

Through a New Lens: Toward a Fundamental Reframing of “the Client”

Turning Crisis into Opportunity for Systems Change in Human Services

As we write this in July 2009, the United States is in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Millions of Americans have experienced foreclosure and job loss or have watched as their savings disappeared almost overnight in the volatile market. This has thrown countless families into financial turmoil, forcing many into poverty for the first time, while others have descended further into destitution.

As those of us in human services well know, the scope and implications of these conditions are alarming. Increased health problems, higher incidence of domestic violence and substance abuse, increased likelihood of dropping out of school, and diminished prospects for the future are only some of the risks associated with financial instability and impoverishment. Simultaneously, our human services infrastructure – at both the community and government levels – shudders under the weight of the crisis as it struggles to keep up with the increased need, despite a significant decline in philanthropic giving, federal funding that is limited to “economic stimulus” purposes, and near-bankrupt state budgets.

Yet, even in the face of such dire circumstances, this crisis actually presents us with a unique opportunity – *an opportunity to dramatically improve how we do business.*

This is because, in critical situations, there is a human tendency to loosen our hold on artificial divisions and self-definitions, and to come together across perceived differences in search of solutions. Although said in reference to America as a nation of immigrants, the sentiment that “we may have come over on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now!” holds true in times of common crisis. In a burning building, or a ship whose hull is breached, there are no celebrities or power brokers, and no one is redundant. In these urgent times, we’re all in it together.

Recognizing this, in May 2009, the National Human Services Assembly brought together a group of national leaders, representing two traditionally distinct fields – Youth Development and Family Strengthening – to draw on their diverse expertise and talk about actionable ways to truly wrap supports around vulnerable children and families in this time of crisis.

During the meeting, there was ready acknowledgement that what we’ve already learned and explored independently, and to an extent collaboratively, within the various human services divisions is moving us in the right direction. Focusing on assets, looking beyond a single client to a more holistic approach, homing in on outcomes and evidence, looking at co-location and integration, working toward ending intergenerational cycles of poverty – these are all vital steps forward.

The group also agreed, however, that what we need is to seize on the present opportunity to take even bolder measures and greater strides. And, above all, we came down foursquare on a starkly simple conclusion:

If we truly believe what we say about making a difference in the lives of vulnerable children and adults, then we need to acknowledge a fundamental flaw in how we tend to frame – or think and speak about – our work.

The client is not the child.

The client is not the adult.

The client is the family.

Furthermore, ***by family we don't mean as defined by partisan politics or religious doctrine, but rather as how the people define it for themselves.*** After all, who a child or adolescent, teenage mother or incarcerated father, unemployed senior or disabled worker considers to be family, very well may not correspond with more official or conventional definitions.

In fact, it's arguable that ***the very term "client" itself is outmoded.*** When referring to "clients," we're talking about citizens and neighbors who are consumers of our services. Though valuable in its time, the client framework does not actually convey what we have come to know that ***self-determination is central to helping people.*** Whether we call this empowerment or engagement, people must be involved in making choices and in setting their own course. Not only is this because that's what works, but because a democracy of empowered citizens is among the ends we seek.

In other words, you can't solve an equation if you've misstated what you're solving for. Only when we rethink long-held frameworks, and even the language we use, can we actually begin to make dramatic advances in supporting youth and families. And *this* is precisely why the economic crisis is an opportunity – because it is now that we have chance to come together across traditional divisions within human services and to rethink artificial and misrepresentative conceptions about those who we serve.

How We Got Here: A "Right Time, Right People" Convening

When the National Human Services Assembly decided to hold this special roundtable for national leaders in Youth Development and Family Strengthening, we believed that a dialogue across disciplines was long overdue. We also believed that the timing was, counter-intuitively, right. Travel freezes, increased pressures? True, but given the crisis, the need for discussion and shared action also could not have been clearer.

To this end, we decided to try to get the right people in the room, bring in thought and practice leaders to stimulate their thinking and spark conversation, and then facilitate an interdisciplinary working session with a bias toward action. As it turned out, there was tremendous interest in our idea, and on May 21, 2009 nearly fifty national leaders from the fields of child development, youth development, family strengthening, and community development jointly focused on the theme, ***Shelter in the Storm: Wrapping Supports Around Vulnerable Children and Families.*** Among them were representatives of the following organizations:

Afterschool Alliance
Alexandria City Public School
America's Promise Alliance
Aspira Association
Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities
Baltimore County Public Schools
Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
Catholic Charities USA
Child Trends
Communities In Schools
Child Welfare League of America
FirstFocus
Forum for Youth Investment
Generations of Hope Development Corporation
Generations United
Girl Scouts of the USA
Girls Incorporated
Goodwill Industries International
The Hatcher Group/ Annie E. Casey Foundation
Healthy Teen Network

JustPartners, Inc. / Annie E. Casey Foundation
Mayor's Office of Children, Youth & Families
National Council of La Raza
National Crime Prevention Council
National League of Cities
National Network for Youth
National PTA
National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
National Conference of State Legislatures
Salvation Army
Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future
Towson University
United Way of America
United States Department of Agriculture - Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service
Volunteers of America
Youth Service America

As keynote speaker, Cliff Johnson, Executive Director of the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education and Families, helped to frame this conversation by highlighting the need to rethink common understandings of Family Strengthening, along with citing examples of best practices for successful collaboration between Youth Development and Family Strengthening at the municipal-level. Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., a Senior Scholar from Child Trends; Beth Lovell, Director for Children, Youth and Families for Volunteers of America; and Miles Magbie, Manager of Youth Strategies for United Way of America; who comprised the practitioner panel, also posed important challenges to conventional family strengthening and youth development practices, and offered critical insights into alternative ways to approach providing wraparound supports for vulnerable children, families, and communities.

What Happened? Themes with an Action Bias

Several essential themes came out of the convening on May 21, 2009, which underscored the need to re-conceptualize our work (notes from that meeting can be obtained upon request by contacting nthompson@nassembly.org). This included paradigm-changing keys to a focus on family outcomes with vulnerable children and adults:

- **Understand that child outcomes *are* family outcomes**
- **Family Mapping – ask individuals to indicate who matters to them**
- **Engage kids *and* parents – help them acquire skills relative to their roles in the family (vs. lecturing)**

- **Train parents to advocate for their kids and themselves**
- **Ensure that service providers have essential case management skills and the ability to stick with the family over time**

The group also identified several additional points on the need to rethink family strengthening and how it intersects with youth development as well as immediate steps and strategies to overcome major challenges, which informed and expanded on these keys.

Reframing Family Strengthening

While the general thrust of the conversation pointed to the need to reframe our understandings of family strengthening and who we serve, the group specifically highlighted two points on this subject:

Family crises are youth crises. Family troubles such as housing insecurity, family stress at home, and abrupt changes in schools derail positive youth development in numerous ways, including dramatically impacting academic achievement.

Family Strengthening is not just a category of service. Family Strengthening is more than a field of service or a policy goal – it’s a *lens* through which we must look at everything we do.

Major Challenges and Actionable Solutions

The group also recognized that while there are some fundamental obstacles to transforming how we provide supports, there are identifiable, and actionable, measures that can be taken to overcome them:

Challenge: Organizational silos and a lack of coordinated collaboration.

Solution: Integration at all levels and strategies that identify the totality of the family’s assets and challenges. Cross-system approaches that are multigenerational – two generations and more – as well as co-location of services (e.g., schools as Community Learning Centers or elderly and child care programs at the same sites) and more complete integration across organizations are vital for family success.

National organizations can also play a very important ***signaling*** role to their affiliates about the importance of integration and collaboration. These efforts, however, should be directly related to enhancing family functioning and family success, and not just “collaboration for collaboration sake.” Similarly, case managers can facilitate cross-organizational supports and the deployment of diverse resources, smartly, in sequence.

Challenge: Fragmented funding streams.

Solution: A game-changing approach to government funding that allows localities and service providers to combine resources from the various, diverse streams. Categorical public funding and an approach that addresses child, youth, and family issues problem-by-problem are

antithetical to whole-person and whole-family solutions. Providers should unite to raise awareness among policy makers and engage them in developing blended funding options

Challenge: A lack of policy.

Solution: Development of a coordinated policy and service system for children and families.

Just as the Older Americans Act helped improve the lives of older adults significantly and measurably, an American Families Act or Child, Youth and Family Act could signal our resolve as a nation to more effectively nurture families so that they may produce children who become healthy, productive citizens.

Simple and Immediate Action Steps

Without losing sight of the longer-term strategies, the group recommended relatively simple measures that can begin to implement these changes, while addressing the immediate needs of the families we serve. Among them:

Benefits Eligibility Screening. Whether an organization works with children, youth or families, helping families to establish an adequate financial base is a central part of ensuring that they are able to address other challenges. Technology tools can provide ready access to benefits for which they are eligible.

Data Sharing. Looking to technology can also facilitate sharing of information that helps to coordinate, and increase, the collective impact of services for a given child or family.

Case Management. Although an old concept, case management is frequently misinterpreted. Rather than having a separate case manager at every agency, the original – and more effective – approach is when providers work with the family to identify a single case manager who can coordinate support for them across organizations. This will help to bridge silos and effectively integrate efforts. Successful case management must be done in collaboration *with* the family and not just *for* the family.

What Might We Start Now? Actionable Strategies

While, as the saying goes, this work may not be rocket science, as a society we haven't applied nearly the same kind of rigor and resources to developing children, youth, and families as we have to building rockets. We feel it is time for some long overdue investing. To do so, there are four areas of work that we can – and should – pursue together:

- ✓ **Change the lens.** Looking at the issues from three different vantage points – children OR youth OR families won't get us to solutions that acknowledge the interdependency of the three.

- ✓ **Establish policy.** While we certainly need policy about families overall in this country, the greatest void is actually the *absence* of policy – and the resulting lack of integrated strategies and integrated service system – *for families raising minor children*.
- ✓ **Integrate.** We must do whatever it takes – whether it’s breaking down or merging specialized bureaucracies or providing funding that can be used across categories – to allow local officials and service providers to develop and deploy integrated strategies for children, youth, and families. This includes ensuring the family has access to a single, *trusted* entity to help them pursue solutions to the challenges they face through a similarly coordinated approach.
- ✓ **Take Immediate Action.** While the end goal is to work towards the longer-term, broader goals, in the interim, implementing simple, immediate measures such as data sharing and benefits screening can be important next steps for providing families the necessary supports during this crisis and beyond.

These are areas of work we can take on within our own spheres of influence, and advocate for on a broader scale. Yet, as those who were present recognized, May 21st only marked the start of this discussion. In order to implement these changes on a significant scale and in a sustainable way, the conversation must expand and continue. So, too, must the move toward concrete and collaborative action. Only then will we truly begin to move away from piecemeal supports and towards approaches that will serve children, youth, and families in ways that enable them to flourish.

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The following resources were highlighted at the March 21 convening:

The National 4H [Community Readiness Network](#)
 Center for the Study of Social Policy model [Strengthening Families](#)
 Child Trends database of effective interventions: [LINKS](#)
 Child Trends research brief: [The Strengths of Poor Families](#)
 The Connecticut Commission on Children’s initiative: [Parent Leadership Training Institute](#)
 The [Flourishing Families](#) study
[National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds](#)
 The National League of Cities’ project [The Mayors’ Action Challenge for Kids and Families](#)
 The National League of Cities’ publication [Beyond City Limits: Cross System Collaboration to Reengage Disconnected Youth](#)

Direct any comments on or inquiries about this paper to nthompson@nassembly.org, kkey@nassembly.org or irv@nassembly.org. To view the National Assembly’s online resource center or sign up for the Family Strengthening Newsletter go to www.nassembly.org/fspc.

