



Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies
Leadership, Voice and Vision for Child Welfare in New York State

INTRODUCTION TO COFCCA STRATEGIC PLAN (DRAFT) December 2016

The Council of Family and Child Caring Agencies was founded in 1974 via a merger of Upstate and NYC foster care provider organizations to work on behalf of children in foster care and those non-profit organizations providing services to the children on behalf of the New York State government. Since COFCCA's founding, the organization's focus has expanded in response to new services aimed at supporting children and their families. In the late 1970's the state asked the agencies providing foster care to begin serving juvenile delinquent youth as well. And in the '80's preventive services were created, designed to support families in keeping their children safely at home. Over the past two decades, the state turned to our agencies to serve a growing number of residential school based placements. This grew in recent years to meet state demand for returning hundreds of children and adolescents from out-of-state placements. Today provision of all of these services are the domain in which COFCCA operates.

State and county governments are charged by the citizens of the state to protect children whose lives and development are threatened; government is constitutionally obligated in extreme circumstances to assume full responsibility for all necessary care and supports. COFCCA's member agencies pursue organizational missions that include the safety, well-being, and permanency of children and their families and so have become the principal suppliers on the government's behalf of services to the children and families. COFCCA has acted successfully as an advocate for the children and families as well as a good-faith intermediary between the government and the nonprofit provider organizations. Our organization has a proud legacy and a strong record.

But legacies can only be discussed in the past tense, in the context of a world and circumstance that are passing or have passed by. Continued relevance and success requires the organization to perceive and respond to large-order changes in societal context, and to design that response so that it is both functional and true to our core values and skills. There is no need to persuade anyone that our work has entered a period of explosive evolution with respect to clinical theory, the role of government, and to business practices and planning. The COFCCA Board of Directors has therefore undertaken to update its strategic plan to address the multiple of transformative developments and to set a framework for increasing our focus on issues impacting our clients which go well beyond the historical constructs of the child welfare and juvenile justice service delivery systems.

Consider a few of these transformative developments:

Changes in Health Care Landscape:

- Concepts associated with the Affordable Care Act, such as “health care status” and “environmental and social determinants of health” expand our focus beyond narrow disease and symptom definition.
- Behavioral health care has been legitimized as a cardinal component of both government-sponsored care and private insurance.
- Our nation and state have committed to an extraordinary expansion of Medicaid; that expansion and the involvement of the insurance industry and managed care will impact our foster care and community-based services work profoundly.
- Medicaid Redesign in NYS is committed to what is known as the Triple Aim in healthcare: improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction), improving the health of populations, and reducing the per capita cost of health care.
- With the determination to spend resources to promote better health comes an appropriate determination to demand full value and the achievement of specific outcomes from providers. New payment philosophies and practices such as “value based payments,” “performance-based contracting,” third-party care management, and increased external scrutiny of financial and clinical practice are now facts of life.

Changes in Service Delivery:

- Rapidly increasing scientific knowledge about brain development and the long term impacts of chronic stress on the developing child bring new understanding of the impacts on children and their families, which is being translated into evidence based and trauma informed approaches to care. This new knowledge is absolutely central to our work.
- There is a growing belief that educational attainment, vocational capability, and the improvement of clients’ financial conditions are useful metrics of success in our work. We cannot be satisfied with short term services on an “emergency” basis. We need to commit to changing the life trajectories of the children and families we serve.
- Authority hegemonies based on race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual identity, or religion are eroding rapidly; additionally, the power of those being served over the nature and direction of the assistance they receive has grown—and will continue to grow—exponentially.

Changes in Business Practices and Planning:

Concepts more traditionally associated with for-profit/marketplace environments are increasingly becoming part of nonprofit business practice. For example:

- the importance of, and emphasis on, customer choice;
- multiple, rather than single-source, income streams;
- formally-defined interdependence between various corporate entities;
- the importance of capital reserves that can be employed to fund new initiatives;
- the importance of constantly assessing risks to the organization, notably enterprise risks;

- the importance of contemporary communication and data management capability;
- and the development of contracting based on the value of the product to service recipients and funders, superseding contracts based principally on the costs incurred by providers.

Some of these transformative developments will be more welcome than others; in the end, COFCCA must navigate all of them. But individually and collectively they constitute a set of forces that may blur COFCCA's singular focus. Compounding this is the fact that while each of COFCCA's members shares a direct interest in child welfare and/or juvenile justice, each also pursues its own particular mission down different paths, each will choose its own response to transformative pressures, and at least some will expect COFCCA to be relevant to the entirety of their activity.

How and where should COFCCA respond? How should it best expend its limited resources, best apply its singular experience and capability?

What COFCCA Must Do

We propose that New York's children and families, our public sector partners (which must include not only public child welfare agencies but also those with the primary focus of education, health, mental health, substance abuse treatment, etc.), and COFCCA's members cannot afford to lose the state's single most focused and important organization advocating for child welfare and juvenile justice programs and clients. COFCCA's first strategic challenge will be to define and maintain a hard focus on its core activity—the practice of child welfare and juvenile justice—while at the same time utilizing its authority and influence to advance progressive agendas in the broader universes of social justice and social determinants of health. The challenge will be to focus narrowly and participate extensively.

We understand the core of COFCCA's concern to be “child welfare” (and by extension juvenile justice) which is to say the intersection of child, family, and government. Child welfare begins when the government determines that circumstances warrant its intervention into family life, and ends with the restoration of family integrity in some form, or with the maturation of the child. All the elements that are part of the transition for family and child into, and then out of, child welfare are the subjects of COFCCA's attention—the laws, the courts, their efficacy on behalf of children and their families, and their impact on all participants; the quality of the interim child protection, daily care, etc. COFCCA works to support its member agencies, by providing leadership, voice, and vision to promote the proper execution of public sector oversight, appropriate funding of essential system elements; and above all, the consequent quality of life and citizenship that the subjects of child welfare realize. These are the areas in which COFCCA is expert, and in which it should retain its focus.

Until that day when government involvement with family life is determined to be unnecessary, child welfare will continue to be a highly specialized legal transition for the child, from parental responsibility to government and back to family, that determines the trajectory of countless family units and individual lives. At its core both child welfare and juvenile justice are coercive systems, more often than not unrequested by the family, but imposed by the government to meet societal expectations that children, families, and communities be safe and nurturing. Many other organizations and individuals in New York State affect aspects of the child welfare experience, but none grasp its entirety and exceptionality as does COFCCA.

Several facts support this view of child welfare as a specialized field: the transformative influences described above will influence child welfare, but have not to date altered its legal status under the state constitution or some of the basic funding and state oversight practices; e.g., county commissioners retain the authority and obligation to protect children, NYS OCFS remains responsible for statewide oversight, and the foster care cost based payment system remains in place with no immediate alternative in sight. COFCCA's experience with what appear to be continuing aspects of child welfare is precious, and cannot be discarded lightly.

But the primacy of the basic legal nature of the child welfare system should only serve to focus COFCCA's activity, not circumscribe it. Having articulated its initial priority, COFCCA must now determine how to focus on it intensively while participating extensively in the larger context. If the "how" takes a bit of thought, the "why" is self-evident: most of those transformative developments mentioned earlier are already or will be impacting the children, families, and member agencies that COFCCA serves.

It is increasingly clear to our agency leaders that while addressing the core concepts of safety, permanency, and well-being for children and families in the child welfare system, their long term health and vigor lies in reaching these families earlier, and perhaps being available to support, encourage, and guide longer. The challenges these families face are not defined by their worst actions. Increasingly as knowledge of brain development explodes and as the desires of virtually all parents to be better parents is clear we need to reach families earlier, and in less coercive approaches. From home visiting with parents of infants, to quality preschool and public schools, to parenting supports and help with employment and housing, we as a New York State child welfare system can do better. COFCCA should be a leading voice for the development and funding of a wide network of primary p services to support families and prevent the need for more intensive and invasive services later.

Medicaid expansion, for example, has the clear potential to alter dramatically the number of families that collide with child welfare or juvenile justice. Member agencies that adjust to Medicaid expansion may become agents of family independence with unprecedented effect. Few, if any, of COFCCA's members work entirely within the confines of child welfare or juvenile justice anymore; the viability of their business plans and their very mission effectiveness may depend on COFCCA's ability to assist them in transition

COFCCA cannot, will not, ignore the greater movements in the overlapping areas of social justice and social determinants of health. We understand that topics not traditionally associated with the narrow description of child welfare offered above—racial justice, equity that is blind to gender and sexual identity, economic fairness, the quality of schools, etc.—may well be the at the root of our current need for a legal system that engages and restructures families. Increasingly we see the opportunity to engage families before they reach a crisis point and support and assist them outside of legal mandates and the stigma of being threatened with the removal of a child.

How, though, does COFCCA engage meaningfully in larger social, political, and clinical issues without sacrificing the specialized focus on the central process of child welfare?

How Should COFCCA Evolve to Help Meet these Challenges Faced by our Members?

1. If our first priority is to continue the work on behalf of member agencies and their clients, then first we must maintain the COFCCA staff's traditional portfolio of state, NYC, and county government oversight with respect to child welfare, monitoring federal and national developments as well. Continue the recently enhanced attention to regional and local membership concerns. Continue the close advocacy/advisory relationships with both OCFS and ACS. Continue presenting the reality of child welfare service provision (e.g., the "Baruch Studies") to the government and to the public.

COFCCA should also continue the engagement of professional lobbyists to direct and conduct advocacy with respect to critical priorities COFCCA designates.

2. We must also continue and strengthen closer working relationships with other key government agencies most notably the State Department of Health and the State Education Department. This work is ongoing, but should be intensified.
3. Develop a capacity, either via a cadre of staff or contracted specialists, to provide focused attention on emerging specialty topics (e.g., as we have done regarding Medicaid Managed Care), so that COFCCA staff can continue to focus on child welfare while the organization continues to provide vital information and education relative to important emerging topics.
4. Support the development of a more diverse set of leaders of member agencies who in turn can take on active leadership of COFCCA and our various work areas. This is not just because it is right to do, but is a key strategy in helping our members engage with their communities and learn and share from diverse perspectives. COFCCA anticipated developing a program to support emerging leaders but abandoned it in the Great Recession. It is time to re-engage in this for the betterment of our organizations.
5. Continue and expand as possible the important work of the COFCCA Center for Excellence in Child Welfare. This work grew out of our last strategic plan and was intended to disseminate knowledge important to the field, support more and better training and staff development in conjunction with our member agencies, and to provide a forum for thoughtful dialogue about crucial issues facing our field. Efforts to date have been limited to what current staff could develop while carrying out other assignments, but the efforts have found an audience of both private as well as public sector staff seeking this type of information and interaction.
6. Move more into the arenas beyond child welfare and juvenile justice services to identify and speak to the very critical needs of our client families and focus on social justice, equity, and related issues. To do this, we must find the balance described above: "focus narrowly and participate extensively." We do not envision expending substantial portions of limited staff resources campaigning for more funding or restructuring of public schools, or engaging in developing new employment resources for whole communities. Rather our challenge is to find those aspects of public policy and funding where we can speak to the needs of our client families.

One way we might do this is by developing with a designated list of other state advocacy and membership organizations, a series of Memoranda of Understanding that will commit signatory agencies to mutual support on a defined range of initiatives. COFCCA need not be the dedicated leader for every progressive initiative related to the welfare of children and families, but it can influence desired outcomes by working closely under the leadership of others; at the same time, the support of colleague agencies working under COFCCA's leadership on specific child welfare or juvenile justice actions increases the likelihood of success. This MOU concept speaks directly to proposals for the entertainment of merger options: we believe it would be an error to blend COFCCA's child welfare mission with other causes less directly involved with our topic. At the same time, scale in collective action is essential, and may be achieved short of corporate restructuring.

7. Some aspects of the state's progressive development of an enhanced array of Medicaid services, mostly designed to improve health outcomes and avoid high end hospital and residential placements, are tailor-made for the expertise our agencies have developed. This potential "new line of business" is one which our agencies want to explore. COFCCA should provide support, expertise, consultation, etc. as agencies move into these challenging fields. These services will be focused not only on our traditional client base but will also provide the opportunity for our member agencies to meet a broader set of the community's needs.
8. The emergence from the Great Recession, with seven or eight years without funding increases while businesses and even government have increased wages; the impending minimum wage law; the new federal overtime requirements; as well as the very difficult, always challenging, and sometimes dangerous work, is very quickly leading to a severe workforce crisis for publically funded nonprofit human services organizations. Our starting salaries and very inferior benefits, such as health insurance coverage and retirement plans, result in extreme turnover rates (up to 41% last year).

While our workforce is rapidly depleting, the new hires are increasingly unable to do this work. COFCCA must be a strong voice calling this to the attention of the public and our elected leaders. The likely impact will be agencies closing valuable programs and thus leaving families and their children without needed, mandated services. In the case of youth requiring residential care, the outcome may be a return to the days when over 1000 youth were placed in residential settings out of state - harming the youth and families while increasing unemployment in our New York communities.

The bottom line is we need a workforce capable of implementing increasingly sophisticated methods of service, who have the skills to handle numerous crisis situations, and who want to make this work their career. This will require higher pay, better training, and ongoing commitment. COFCCA's Center for Excellence can be a leader in identifying and implementing some of this training and technical assistance.

9. Continue and expand as possible, work focused on supporting member agencies in their survival and growth. We strive to help every agency be an agency of excellence. This includes telling our collective fiscal story through the "Baruch" project. Working to help agencies identify and address risks through cross fertilization and exchange of ideas, best practices, etc. is another opportunity for our members, who are very willing to share information,

ideas, and practices with each other to do so. One of the important conclusions of the post FECS reviews is the critical need to focus on agency risk assessment and management. COFCCA has the capacity to lead its members in this effort. The skill sets demanded by the administrative, funding, and purchasing mechanisms are, if not entirely new to our agencies, much more complicated. COFCCA will provide supports and technical assistance to our members in meeting these needs.

10. Finally, some areas warrant special attention. Two examples:

First, the basic need for the children in our care for a quality education comes up over and over. Yes, their family or individual situations raise multiple challenges. But it is simply not possible to consider these kids a success, if they drop out of school, do not participate, or are simply not ready. COFCCA should develop an initiative to engage other partners to think deeply about this. We then should identify ways to address this through our advocacy, identification and dissemination of best practices, etc.

Similarly, the basic principle in child welfare and juvenile justice is that every child who must be in out of home care deserves the highest quality placement and one that meets the needs of the youth. And that in turn always means in a family when that is possible. But despite the rhetoric and hopes of some critics, the truth is that for some youth the only way they can be ready to participate safely and productively in a family and in their community is to live for a reasonable but short period of time in a residential setting where their needs and strengths can be nurtured and supported, where they can feel safe to move on. Very few voices are raised in support of this crucial service and COFCCA must be one of them. Again, we should commit to identifying and disseminating best practices and should encourage all members to embrace these.

Attachment A

COFCCA's Core Functions

In exploring how COFCCA responds to these challenges we anticipate continuing and enhancing our essential core functions:

Advocacy Above all else COFCCA is a fierce advocate for our member agencies. We seek changes in statutes, regulations, and policies to allow our member agencies to better serve their client children and families. And critically, we focus attention on the need for the government to pay fully the reasonable costs for the services, programs, and outcomes it expects. These efforts are aimed at our elected officials as well as the government agencies. We also raise issues with our government partners to ensure that critical incidents and concerns about the actions of public sector organizations, and their staff are carried out in reasonable, professional, and consistent manner.

Information Communication We seek out and share information which we believe can better inform our member agencies on government policies, opportunities and changes. We monitor federal, state, and wherever possible local information across all of the areas in our mission as well as up to date information and changes in the operations, oversight, and governance of nonprofit organizations. We provide analysis of emerging policy, regulations, and statute changes (federal, state, and in some cases local) for our members so that our member organizations may use this information in current and future decision-making for their organizations. COFCCA regularly surveys its members and generates reports from the data we collect that provide valuable sector-wide information for our members and to our state agency partners and government representatives.

Networking The demands on agency leaders and senior staff are immense and change often. One intrinsic function of COFCCA is to create opportunities for our member agency leaders and staff to come together, share experiences, learn from each other's successes and challenges. These opportunities also serve to build a cohesive membership which looks out for each other's interests and works together under the auspices of COFCCA to effect change.

COFCCA Center for Excellence in Child Welfare The COFCCA Board created the Center to augment our capacity to deliver information about emerging issues, best and promising practices as well as training to our members. The Center provides the vehicle for focusing our attention on the current needs of our member agencies as well as challenging all of us to see future problems and opportunities.