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# How can child protection agencies partner with other sectors to transform mandated reporting?

Mandated reporting was established to keep children safe, yet its implementation often has led to unintended consequences such as unwarranted reports of maltreatment, family disruption, and missed opportunities for supportive interventions. While [mandated reporting](#) laws long have been a cornerstone of child welfare policy in the U.S., research and lived experience underscore that these laws can inadvertently perpetuate disparities, strain families, overwhelm systems, and divert attention from those who need child protection the most. To truly safeguard children, support families, and promote community well-being, a fundamental shift is needed — from a compliance-driven process to a collaborative approach oriented around preventing child maltreatment.

The complexity of transforming mandated reporting requires a multi-sector response that leverages the strengths, perspectives, and resources of a diverse set of partners. Cross-sector collaboration, one of [seven interrelated levers for transforming mandated reporting](#), provides a path for reimagining the front end of the child welfare system that centers around prevention, equity, and family well-being as a means toward achieving child safety.

This brief highlights actionable steps and practical insights for child protection agencies to either start or strengthen partnerships with other systems, such as health care, education and law enforcement.<sup>1</sup> While this brief details how child protection agencies can instigate multi-sector collaboration, other partners also can initiate the process.

By moving through the various phases of achieving an effective multi-sector collaboration, jurisdictions will be able to create more responsive and equitable systems that prioritize family support over family surveillance. While the path forward will look different in every community, the goal remains the same: **Ensure that children and families are met with care, not control and coercion, and that professionals are equipped to respond with compassion, clarity, and confidence that there are many ways they can help.**

## 7 levers for transforming mandated reporting

1. Engage people with lived expertise
2. **Engage cross-system partners**
3. Start with and routinely examine trends and research
4. Build a new narrative and shift mindsets
5. Develop reporter awareness, education, training, and tools
6. Re-examine existing funding and policy approaches
7. Design better pathways for families to access support

## Phase 1: Identify potential partners

The starting point for cross-sector collaboration is identifying who needs to be involved. This phase is exploratory and relational, focused on understanding the needs and experiences of potential partners and people with lived expertise. Activities may include:

- **Conduct a landscape scan** to understand community dynamics and identify sectors that intersect with mandated reporting, such as education, law enforcement, health care, social services, and community-based organizations.
- **Engage individuals with lived experience** from the very beginning to serve as co-designers of the transformation plan and ensure the collaboration is grounded in the realities of those most impacted. Lived experts also can play a pivotal role in identifying additional partners to engage in this effort.
- **Host listening sessions, focus groups, or informal interviews** to understand each partner's priorities, challenges, and readiness for change.
- **Look for early interest** — individuals already modeling supportive, prevention-oriented practices — whose leadership can help build credibility and momentum.

This phase lays the groundwork for collaboration by fostering mutual understanding and alignment around the shared goal of supporting families in ways that go beyond mandated reporting.

### Spotlight: Franklin County, Ohio

Children's Services in Franklin County, Ohio, began its efforts toward transforming mandated reporting by building relationships with education sector leaders to better understand their processes and needs. The agency learned that only one in four schools was actively using data to inform their mandated reporting practices, highlighting the importance of targeted engagement and capacity building.

## Phase 2: Customize outreach and engagement

After initial partners are identified, the next phase involves tailoring outreach and engagement strategies to fit the local context. During this phase, jurisdictions begin engaging partners while continuing to center lived expertise to ensure strategies reflect community realities. By grounding these efforts in local needs and strengths, jurisdictions can build sustainable, trust-based partnerships that advance systemic change and begin to shift mindsets. Activities may include:

- **Identify champions** within each sector who can model new approaches and support peers in navigating change. Lived experts may aid in this process by identifying formal and informal champions from agencies and the community.
- **Adapt outreach strategies** to fit each system's operational realities, including understanding any policy or process barriers that may hinder changing their practices.
- **Share early data** by combining local reporting trends — such as the percentage of reports screened out or unsubstantiated — with insights on disparities.
- **Provide information on the [traumas associated with child protection investigations](#)** — especially those that result from unwarranted reports to a child protection hotline — in order to support more thoughtful, prevention-oriented discussions and collaborative decision-making. Elevating the voices of lived experts who are willing to share their families' experiences can be a powerful way to increase partner buy-in.

This phase also can include documenting and sharing effective practices. Capturing the experiences of champions and community partners — through case studies, peer learning sessions, or firsthand stories — helps build momentum toward change.

## Phase 3: Build the foundation for collaboration

Once partners are engaged, it is important to establish a strong foundation for collaboration that is grounded in shared purpose, aligned resources, and a commitment to transparency and learning. This phase focuses on establishing structures and routines that support coordination, making a shift from informal relationship-building to formal collaboration. Activities may include:

- **Create shared goals** co-designed with all partners, including lived experts, that reflect collective priorities, such as reducing unnecessary reports or increasing access to community supports.
- **Map infrastructure and practices** — including programs, funding streams, and data systems from all partners — to identify gaps and opportunities for alignment.
- **Embed collaboration into existing routines**, such as law-enforcement officer roll calls, interagency meetings, or workgroups, to maintain momentum and reduce burden on partners.

This is also a time to share and review local reporting data trends, substantiation rates, and disparities to promote shared ownership of child and family outcomes. Partners also may begin sharing existing workflows, tools, and decision-making frameworks. This exchange of information increases partner understanding across systems and deepens trust by promoting greater transparency.

This structural foundation creates the scaffolding for deeper collaboration and prepares jurisdictions to move into co-design and implementation with greater clarity and coordination.

### Spotlight: Miami-Dade County, Fla.

Citrus Family Care Network in Miami-Dade County, Fla., integrated its partnership efforts with law enforcement by sharing knowledge during officer roll calls — the mandatory briefings at the beginning of officers' shifts — using short actionable messages instead of formal presentations in order to respect officers' time.

## Phase 4: Co-design new approaches and tools

At this stage, partners move from planning and relationship-building to co-designing new tools, protocols, and training that reflect a shared vision. This phase is about designing practical, sustainable strategies that support mandated reporters in making informed, family-centered decisions — while reducing unnecessary child welfare system involvement. Jurisdictions can take several approaches during this phase.

### Leverage policy changes

Policy changes can be a springboard to update training and guidance. Whether it's a new definition of child neglect, changes in liability protections, or revised reporting thresholds, these kinds of shifts offer a timely opportunity to revisit how mandated reporting is taught and understood. Activities may include:

- **Co-create training content** with partners that includes real-world scenarios, decision-making frameworks, and clear guidance on when and how to connect families to resources when a report to the child protection hotline is not necessary. Consider having impacted families and other lived experts help design training.
- **Align messaging across systems** using language that emphasizes prevention, equity, and family support over family surveillance.

### Increase awareness of community resources

Mandated reporters rarely are aware of the full range of supports available to families in the community. Increasing awareness of available services can empower mandated reporters to feel more confident offering help and counter the misperception that reporting is the only option to get a family the support it needs.



Lived experts can be especially helpful in this phase as they can help identify the kinds of resources and information delivery methods that will have the most impact for families at risk of child welfare system involvement. Activities may include:

- **Develop and distribute** resource guides, referral directories, and tip sheets.
- **Promote the use of [helplines](#)** that offer real-time consultation for reporters.
- **Embed resource awareness** into employee onboarding and ongoing staff development.

### Spotlight: New York City

In New York City, the Administration for Children's Services and Health + Hospitals launched the [Pathways to Prevention](#) initiative, which included creating and mapping referral pathways and developing training materials for providers to connect families to services within the city.

## Reduce legal and emotional burden

Decision-support tools can help reduce fear of liability and the emotional toll of decision-making. These tools should be developed collaboratively with legal, clinical, and community input to ensure they are both protective and practical. Tools may include:

- **[Decision trees](#) or flowcharts** that clarify when a report is required and when alternative actions are appropriate.
- **Tools that encourage consultation** and documentation of decision-making processes.
- **Guidance that reflects legal standards** while promoting discretion and professional judgment.

## Encourage collaborative decision-making

Ease the burden of reporting from individuals by creating structures that support shared responsibility. Collaborative decision-making improves the quality of decisions and expands the range of options considered, leading to more holistic and family-centered responses. Strategies may include:

- **Team-based decision-making protocols** to allow multiple professionals to review concerns together, share perspectives, and agree on the most appropriate response before a report is made.
- **Supervisor consultation requirements** whereby mandated reporters discuss concerns with a supervisor prior to filing a report, ensuring decisions are informed and consistent.
- **Cross-agency case reviews or consultations** that enable real-time collaboration — such as scheduled case review meetings or dedicated phone lines — where reporters can seek guidance, explore alternatives, and connect families to supports without defaulting to the child protection hotline.

## Phase 5: Create continuous learning opportunities

Data often is key to initiating effective partnerships, and it remains important throughout. Data and storytelling are powerful tools for guiding and shifting mindsets and can help professionals stay engaged, reflect on their assumptions, and consider new ways of engaging with families. Throughout transformation efforts, partners should discuss and ultimately agree on indicators related to reporting, referrals to community-based supports, and child and family outcomes. This can help assess progress, continue momentum, and identify areas for refinement. Activities may include:

- **Document lessons learned and challenges encountered** during implementation. Capturing successes and setbacks can support continuous improvement and inform future adaptations.
- **Monitor agreed upon outcomes**, including referral and substantiation rates and use of community supports.
- **Share what is working** and what is not with existing partners and use what has been learned to adapt and improve collectively. Build on successful approaches and scale to new partners.

- **Create opportunities for peer learning and cross-site exchanges**, such as learning collaboratives, communities of practice, or informal knowledge-sharing forums. These opportunities can foster innovation, build momentum, and strengthen cross-sector relationships.

## Phase 6: Think in the long term

Transforming a process as long-standing and complex as mandated reporting will not be linear, and revisiting earlier phases to build new partnerships or revise tools is likely. To manage expectations and fuel progress, anticipate where tensions may emerge and think about how to make the changes sustainable.

### Prepare for pushback

Shifting away from entrenched processes can challenge deeply ingrained norms and professional identities. Many stakeholders view mandated reporting as a safeguard for children and a protection from liability, so moving toward a different approach can feel risky or even threatening. Anticipating these reactions is essential to ensure reforms take root and endure. Approaches to consider include:

- **Identify and engage silent actors.** Legal, insurance, compliance, and professional associations may resist change. Engage them early to clarify concerns and co-design solutions.
- **Measure and communicate progress.** Implement ongoing and proactive communication approaches that leverage key outcomes, including substantiation rates, reducing institutional and individual risk, better use of limited jurisdictional resources, and improved child safety and family well-being outcomes.

### Consider sustainability

Cultural and procedural shifts need to endure beyond initial implementation. Sustainability means embedding new practices into the fabric of systems so they remain active through leadership changes, funding fluctuations, and political shifts. Approaches to consider include:

- **Institutionalize practices.** Incorporate new approaches into policy, contracts, and training systems to make them standard rather than optional.
- **Create dedicated roles.** Assign responsibility for maintaining collaboration and monitoring progress, such as prevention coordinators or cross-system liaisons.
- **Establish feedback loops.** Build mechanisms for continuous learning and adaptation, including regular data reviews and partner check-ins.
- **Maintain focus.** Document the rationale for change, evidence of impact, and voices of youth and families to reinforce the objective and withstand external pressures.

#### Spotlight: Los Angeles County

As part of their [Mandated Supporting Initiative](#), Los Angeles County analyzed funding streams (state block grants, philanthropic dollars) and leveraged existing prevention programs to support mandated reporting reform. The county also reviewed its decision-support tools and training systems to identify gaps and opportunities for cross-sector alignment.

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<sup>1</sup> In December 2024, 13 jurisdictional teams comprised of child protection agencies, mandated reporters, lived experts, community partners, and other advocates and stakeholders gathered to explore approaches to transforming mandated reporting. The convening brought forward information on key issues, challenges, strategies, and early lessons from change efforts. Content of this brief reflects the perspectives of these teams and others that joined the network during 2025.

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