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Building Relationships across Systems to Enhance Resiliency and Improve Foster Care Outcomes

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Abstract. *Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) of Lancaster County represents a collaborative, systemic response to gaps in current service systems in a largely rural/suburban area. This paper discusses strategies used to foster support for CASA and on-going efforts to develop, implement, and evaluate the CASA program. We share lessons learned related to the development of innovative systemic responses to service gaps in rural areas.*

Keywords: *CASA, rural social work, program evaluation, community-based services*

Lancaster County, PA has a population of 519,445 and is 943.81 square miles (U.S. Census, 2011). Since the eighteenth century, Lancaster has been known as the Garden Spot of America. Today it is “synonymous in American popular culture with Amish country, a place of peace, prosperity, and traditional values that has somehow survived unscathed the upheavals of the twentieth century” (Walbert, 2002, p. 12).

The farmlands of Lancaster County constitute some of the most productive, non-irrigated agricultural soils in the world. Its farms and related industries provide more than 51,000 jobs and contribute more than \$4 billion to the local economy each year (Lancaster Farmland Trust, 2010). There are nearly 6,000 farms in Lancaster County. The average farm is about 78 acres, and the county ranks fourth in the country in number of farms (Lancaster Farmland Trust, 2010).

Many of the farmers in Lancaster County are Old Order Amish or Mennonite. Their shared heritage embodies the simple, religious lifestyle of their Plain Community ancestors. Amish and Mennonite farmers often farm with horse-drawn plows instead of gas powered equipment and view themselves as stewards of the land. For generations, they have chosen farming as a way of life “based upon the belief that their lifestyle and families can be maintained best in a rural environment” (Lancaster Farmland Trust, 2010).

Though viewed by many as an idyllic, traditional, and historic place (Walbert, 2002), Lancaster is also a rapidly growing population center with progressive farmers, booming industry, and modern challenges (Walbert, 2002). Like many rural communities, Lancaster struggles to meet the needs of its foster care population. Limited resources, traditional cultures, and the influence of a growing urban center challenge public child welfare, the judicial systems, and private service providers.

Public Child Welfare

Abused and neglected children represent a uniquely vulnerable population in need of advocacy (Litzelfelner & Petra, 1997). Public child welfare agencies are responsible for ensuring the safety of children they service and acting in a manner that is in the child’s best

interest. The conditions, under which this work occurs, however, are challenging at best. The literature is replete with descriptions of the beleaguered public child welfare system. Alpert and Britner (2005) describe systemic challenges that include time constraints imposed by state and federal policies and other barriers to effective casework including difficulty in engaging parents, poor communication with service providers, and staff turnover, as well as parent-specific issues such as poverty, transportation, mental illness, drug addiction, and non-foster care obligations.

Competing professional roles, inherent in public child welfare, further complicates a child welfare worker's task by preventing the worker from focusing solely on the needs of the children. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974 mandated each foster child be appointed a guardian ad litem to represent the best interest of the child in every court proceeding. However, high caseloads and lack of formal child welfare training prevented guardian ad litem from having the intended positive impact on outcomes for abused and neglected children in foster care (Youngclarke, Ramos, & Granger-Merkle, 2004).

Lancaster County Children and Youth Social Services Administration (LCCYSSA)

As stated in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare 2009 Child Abuse Report, in Lancaster County, there are 125,593 individuals who are under the age of 18 and approximately 500 children in foster care. In 2009, there were 803 reports of child abuse, with 151 substantiated (18.8%). There were 16 instances of substantiated re-abuse (10.6%). For the same year, the total expenditure for child abuse investigations was \$783,797.

The challenges present in public child welfare nationally are reflected within Lancaster County's smaller system. Barriers to effective service are compounded by characteristics and trends specific to LCCYSSA. Historically, compared to other counties within the state, LCCYSSA has utilized its own skills, programs, and resources to meet the needs of families, rather than relying on the services of outside providers. Increased caseloads have forced adaptive responses that have affected the culture and capacity of the agency. To meet increased demand, LCCYSSA now contracts with outside agencies to provide resource homes and therapeutic interventions. LCCYSSA also has been asked to make internal changes as a result of the federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR; Department of Public Welfare, 2003). This review identified persistent court delays as a barrier to permanence for children.

Court Appointed Special Advocates Program (CASA)

Nationally, one response to high caseloads and persistent court delays has been CASA, the Court Appointed Special Advocates program. In 1977, Judge David W. Soukup of Seattle, WA, created a program of trained community volunteers appointed to conduct an independent investigation of the facts and objectively make a recommendation in court that would be in the best interest of a foster child (Ray-Bettineski, 1978). This program was to ensure that all necessary information would be conveyed to the judge so that informed decisions about the needs of children in foster care could be made. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges embraced the concept and proposed the name Court-Appointed Special Advocate

(CASA; Berliner & Fitzgerald, 1998). In 1990, the U.S. Congress authorized the expansion of CASA with the passage of the Victims of Child Abuse Act (P.L. 101-647). Over time, the nation saw an expansion in the CASA program. As reported by the National CASA Association (NCASAA), last year, over 75,000 CASA volunteers advocated for abused and neglected children in 955 state and local CASA and guardian ad litem programs nationwide (www.casaforchildren.org).

The passing of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 created an increasing need for thorough information about client families' needs. ASFA places an emphasis on establishing permanency by mandating that a petition to terminate a parent's parental rights must be filed 15 months after a child is placed in substitute care if the parent has not made substantial progress toward service goals (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, 1997). Thus access to detailed information to identify the needs of children and families—and information related to families' use of ordered services—is vital for judges who maintain the ultimate authority in decision-making in child welfare hearings.

CASA: A Program Overview

CASA volunteers provide a stable constant throughout a child's foster care stay ensuring the child is not "lost in the system" (Ray-Bettineski, 1978, p. 69), while involved professionals pursue the long-term goal of permanency. Although the design of CASA programs varies by local jurisdictions, they are unified by the belief that every child has the right to a safe, permanent home (Weisz & Thai, 2003). There are five basic activities performed by every CASA volunteer. Youngclarke and associates (2004) refers to these activities as: (a) fact-finder and investigator, (b) courtroom representative, (c) case monitor, (d) mediator and negotiator, and (e) resource broker. CASA volunteers are afforded access to all records and individuals in order to conduct an independent investigation of the situation. Upon completion of the investigation, CASA volunteers prepare a written report that is presented in court to ensure the child is given a "voice in all dependency hearings" (Ray-Bettineski, 1978, p. 69). This information is to aid the judge in his or her recommendations. The CASA volunteer monitors all court-ordered services for compliance, as well as for timeliness (Calkins & Millar, 1999). As the mediator, the CASA volunteer helps with problem solving through collaboration (Youngclarke et al., 2004). Their role as the resource broker is to advocate for any and all needed services for the child.

The specific components of the CASA program include the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. The inputs are the CASA volunteers who perform activities such as: (a) visit with the child, (b) investigate and gather facts, (c) provide written report of findings to the judge, (d) make recommendations for services, and (e) monitor the delivery of services. The outputs of the CASA program include: (a) an increase in services the child receives, (b) a decrease in court continuances, (c) a decrease in the number of different foster care placements a child experiences, (d) an increase in placement stability, and (e) a decrease in re-entry to the system (Litzelfelner, 2002). The anticipated outcome of the CASA program is a timely, safe, permanent home for every child in foster care.

Empirical Evidence Relating to CASA Outcomes

Research suggests that CASA may mitigate the effect of service barriers in the child welfare system. Weisz and Thai (2003) found that judges rated CASA reports helpful in making case decisions, and that CASA cases had more complete information than non-CASA cases. In the same study, CASA volunteers were more likely to investigate alternative services for a child, and attorney guardians ad litem (GALs) reported that they felt the CASA program was positive for the child (Weisz & Thai, 2003). Litzelfelner (2000) reported that, compared to children without a CASA, more children with a CASA returned to parents or lived with a relative. Additionally, children with a CASA were less likely to be in institutions and were provided more services. Calkins and Millar (1999) reported both a reduction in the number of foster care placements for children assigned a CASA and less time spent in foster care. Another study found that the risk for re-entry into foster care for children with a CASA was half that of non-CASA cases (Abramson, 1991; Poertner & Press, 1990).

Despite these promising findings, several researchers have noted that while CASA appears to meet serious needs in a beleaguered system, studies of the effectiveness of CASA programs have been limited by methodological weaknesses, unclear conceptualizations, biased samples, and a lack of comparison groups (Youngclarke et al., 2004). They also noted that none of the studies, included in their synthesis of the literature, examined the physical and mental health outcomes for children targeted by CASA programs (Litzelfelner, 2000; Youngclarke et al., 2004). Finally, literature and anecdotes suggest that the role of the individual CASA worker is difficult to define, and measurements of CASA programs' "effectiveness" have involved variable perceptions of the role of CASA volunteers (Leung, 1996; Poertner & Press, 1990). Though charged with advocating for the needs of children, complex family systems, full court dockets, limited resources, and the culture of involuntary services create an environment in which it is sometimes difficult to identify the needs of the child vis-à-vis other family members, and even more difficult to efficiently gain information and make realistic recommendations.

CASA of Lancaster County

Within Pennsylvania there are 22 counties with CASA programs (Pennsylvania CASA Association, December 7, 2011). In 2005, a group of concerned Lancaster County citizens met with President Judge Farina to advocate for the development of a CASA program. The first board of directors of CASA of Lancaster County was established in 2007. Program development and implementation were successful despite complex socio-cultural forces and the existence of historically oppositional social service systems.

Conditions for Conflict

Cultural forces, demographic changes, and social trends in Lancaster County create a context of diversity and potential conflict. The Plain community is thriving, but it represents just one dimension of Lancaster County's religiosity. Other Christian congregations are fully engaged in the work of the "modern world" and, with an increasing number of immigrants, Lancaster County boasts an impressive degree of religious, ethnic, cultural, and language

diversity. Though thousands of acres are dedicated to farming, Lancaster City's urban population continues to grow and migration to the suburbs is visible in the new housing developments that encroach upon the farmers' fields.

Though these trends seem oppositional, a true resource of Lancaster County is the common ground that is created by themes that cut across dimensions of difference. Put simply, shared values persist. Relationships remain central and the preferred means for navigating services and tapping into cultural and material resources. Service and philanthropy are valued highly and the Christian impulse to serve others sustains a culture of giving and volunteerism. The primacy of family persists, though the definition of family is now more flexible than it has been historically. Innovative bootstrapping is the preferred means for "getting ahead," and the community remains committed to "helping its own." Lastly, across systems and cultures, community members take seriously the obligation to "do the right thing." Morality is the context for policy and service decisions, and children are viewed as fragile and valuable members of the community who require protection.

Strategies for Working across Systems

In important ways, the CASA program is congruent with the shared values and themes of Lancaster County. Using strategies that resonate with the community and culture (e.g., building relationships, emphasizing the primacy of family, training volunteers from within the community) CASA of Lancaster County pursues the long-term goal of increasing permanency for children in foster care.

Strategies that Foster Support for CASA of Lancaster County

From its inception, CASA of Lancaster County concentrated its efforts on involving stakeholders in every step of the development process. Initially, a steering committee was formed to identify how CASA could benefit Lancaster County. Its primary goals included the development of the mission statement and by-laws and the creation of an active board with members from across the community who would be supportive of CASA's goals. The Executive Director of LCCYSSA was on the steering committee and was actively involved from the start. Caseworkers, however, viewed CASA with some trepidation, concerned that untrained professionals would impinge upon the caseworkers' professional role and/or add additional pressure to their difficult jobs. Steering committee members were tasked with educating caseworkers and the larger community about the role of CASA volunteers, the requisite collaborative nature of their work, and the potential for mutual success. From the start, steering committee members understood that getting "worker buy-in" was critical to the success of CASA of Lancaster County.

Strategies for Implementation Fidelity and Evaluation

We are utilizing a mixed method, longitudinal research design to evaluate the CASA program. Data are collected from key stakeholders (parents/caregivers, guardian ad litem/attorneys, resource parents, caseworkers, judges, youth in care, and CASA volunteers), as well as from a group of youth in care who have not been appointed a CASA volunteer. Data collection occurs at baseline, 6 months, 12 months, and 18 months.

Qualitative Strategies. Focus groups with key stakeholders, ethnographic court observations, interviews with youth, and court document review are being utilized to capture qualitative data that will inform volunteer training, determine the degree to which the program is implemented as intended (fidelity), and help to assess client and stakeholder satisfaction and benefits. For example, a focus group with LCCYSSA caseworkers revealed that some workers were concerned that CASA volunteers might impinge upon their role and function as professional workers. As a result, a presentation at LCCYSSA occurred, which emphasized the distinct and complementary nature of caseworker and CASA volunteer roles, as well as their shared goal of meeting the needs of youth in care.

Ethnographic observations yielded rich data about the culture of courtrooms and dependency hearings. An important finding was that the stress of the formal courtroom environment created a context in which workers might—in the absence of complete certainty regarding a certain case detail—respond vaguely to judicial questions. Involved stakeholders have expressed a commitment to including court preparation in trainings of both CASA volunteers and caseworkers.

Interviews with youth inform our assessment of at-risk behaviors as well as the degree to which youth in care are receiving the services they need. In collaboration with the executive director of LCCYSSA, we have identified certain behaviors on the youth interview survey that would trigger a notification to the involved worker, thereby ensuring that the youth is connected with an appropriate service or provider. For example, if a youth discloses that she is using drugs and/or has considered harming herself, this finding is reported to the youth's caseworker. The youth is informed of this process when the assent form is signed at the beginning of the interview.

Quantitative Strategies. Administrative data from LCCYSSA, program data from CASA, and outcome data for youth with and without a CASA volunteer will be analyzed. Outcome data from LCCYSSA include maltreatment statistics, placement information, re-entry rates, and placement stability information (e.g., number of disruptions). From CASA, volunteer data to assess competency, implementation of activities, and level of satisfaction with supervision and training are collected. Data related to the volunteers will inform training and supervision. If a generalized gap in knowledge is discovered, then the training program can be adjusted to include additional information. For example, volunteers from Lancaster County may be less knowledgeable about the presence and impact of religious diversity on the work they will do. The addition of a module on non-Christian religions might prove valuable. On an individual basis, these data might reveal that a particular volunteer has a unique knowledge deficit that can be most effectively addressed through one-on-one supervision.

The youth survey instrument, *Communities that Care* (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, & Baglioni, 2002), will yield aggregate data that will help us track changes in at-risk behavior. Our interest is in determining the extent to which, if any, the assignment of a CASA volunteer appears to impact behaviors that may lead to a delinquency status for youth in the foster care system.

Lessons Learned

The importance of engaging stakeholders in the development of the CASA program early on has been emphasized. As natives of Lancaster County and former child welfare practitioners, the authors naturally appreciated the practice wisdom which stakeholders had to offer and understood that the traditional and somewhat conservative culture of the county would necessitate collaboration for the program to be successful. In the initial meetings to discuss the program evaluation, feedback from stakeholders was not sought. The initial impression was that stakeholders, especially the board members, were not interested in the “mundane” matters of program evaluation design. In the end, this misstep led to some confusion. Early board meetings that involved discussions of the program evaluation ended in some frustration when the program evaluators wanted to talk about “rigor,” “fidelity,” and “implementation,” and board members wanted, instead, to immediately track outcomes. In hindsight, getting stakeholder input regarding program evaluation would have been as valuable as their advice regarding program development.

Conclusions

In working to develop and now evaluate CASA of Lancaster County, the authors have been reminded of both the importance of context (e.g., community, rurality) and the dynamic nature of relationships. CASA is a national program; CASA of Lancaster County is a unique, local program that must respond to the culture and conditions of the community it serves. The primacy of relationships, and the networks they create across systems, has been both resource and obstacle. As our roles and responsibilities change—from grant writers to board members to program evaluators and back again—the nuances of these relationships shift as well. Sometimes we lead with familiarity, sometimes with academic distance. Our increased ability to gracefully shift roles has enhanced our ability to work effectively within the CASA program.

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