR. COMMUNITY RESOURCES COLLABORATIVE

The [Martin Luther King Sr. Community Resources Collaborative](#) was designed to expand the reach of Ebenezer Baptist Church's ministries to include services that promote family stability and economic empowerment. The collaborative helps families by providing comprehensive and integrated social supports to Atlanta's Sweet Auburn and Old Fourth Ward neighborhoods at a single location, on the campus of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church.

The collaborative serves vulnerable youth and families through a strong network of community-based organizations that provide an array of services. It actively taps into the resources of governmental agencies and social service, business, and educational organizations and offers wraparound services to families in the following target impact areas: family and children services; educational achievement; workforce readiness; housing education; and family economic success. The partners help clients achieve success in these targeted areas. Over the history of the collaborative, partners have included the Center for Working Families, Operation Hope, nsoro Foundation, Operation Hope, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services, and the City of Atlanta WorkSource.

Current services include: financial literacy and asset development; computer literacy; safety net services and referrals; public assistance case management; workforce training and development; life skills; and tax counseling and preparation.

FBOs of the same faith, given that they may have credibility in certain neighborhoods or communities.

### Cultivate relationships and meet organizations where they are

Collaborations between FBOs and child protection agencies involve effort and hard work by both

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

partners, especially because they often bring together organizations that have different operating frameworks. It is important for child protection agencies to take the time to build trust with their faith-based partners and explore what each organization and its leaders have to offer, before moving forward. In addition, it is important for child welfare to view FBOs as experts in their communities and as thought partners that are well positioned to generate innovative solutions. New York City emphasized the importance of using respected faith leaders as “[cultural brokers](#)” when first engaging with new FBOs, as this approach helped build trust between the FBO and child protection agency.

## Engage with the FBOs where families live

One of the advantages of partnering with FBOs is that they can often serve as “hubs” for the neighborhood, providing services to families or referring them to other organizations within the community. By collaborating with FBOs located in the neighborhoods of families in need, child protection agencies can ensure the services and supports are tailored and accessible. Another advantage of working in the communities is that the faith community is more likely to reflect the demographics of the families being served and have members who can relate to a parent’s experiences and challenges. Texas, for example, used geospatial mapping to identify neighborhoods with high rates of CPS investigations, and then targeted outreach to the FBOs in those specific communities. In Atlanta, Ebenezer Baptist Church is surrounded by the city’s highest-need neighborhoods. To target those vulnerable families, the church opened a community resource complex directly on campus that provides an integrated service delivery model. Families can now come to a single location to receive comprehensive services.

## Raise awareness about child welfare

Many FBOs have underscored the importance of understanding both how the child protective agency operates and the experience of families that come into contact with CPS so that they can better understand how to help. FBOs may have varying degrees of

## JURISDICTIONAL EXAMPLE: NEW YORK CITY’S FAITH PARTNERSHIP

The **New York City Faith Partnership** began in September 2009, with a focus on providing internships to students enrolled at the New York Theological Seminary (NYTS). The internships were structured similarly to other seminary programs, which require students to complete a field-based supervised ministry program at a local church. In addition to their faith-based studies at the seminary, students were instructed on issues of child abuse and neglect and trained to view their ministry through a child welfare lens of children and family services. To that end, they received training on the child welfare system and other pertinent issues related to child welfare.

The overall vision of the New York Faith Partnership is for seminarians to broaden ministries to include outreach and supportive services targeting vulnerable families. In turn, this would help cultivate congregations that are more aware of child welfare issues and better positioned to assist families in need. The longer-term vision is for congregants to provide informal wraparound services to families within the community, services that would hopefully prevent the need for the child protection agency to intervene with those families. This also includes supporting families through reunification, and supporting young people returning to their communities from foster care.

Host churches were selected based on existing relationships with the child protection agency. It was believed that by selecting students enrolled in the Master of Divinity program, the cohort would be better suited for the initiative, as they were current pastors seeking to further their professional development and competencies. The effort began on a small scale with five interns assigned to churches in communities experiencing some of the highest poverty rates in the city.

awareness and involvement with child welfare issues. As a result, child welfare partners will need to assess each faith institution’s level of understanding and provide orientation and training accordingly. Investment

# How are child protection agencies partnering with faith-based organizations to support vulnerable families?

in capacity building is critical to success, and each FBO will require different types of activities. Texas DFPS, for example, recently created a [Get Involved webpage](#) that encourages community members of all ages and interests to volunteer their time and expertise. The page offers a range of volunteer orientation sessions and trainings to ensure everyone has the resources and supports needed to help children and families. Providing ongoing opportunities for capacity building also helps to dispel myths and change the narrative about child welfare from rescuing children to supporting and strengthening families.

To provide sufficient context and highlight shared beliefs, New York City has an outreach worker who regularly provides presentations to FBOs about the agency's array of prevention services. Texas has developed an initiative called Clergy in the Courts for Kids in which clergy and FBO members are invited to attend court proceedings. The goal is to introduce the faith community to families within the community and provide opportunities to help. The judge sends a letter requesting a faith leader to attend the court proceeding and then gives a 10- to 15-minute introduction in chambers before the hearings begin, outlining the cases the faith community member can expect to see. After the hearings, the judge debriefs with the faith

leader, the child protection caseworker, and the Court Appointed Special Advocate to answer questions about the process and discuss specific ways they can help the families. Not only does the faith community become acutely aware of how the system works, but this initiative also allows judges to learn about the breadth of community resources that can be leveraged from within the faith community.

## **Provide consistent messaging across the agency**

Child protection agency leadership will also want to take steps to clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the collaboration with FBOs to all levels of staff. Some partnerships have experienced a more difficult time getting off the ground when they did not have the full support of the local child welfare staff, given that caseworkers are often responsible for referring families to services and programs offered through the faith-based partnership. Clear communication between agency leadership and local child welfare offices is important, as is the need for leadership to emphasize the importance and value of such partnerships both to the agency and to families. This can ensure that child welfare professionals at all levels support and advance the FBO initiative.

- 1 Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are organizations that derive inspiration and guidance for their activities from the teachings and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith. They comprise a range of religious charitable organizations affiliated with one or more faith and spiritual traditions.
- 2 This report is based on a review of available materials and interviews with leaders and Casey Family Programs staff about the following faith-based initiatives: The New York City Faith Partnership; Safe Families for Children; Trinity Family Life Center; and the Texas Faith-based Partnership. Interviewees included: David Anderson, Executive Director, Safe Families for Children, October 8, 2018; Kristene Blackstone, Associate Commissioner, CPS, Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, October 4, 2018; Felicia Mason-Edwards, Administrator for Faith-based Programs, Texas DFPS Division, October 4, 2018; Audra Leal, Director, Active Grace Ministry, October 26, 2018; Lauren Clay, Senior Policy Advisor, Office of Texas First Lady Cecilia Abbott, October 19, 2018; Alexandra James, Executive Director, and Chad Morris, Chief Operating Officer, Trinity Family Life Center, November 1, 2018; Howard Knoll, Senior Director, Casey Family Programs, October 18, 2018; Toya Randall, Senior Director, Casey Family Programs, October 25, 2018.

**P** 800.228.3559

**P** 206.282.7300

**F** 206.282.3555

casey.org | [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org)

