



BRIGHT SPOT

# TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

## How does My Community Cares in Louisiana **build strong neighborhoods that keep families together?**

Hazel had survived many challenges throughout her life. She endured abuse and neglect as a child, struggled with drug addiction, and spent time living on the streets. But her most painful challenge was when she was separated from her four children and they were placed in foster care. She was willing to do anything to reunify with them but every time she made an effort, she hit bureaucratic roadblocks. She felt judged and punished by the very people who were supposed to help her. And then Hazel met a community member who had been through similar life experiences and took Hazel under her wing. Serving as Hazel’s advocate, she connected her to meaningful supports, and most importantly, believed in her. According to Hazel, having an advocate made all the difference. “Just having her there to ask me what I need and then help me to get it — she showed me compassion when no one else would. If it wasn’t for her, I would not have my children today.”



After her experience, Hazel didn’t want any parent to go through what she had. She wanted to be there for others, parent to parent, before child protection was called and the family became involved with the system. Through participation

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in a listening circle<sup>1</sup> facilitated by [CommunityBuild Ventures](#), she learned about a new initiative in Louisiana: **My Community Cares (MCC)**. MCC applies a neighborhood-based approach to reduce the number of children who experience abuse or neglect, keep children and parents together, and connect families to available resources and support. Hazel immediately signed up. “I believe that children are meant to be with their parents,” Hazel said. “We need more people out there doing whatever it takes to keep families together.” MCC asks residents of neighborhoods with the highest concentration of reports of abuse and neglect and children in foster care to **lead and co-design strategies with agency partners and other key stakeholders to support families so they never become involved with child welfare.**

## The beginning<sup>2</sup>

MCC was developed in response to the 2018 [Child and Family Services Review](#) (CFSR) conducted on Louisiana’s child welfare system. The CFSR highlighted an opportunity to reassess how the Louisiana Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) and other agencies partner together to support families and prevent children from entering foster care. This review prompted a sense of urgency and served as a catalyst for a bold new vision for DCFS, shifting from a reactive agency to one centered on family strengthening. In response to the CFSR, Louisiana engaged in a pilot [Program Improvement Plan \(PIP\) process](#), which provided an opportunity to bring a diverse set of stakeholders together to create a roadmap for a new vision of what they wanted child welfare in their state to be.

Armed with data, the voices of those with lived experience, and an open mind, consensus around an approach began to emerge during the PIP process. The data showed that many families involved in child welfare historically lived within the same neighborhoods. Instead of simply choosing a prevention program, stakeholders agreed to seek the voice of **local residents to identify what community-based programs families need in order to have access to critical services that are supportive, culturally relevant, and built on the strengths of their neighborhood.** Out of this development, MCC was born. Four parishes

## IMPROVING COORDINATION

One major barrier that emerged during the listening sessions was that some residents, as well as community partners, were not aware of available services or how to access them. In response, an online platform — **My Community Cares Connection Portal (MCCCP)** — was created in each parish to facilitate collaboration between service providers, agency partners, and community members to coordinate care, share information, and connect families to community supports. MCCCP has been especially critical during COVID-19, when providers have needed to connect families to concrete supports quickly.

with high numbers of children involved in reports of abuse and neglect were chosen to pilot MCC: Caddo, East Baton Rouge, Livingston, and Rapides. Out of those four parishes, 10 ZIP codes were identified as priority neighborhoods. The four parish teams began forming in late 2019 and spent 2020 building momentum and engagement with the 10 priority neighborhoods, while adapting their approaches within the COVID-19 environment.

A number of [judges and legal stakeholders who are passionate](#) about finding ways to serve families before they became entangled with the court system were strongly involved in the creation of MCC. As a result, the Court Improvement Program (CIP) of the Louisiana Supreme Court and the Pelican Center for Children and Families became lead entities of MCC in partnership with DCFS, the Louisiana Children’s Trust Fund, Children’s Justice Act Task Force, and many other agencies and community members. The [Pelican Center for Children and Families](#) provides administrative and staff support to the state, parish, and neighborhood teams.

## Core components

While each parish and neighborhood took their own unique approach to implementing MCC, there are key tenets that ground the initiative across all of the communities. These include:

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- **Team-based, power sharing structure:** MCC's foundational assumptions are that communities know the best solutions to their unmet needs and challenges. MCC is designed to share power and decision-making with community members at neighborhood, parish, and state levels. Community teams are centered on those with lived experiences as experts, and focus on creating a shared vision and ownership of desired outcomes. Teams are structured at three levels: 1) **neighborhood teams** made up of community residents who identify gaps in services and advocate for solutions to keep families safe, strong, and supported; 2) **parish teams** that include representatives of government, business, service providers, faith-based organizations, schools, nonprofits, community members, and parents with lived experience who meet regularly to enhance coordination and collaboration across the parishes and to support neighborhood teams; and 3) **the state team** that includes individuals with lived experience and representatives from multiple state agencies who provide advocacy and support to each parish and facilitate systemic changes at the state level.
- **Comprehensive continuum of services:** Building a robust, accessible service array — from prevention to treatment — that addresses the root causes of child abuse and neglect is another critical element. MCC works as a single point of contact for families in need of supports before crisis hits. MCC connects families to resources for basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, along with additional help finding resources for employment, parenting classes, or financial management. These upstream services are universally available, culturally relevant, and focus on building protective factors for parents.
- **Coordination across sectors and organizations:** MCC focuses on building relationships, improving coordination, and addressing gaps among nonprofits and government agencies. MCC aims to create linkages between families and professionals to community-based prevention services and supports, and leverage the strengths and assets of communities.

## Ask, don't tell

Parish teams solicit the voices of community members in a number of ways. Each parish hosts multiple **listening circles** with parents who have lived experience with child welfare, alumni of foster care, and foster parents to ask them about their personal experiences and what would have helped families avoid involvement with the system. They review specific removal cases and brainstorm ways those parents could have been supported differently. This information is shared with the child protection agency. Each parish also convenes **community conversations** with residents to present data on child welfare involvement in their local area, find out who they turn to and trust to get needs met, and discuss gaps in services and what children and families in their neighborhoods need to be safe and stable.

To further assess the unmet needs of each particular neighborhood, residents are asked to fill out a **family needs assessment**. The assessment includes questions about access to housing, child care, parenting supports, and concrete needs. These assessments are used to inform the neighborhood's strategic plan. Although it has been more difficult during the pandemic, parishes are still **hosting outdoor community events**, while adhering to COVID-19 safety guidelines, to spread the word about MCC and build community cohesion. MCC advocates use these events to ask residents to fill out needs assessments and become involved with their neighborhood team.

Several strategies have been implemented as a result of the meaningful engagement of community members:

- Parishes host **informal caregiver support groups** that are open to anyone in a parenting role to openly discuss the successes and challenges of raising children. In **East Baton Rouge Parish**, a parent with lived expertise in child welfare leads bi-weekly support groups and has been using a trauma-based curriculum to facilitate conversations around raising a child with a trauma history.
- The family needs assessments in **Rapides Parish** revealed a shortage of wraparound mental health

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services in schools. Largely because of the MCC partnership, Rapides has quickly **expanded the mental health programs** from nine to 23 schools. Each of these schools now has a social-emotional specialist whom children can access immediately and then be referred for more intensive services if needed.

- Through community meetings and needs assessments, the MCC **Livingston Parish** team identified barriers children and families face in accessing quality healthcare. MCC partners responded to this need by partnering with Our Lady of the Lake Hospital to **utilize their medical mobile “Blue Bus”** at MCC events. Partnering with the Blue Bus offered a practical way to provide vision and dental screenings, vaccinations, immunizations, health assessments, etc., directly to the community.
- The MCC **Caddo Parish** team recognized that many children and families in their community have experienced significant trauma in their lives and generational healing was needed to break this cycle. The team focused its efforts on **raising awareness about the effects of trauma** through a community-wide training on Trust-based Relational Intervention (TBRI®), which equips caregivers with strategies to better nurture children who have experienced trauma. School districts in Caddo have adopted a trauma-informed lens and will place TBRI® practitioners in all 64 schools. In the future, the goal is to educate the entire community, from churches to grocery store employees, to operate from a trauma-informed lens.

## Early impact

The goal of MCC is to reduce the number of children who are separated from their families by building a comprehensive set of supports families can access well

before the child protection agency becomes involved. If MCC is successful, the 10 priority neighborhoods in Louisiana will experience a significant decrease in the number of hotline reports, CPS investigations, and ultimately, the number of children entering into foster care over the next five years.

For the first year of MCC, the parish teams are measuring impact through a number of short-term indicators. Each parish is tracking the number of residents participating in community events, community conversations, and listening circles, as well as how many family needs assessments are completed. The number of community residents who volunteer to become community advocates for MCC is also tracked, as is whether a family referred to community supports follows through on obtaining those services. Each parish has a target goal for each indicator.

## Implementation considerations

For communities interested in embarking on a similar initiative to MCC, there are important lessons to consider.

### Find trusted and credible messengers

Many communities — especially communities of color that have been marginalized — mistrust government agencies and service providers. It may be difficult for organizations to convince residents they are there to help. Each parish needed to find trusted and credible messengers in their neighborhoods who could vouch for MCC and serve as its spokesperson. Carla Burgos, **Caddo Parish** MCC coordinator, is spending her first year in this role finding the right people in the community to lead MCC. She said she reaches out to them directly to ask about their vision for the community: “I am looking for trusted community members in the prioritized neighborhoods who have

I believe that children are meant to be with their parents. We need more people out there doing whatever it takes to keep families together.

— HAZEL MANCUSI-UNGARO,  
MCC COMMUNITY ADVOCATE, EAST BATON ROUGE PARISH

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strong leadership, who are grounded in the community, and who community members look up to. I know if they are in the room, then people will show up. So I have to be slow and methodical about this relationship-building and never give up.”

## Center the work in community residents

A foundational goal of MCC is to respect the voices of those most impacted and follow their lead. Tonya<sup>3</sup>, a community advocate in **East Baton Rouge Parish**, said organizations have a history of coming into communities without actually engaging with anyone from the community: “What usually happens is that people come into our community to ‘save’ us, but we are the last ones to know; no one ever asks us anything until their time there is almost over. That needs to change. And with My Community Cares, it is changing.” Listening to community members requires time, effort, and a commitment to step back when necessary. MCC teams must not jump to solutions until every voice that wants to be heard is heard.

One of MCC’s strategies to share power is to provide small microloans to community leaders like Tonya, who has been a trusted presence in East Baton Rouge for decades. Parents go to her when they need help without the fear of government interference. One of the goals of MCC is to find a “Tonya” in every neighborhood and provide them with the resources and capacity they need to support families.

## Engage the broader community

A critical strategy of MCC is to host and support a variety of events and conversations to **engage community members**. Heather Simon serves as the **Livingston Parish** MCC coordinator. Given her experience as a foster and adoptive parent, she prioritizes community engagement, recognizing the value of bringing service providers in the community together with children and families to build a network of services, activities, programs, resources, and supports that are co-designed. As a result, multiple community events in priority neighborhoods have been coordinated, including: a spring drive-through event where needs assessments were completed to connect families with services and supports and invite them to

be advocates for their community; a back to school bash that included a petting zoo, balloon animals, free school supplies, parent support, and other resources; weekly events at local parks to give popsicles to children and support information to parents; partnership with local law enforcement to provide car seats and car seat safety training; and partnerships with schools to provide clean uniforms and meet other basic needs for families as they arise. These engagement strategies build trust in the community and connect families with the support they need.

## Be clear with intentions

One key theme across the four sites is the need to be upfront with intentions and clearly articulate goals and commitment to those goals. Many communities have seen community initiatives come and go and are skeptical that MCC will be different. This is why building relationships, listening to community members, and following through on promises — no matter how small — are so essential during that first year. In **Rapides Parish**, intentionality has been a key lesson learned during the past year. According to Rapides School District Superintendent Jeff Powell: “The importance of an intentional and sustained focus on a few specific goals that we can actually accomplish is a key component of keeping the momentum going.” It is important to message these goals to the community to hold the involved parties accountable.

## Involve judicial leadership

MCC parish judges bring a perspective oriented around preventing court involvement, after spending their careers watching families get separated. Judge David Matlock of the **Caddo Parish** Juvenile Court believes courts need to get out of the way: “The ultimate goal of MCC is to be able to support parents without a court being involved and before the crisis happens. We just need to get the systems out of the room so the community can lead this work.” The leadership role of judges across the four parishes has been paramount to MCC’s success in bringing people together. Judges can use their influence to convene people. Judges from the four parishes also share lessons learned with their judicial peers across the state to spread the ideals of MCC.

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## Leverage and build strategic partnerships

Rather than starting from scratch, building on existing relationships provided some early wins for MCC. For example, the **Rapides Parish** juvenile court judge and school superintendent used their relationship to jumpstart the Rapides parish team. The superintendent opened up the schools to provide a neutral space for community conversations and parish meetings, and the judge invited community members to the meetings and convened them.

Other parishes are using MCC to build new relationships and improve coordination. In **Caddo Parish**, MCC has convened different stakeholders — such as health care providers, law enforcement, and school personnel — to design a trauma-informed community approach. Agency leaders are coming to meetings and interacting with parents. According to Judge Matlock: “In the past, we have been completely

disconnected from each other. MCC brings community partners together with residents to learn from one another, share the work they are doing, and find ways to collaborate. It provides a powerful environment to get everyone on the same level and progressing toward a common goal.”

## Looking ahead

Families need community connection now more than ever. MCC will continue to adapt and fulfill its mission to listen to and share decision-making power with community members about how to make every family in Louisiana safe, stable, and thriving.

*Editor's note: This brief was updated October 2021 to clarify and expand descriptions of the work, clarify the roles of the entities involved, and to correct the spelling of Hazel Mancusi-Ungaro, correct the first name and jurisdiction of John C. Davidson, 9th Judicial District Court, and correct the spelling of Stephanie Breeden.*

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 The listening circle model was introduced and facilitated in East Baton Rouge Parish by [CommunityBuild Ventures, LLC](#). The model was adapted and spread to other parishes.
- 2 The content in this brief is based on the following conversations: John C. Davidson, 9th Judicial District Court, and Jeff Powell, Rapides Parish School Superintendent, Oct. 10, 2020; Hazel Mancusi-Ungaro, East Baton Rouge community advocate, and Tonya, East Baton Rouge community advocate, Nov. 2, 2020; Lucinda Miles, Volunteers for Youth Justice coordinator, Carla Burgos, MCC Caddo Parish coordinator, Community Foundation of North Louisiana, and Judge David Matlock, Caddo Parish Juvenile Court, Nov. 4, 2020; Heather Simon, MCC Livingston Parish Coordinator, Empower 225, Stephanie Breeden, CASA Coordinator, Child Advocacy Services, and Sonja Smith, Supervisor, Family in Need of Services, Livingston Parish, Nov. 12, 2020.
- 3 Tonya's name was changed in this brief in order to respect privacy.

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