

Family Strengthening at the Tipping Point: Emerging Transformation in the Human Services Field

Policy Brief No. 18

Human services organizations at both the national and community levels are integrating place-based, family-strengthening approaches into their policies, programs, and practices.

Executive Summary

A major transformation in the human services community is underway. At both the national and community levels, human services organizations are integrating place-based, family-strengthening approaches into their policies, programs, and practices. *Family Strengthening at the Tipping Point* describes these advances using the results of a 2006 study by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (the Center) at the National Human Services Assembly. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) supported the study as part of its Making Connections (Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development) initiative.

Through online surveys and telephone interviews, the Center queried 39 national and 224 community human services organizations about changes since 2003 in their programs, policies, and practices that reflect neighborhood- or place-based, family-centered approaches to strengthening low-income families with children. The national-level respondents span the human service field: youth development, community building, family services, education and training, emergency services, faith-based, and more. The survey received responses from community human services organizations in 45 states.

Data from interviews and online surveys reveal that both national and community organizations are integrating family strengthening approaches into their work, with many changes occurring as recently as 2003. Significantly, the evolution is also occurring among organizations that have never received AECF grants. The changes reported by non-grantees are robust and numerous.

In a variety of ways, national and community organizations are modifying existing or starting new policies, programs, and practices that reflect place-based family-strengthening approaches. The extent of these changes suggests human services organizations are mainstreaming family strengthening into their daily work. Further, the examples captured by this study demonstrate that the family-strengthening approach is adaptable to a wide array

of settings, services, populations, and purposes. At the national level, adoption of a family strengthening model is documented by the study in areas such as:

- Language in Online and Written Communications – 78 percent, with 13 percent already using such language prior to 2003.
- Mission Statements and Other Agency Language – 47 percent, with 25 already having family strengthening as part of mission statement and other language.
- Public Policy Agendas – 84 percent.
- Worksite Policies and Practices for All Employees – 64 percent, with 23 percent already having such policies in place
- National Organizations Promoting Family Strengthening with Community Groups – 94 percent.

At the local level, more than 30 percent of the respondents indicated that three or more changes towards a family-strengthening framework had been implemented since 2003. Overall, 90 percent of the community respondents indicated at least one change.

Has family strengthening reached a tipping point? Study data indicate momentum is building at all levels and in all corners of the human services field. The emerging picture is that of a paradigm shift, in which family strengthening is at the heart of policy, programs, and practices instead of being isolated “add-on” programs. The challenge ahead for the field is replicating programs and mobilizing stable and secure funding sources to sustain the transformation, especially at the community level.

To read the full report, visit <http://www.nassembly.org/fspc/practice/practices.html>

This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of "family strengthening" in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children *and* their families.

The Family Strengthening Policy Center is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and is an initiative of the National Human Services Assembly, an association of leading national nonprofit health, human service, human and community development agencies. The center benefits from the guidance and involvement of the Family Strengthening Peer Network, which provides opportunities for its members to share knowledge on family strengthening strategies, learn what other organizations are doing, and find synergies and potential areas of collaboration.

This brief reflects the findings and views of the Family Strengthening Policy Center, which is solely responsible for its content. For more information or to access other family strengthening policy briefs, visit www.nassembly.org/fspc.

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