

Child Trauma and Well-Being: Working Across the Branches of State Government

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Why Three Branch Institutes?

At Casey Family Programs, we believe that each branch of state government – the legislature, the executive branch, and the judiciary – has a critical and unique role in improving the safety, permanency and well-being of children and their families. As legislators, you give direction by developing policies, allocating resources and providing oversight. Executive branch agencies that serve children and their families have the enormous responsibility of implementing policy, providing services to protect children and help them thrive, and mobilizing partners in these efforts. The judiciary oversees the care of individual children and makes life-changing decisions such as whether to place a child in foster care, return a child to his family, or provide legal permanency through an adoptive family or guardian. As state and community leaders, members of all three branches can raise the visibility of public concerns and the outcomes that the public wants for children, explore issues and approaches for improving children's lives, and put strategies into place.

It takes all three branches of government working together with a shared vision, along with many other partners, to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children. This recognition led Casey Family Programs to join with national organizations that represent state legislators, executive branch leaders, and judges to develop what we call the Three Branch Institute (3BI). In partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the National Governors Association (NGA), the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), and the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), we convene and provide ongoing support for state teams comprised of all three branches of government to examine issues and practices and to develop specific plans for improving outcomes for children and families. Casey Family Programs is pleased to provide funding to our national partner organizations for this important work, and to join with them to directly plan and conduct the 3BI activities. It is truly a collaborative effort.

Our common goal for the 3BI is to provide opportunity, information, and encouragement for members of the three branches of state government to work together to make measurable improvements in the lives of children involved in the child welfare system.

How does it Work?

Over the past several years, the focus of the 3BI has varied, but the key steps are essentially the same. In 2011 and 2012, the 3BI provided support for states teams to focus on safely reducing the number of adolescents in foster care. Cross-branch teams from five states participated. Our current 3BI, which began in 2013, focuses on improving the social, emotional and physical well-being of children in foster care. Seven states are participating. What follows are the key steps and description of the current 3BI project.

States submit proposals and form teams with executive branch, legislative, and judicial members. New Mexico was one of the seven states selected for the current 3BI, an 18-month project which began in 2013. To be selected for participation in the 3BI, states responded to a Request for Proposals (RFP) issued by the National Governors

Association. The governor's office of each state submitted the state's proposal with the governor's endorsement. The governor appointed the executive branch team members and the leader of the core team that spearheads the work. For the current 3BI focused on the well-being of children in foster care, the governor was required to name executive branch leaders from both the child welfare agency and the Medicaid agency. Legislative leadership (the senate president or the speaker of the house) nominated two legislative participants. Each state's team also was required to include judicial representation, and support from the State Chief Justice was recommended. At the state's discretion, it could also include a tribal representative.

State teams participate in a national convening. The teams from seven states convened for the first time in Philadelphia in July 2013 to begin developing a coordinated plan of action toward a common goal: Increase the level of social, emotional and physical well-being for children with open cases in the state's child welfare system who have experienced maltreatment, trauma, or exposure to violence. The two-day meeting included relevant presentations by national experts, state innovators, and foster care alumni. In addition, state teams had dedicated time to work among themselves to identify common three-branch goals and begin constructing specific plans for accomplishing them.

States build their "home teams," develop their plans and begin implementation. After the 2013 national convening, state teams continued to develop and implement their plans. Most states expanded the number and representation of stakeholder participants on their teams. The national partner organizations provided encouragement and technical assistance, including webinars with national experts on topics that state teams identified, participation in state team meetings, and periodic check-ins to help maintain interest and momentum.

State teams participate in a second national convening. In July 2014, core teams from the participating states re-convened in Milwaukee. Again, the teams learned from national and state experts about a wide range of topics related to the social, emotional and physical well-being of children involved in the child welfare system. Topics included: the impact of trauma on children's lives; trauma-effective services; behavioral health and substance abuse treatment strategies; issues related to psychotropic medications; developing data to measure child well-being outcomes; and opportunities for using Medicaid and other federal funds to improve well-being of children in foster care. Once again, the state teams had dedicated time support to work on developing and refining their plans.

States further develop stakeholder teams, expand and implement their plans. State teams are working to put their plans in motion and to achieve the goals they have established. Since the July meeting, several state 3BI teams have demonstrated great initiative and collaboration. The national partner organizations are able to provide a limited amount of assistance from experts, and several states are taking advantage of this opportunity. Some states are working to engage new partners and expand ownership, communication and collaboration. Teams are digging deeply to incorporate new information and expertise and to expand their capacity. The New Mexico team demonstrates progress on all these fronts.

Accomplishments and Lessons Learned

Quantitative and Qualitative Benefits. Many participating states report measurable benefits, such as safe reduction in the number of children in foster care, reduction in the number of adolescents in care, increase in the number of children in foster care who receive an evidence-based assessment. Other reported qualitative accomplishments, including improved understanding of the roles and challenges of colleagues in other branches, increased engagement and commitment of high level officials from all three branches in common goals for children, establishment of common priorities and consolidated focus, greater sharing of information across branches, and use of common definitions and measures.

Active, sustained participation of all branches. One 3BI lesson is that success requires active, sustained participation and commitment of all three branches. In addition to the importance of individual participation, engaged members often become ambassadors for 3BI with their peers. Participation of legislators, especially during session or election season, can be especially challenging. State strategies include engaging legislative leaders and key members who influence their peers, including legislative staff as team members, and holding 3BI meetings in conjunction with legislative meetings. Likewise, judges face full dockets that are set far in advance. Strategies that judicial members find helpful include scheduling meetings at consistent intervals and far in advance, and asking other judges or staff to cover the docket. Once teams are established, 3BI members sometimes participate in meetings by video or telephone conference.

Mutual accountability. A sense of joint ownership of the outcomes for the state's children can lead to a commitment to action and to mutual accountability for those outcomes. The Tennessee state 3BI team, which includes six leaders from each branch, has sustained its efforts for more than three years. Members drafted a mutual accountability working agreement that articulates the collective and individual commitments of the executive, legislative and judicial branches to foster partnerships to protect children, develop youth, strengthen families and build safe communities. It states the commitment of each branch to specific actions to improve communication and understanding of 3BI goals, to provide support for their common agenda, and to leverage resources to accomplish their goals. The agreement includes strategies for communicating effectively within the 3BI team and with the public, and states commitment to 3BI as a venue for addressing complex inter-governmental issues.

Focus on well-being: Collaborating in new territory. By focusing on the goal of improving the social, emotional and physical well-being of children in foster care, the current 3BI state teams are making progress in largely uncharted aspects of child welfare. Although the primary aims of the child welfare system are often stated as safety, permanency, and well-being, federal and state policy and funding have focused on only the first two goals. A growing body of research shows the long-term damage caused by the trauma of maltreatment and separation of a child from family. The work of the 3BI states will help other states better understand child trauma and well-being, including how to define, measure and assess it. Some states are demonstrating that leaders and staff from the

