Approaches to Collaborative Partnerships in the Child Welfare Community Collaborations Initiative

building capacity to evaluate
CHILD WELFARE COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

This brief describes the approaches to collaborative partnerships used in projects funded by the Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families initiative (referred to here as Child Welfare Community Collaborations, or CWCC; see **Box 1** for a more detailed description of the initiative and the accompanying cross-site evaluation). This brief uses data collected for the cross-site evaluation and from grantee documents to answer the following research question: "What are the promising strategies and challenges in identifying, establishing, and maintaining new and existing partnerships?"

Key findings:

- On average, each grantee partnered with 20 organizations in their community, but the number of partner organizations varied widely – from 9 to 65 organizations. Community-serving organizations (e.g., community-based non-profits and health-related specialists) comprised roughly half of the partners across all projects.

- Grantees identified partners at each stage of the grant process, from writing the proposal through implementation.

- In addition to leveraging existing relationships and soliciting partners through formal selection processes such as Requests for Proposals, grantees also used data to identify partners and solicited community input from individuals with lived experience and local service providers.

Box 1. About CWCC and the Cross-site Process Evaluation

The CWCC initiative is designed to mobilize communities to **develop and evaluate multi-system collaboratives that address local barriers and provide a continuum of services to prevent child abuse and neglect**. The initiative is funded by the Children's Bureau (CB) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). In 2018 and 2019, CB awarded 5-year cooperative agreements to a total of 13 states, non-profit organizations, and Native American tribal organizations (referred to here as "grantees").

To advance the evidence around collaborative approaches to preventing child abuse and neglect, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within ACF, in collaboration with CB, contracted with Abt Associates and its partner Child Trends to conduct the *Building Capacity to Evaluate Child Welfare Community Collaborations* project. The project includes:

- **evaluation-related technical assistance** (TA) to support grantees and local evaluators and their capacity to conduct their required project-specific evaluations and

- **a cross-site process evaluation** of the CWCC grants to better understand how communities came together to develop and implement their CWCC approaches.

This brief is one of a series of products developed through the CWCC cross-site process evaluation. The evaluation explores five key research questions focused on partnership approaches and challenges, data use, implementation activities, contextual factors promoting and impeding implementation, and sustainability.

- Grantees and their partners described how factors both external and internal to their CWCC projects influenced their success in building and maintaining strong partnerships:

  – *Key external factors included:* Collaboration and coordination dynamics among family-serving systems and organizations within the community, partners' organizational capacity to participate (e.g., time, resources), and the level of mutual trust across partners.

  – *Key internal factors included:* Frequent and clear communication, clear roles and responsibilities, strong leadership from the grantee, and shared decision-making.

- Overall grantees and their partners were very satisfied with their partnerships during the project.

Overview

This brief uses data collected for the cross-site evaluation and from grantee documents (see **Box 2**) to explore the community collaborations (i.e., "partnerships") that were part of the foundation of the CWCC initiative's approach to preventing child abuse and neglect. Partnership is a broad term that encompasses varying levels and types of engagement between the partner organization, the grantee, and the community. Each grantee brought their own perspective on what constitutes a partner, so for this brief we use the term "partner" to refer to any organization that grantees described as their partner. Throughout the brief we explore who these partners were, how they were identified, what factors were key to building and maintaining the partnerships, and how grantees and partners perceived their experiences on the CWCC project.

Box 2. Data Used for this Brief

- **Site visits with grantees and partners.** The evaluation team conducted annual site visits that included semi-structured interviews with representatives from all 13 CWCC projects. Interviewees included leaders and staff from the grantee organization and partner organizations. Interviews focused on approaches to partnership, project aims and priorities, strategies for using data, implementation strategies, diversity and equity, and lessons learned. This brief uses interviews from the first three waves of data collection for cohort 1 (2020, 2021, and 2022) and the first two waves for cohort 2 (2021 and 2022).

- **A collaboration survey administered to grantees and partners**. The evaluation team administered a collaboration survey annually that included the Collaboration Assessment Tool (CAT; Marek et al, 2014) and questions about respondent characteristics and background. The CAT measures seven factors shown to contribute to effective collaboration (Context, Members, Process, Communication, Function, Resources, and Leadership) as well as respondents' perceptions of the current and future success of their collaboration. Respondents included leaders and staff from the grantee and partner organizations. This brief uses collaboration survey results from the first three waves of data collection for cohort 1 (2020, 2021, and 2022) and cohort 2 (2021, 2022, and 2023).

- **Grantee documents**. The evaluation team reviewed documents created by all the CWCC grantees including their original grant applications and semi-annual progress reports. The evaluation team also reviewed summaries of each grantee created by the TA team based on approved evaluation plans, implementation plans, and conversations with grantees and local evaluators. The evaluation team then summarized these documents in the CWCC Projects at a Glance and gave project directors the opportunity to review the description of their project for accuracy. This brief uses the list of partner organizations in the CWCC Projects at a Glance.

For more detailed information on the data used in this brief please see the CWCC Design and Methods Brief.

Who Did Grantees Engage as Partners?

In grantee documents from all 13 CWCC projects, overall grantees reported partnering with a total of 256 organizations.[1] **On average, each grantee partnered with 20 organizations**, but the number of partner organizations varied widely – from nine to 65 organizations. Grantees in both cohorts were required to establish relationships with their local public child welfare agency and the legal and judicial community.[2] However, in interviews all 13 grantees reported engaging additional partners based on the design of their project. **Exhibit 1** below and the sections that follow provide illustrative examples of each the four types of partner organizations and the roles they played within the CWCC projects.

Exhibit 1. Types of Partner Organizations and Illustrative Examples (Percentage of All Partners)

Community-serving Organizations (52%)

Behavioral, Physical, & Mental Health Specialists
- Behavioral healthcare centers
- Substance use treatment providers
- Birthing hospitals
- Walk-in clinics

Concrete Services Providers
- Homeless shelters
- Food banks
- Housing authorities
- Employment programs

Community-based Non-profits
- Faith-based organizations
- Family resource centers
- Advocacy coalitions
- Libraries

Public Agencies or Offices (36%)

Legal System Entities
- Law enforcement
- Courts

Social Service Agencies
- Child welfare agencies
- Federal safety net offices (SNAP, TANF)
- Public health departments
- Home visiting programs

Collaborative Partnerships

Philanthropies & Businesses (8%)
- Private philanthropy
- Foundations
- Businesses
- Media and digital marketing firms

Educational Organizations (4%)
- Afterschool programs
- K-12 schools
- Head Start and childcare
- Universities

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1 Partner data are pulled from the CWCC Projects at a Glance and may not be representative of all partners engaged throughout the CWCC projects. As described in the CWCC Projects at a Glance, "partner counts reflect the partners that CWCC grantees included in their initial approaches, as documented in grantees' applications, semi-annual progress reports, and summaries of each grantee created by the evaluation TA team. The evaluation team also asked CWCC project directors to review their partner lists for accuracy." Individual Grantee Profiles will provide a final list of the partners for each project.

2 For the full FOAs see https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/delivery/01CWIG_INST:01CWIG/1218617180007651 (Cohort 1) and https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/delivery/01CWIG_INST:01CWIG/1218615120007651 (Cohort 2). Grantees in Cohort 2 were also required to engage youth and families with lived child welfare experience, the public health community, at least one community services or family assistance program/agency, the community's public housing authority and their local Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention Program (CBCAP) grantee. The CBCAP Program is funded by ACF and offers support for community-based, prevention-focused programs and activities. More information on the program can be found at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/grant-funding/community-based-child-abuse-prevention-cbcap-grants.

Community-Serving Organizations

Community-serving organizations were the most common type of partner (52% of all partners). Community-serving organizations included mental, physical, and behavioral health specialists; concrete-services providers (e.g., food or housing assistance providers); and community-based non-profit organizations. These partners frequently worked directly with parents and families and thus had a good understanding of the strengths and needs of the families living within the geographic area(s) served by each CWCC project. As such, within the context of the CWCC project these partners often made and received referrals to services supported by the CWCC project, delivered project activities such as parent cafes and family coaching, and helped to ensure that planned and actual project activities aligned with community needs.

Public Agencies and Offices

Partner organizations also **commonly included public agencies or offices** (36% of all partners). While all grantees were required to partner with their local public child welfare agency and legal and judicial community, several grantees also partnered with other public agencies and offices (e.g., their local Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) office or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF] office). Similar to community-based organizations, these public agencies often played critical roles in making referrals to and receiving referrals from services supported by the CWCC project and assisting with project planning.
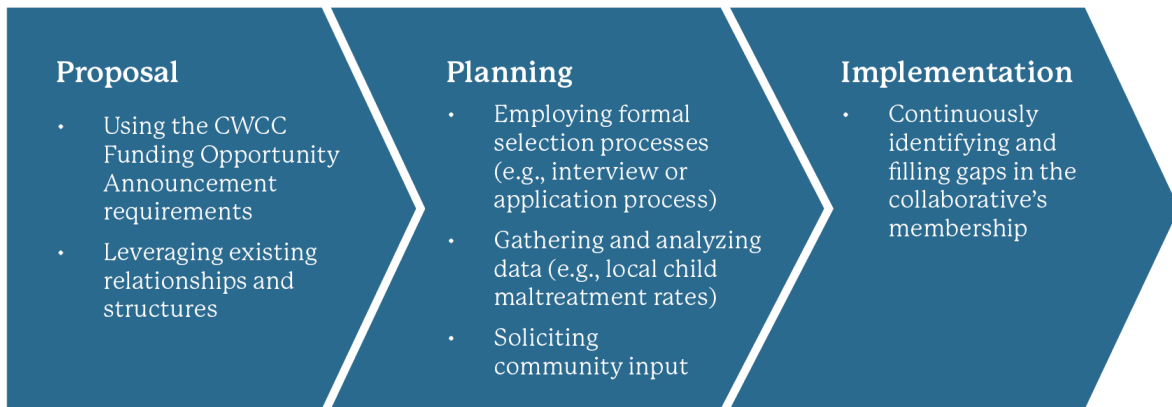
Philanthropic, Business, and Educational Organizations

To a lesser extent, grantees also partnered with philanthropic and business organizations (8% of all partners), and educational organizations (4% of all partners). These philanthropic and business organizations often provided financial and in-kind support to the CWCC projects. They also shared their expertise in administrative work (e.g., assisting with budget management) or communications (e.g., helping with social media campaigns). Educational organizations (e.g., schools and universities) served in a variety of capacities such as hosting community events, making and receiving referrals (e.g., for early childhood education services), and supporting planning.

How Did Grantees Identify Partners?

Interviewees reported that strategies for identifying partners varied at each stage of the CWCC project (see **Exhibit 2**) and partner lists evolved and grew over the course of the five-year grant. During the proposal phase, grantees often used the CWCC FOA requirements and their existing relationships and structures to identify potential partners. As they entered the planning period, many grantees employed formal selection processes (e.g., Requests for Proposals [RFPs]), gathered and analyzed data, and directly solicited community input to identify partners. As implementation began, grantees continued to use these strategies as needed to identify and fill gaps in their collaborative's membership.

Exhibit 2. Examples of Partnership Identification Strategies in Each Stage of the CWCC Project

Proposal

- Using the CWCC Funding Opportunity Announcement requirements
- Leveraging existing relationships and structures

Planning

- Employing formal selection processes (e.g., interview or application process)
- Gathering and analyzing data (e.g., local child maltreatment rates)
- Soliciting community input

Implementation

- Continuously identifying and filling gaps in the collaborative's membership

Using the Funding Opportunity Announcement Requirements

As they were drafting their proposals, all 13 grantees **used the required partner types outlined in the CWCC FOA** to form their initial list of partners. As noted previously, grantees were required to partner with a certain set of organizations and in some cases, this encouraged grantees to partner with organizations they historically did not engage as partners. For example, at least two grantees described forming new partnerships with individuals with lived experience.[3]

Leveraging Existing Relationships and Structures

All 13 grantees **leveraged and built on existing relationships and structures** to form their CWCC partnerships. One common strategy involved networking with existing partners and building on pre-grant relationships. Interviewees described prioritizing partners who had a strong reputation and were trusted by the community. Grantees also identified and partnered with existing coalitions, councils, and advisory groups. Grantee leaders also leveraged their professional connections by meeting with individuals in their networks who then referred them to other prospective partners.

Employing Formal Selection Processes

All 13 grantees said they used a **formal process or criteria to select partner organizations.** Of these, six grantees described using an interview or application process for key partners and/or for specific roles within the project (e.g., a request for proposals for organizations to provide direct services). Grantees

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[3] Throughout this brief, "individuals with lived experience" refers to individuals with varied and intersecting personal life experiences that could be relevant to CWCC projects. Interviewees did not always clarify what forms of lived experience these individuals brought, although some specified that this included individuals who had been impacted by the child welfare system, shared demographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, parental status, socioeconomic status) with the project's focal population(s) or populations disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, had participated in family programs or services or navigated public benefits systems, and/or had lived in the community in which the CWCC project was focused. We use "lived experience" to align with the language used by interviewees; however, we acknowledge that this umbrella term veils the nuance of these different experiences and identities. As such, a lesson learned is that to promote equity it is important to clarify language when referring to groups of individuals, instead of using broader terms that might mask important distinctions. Wherever possible, the evaluation team has identified the type of lived experience being referred to. For more information on the ways that projects engaged individuals with lived experience, please see the Supporting Equity through CWCC brief.

also mapped out community needs and used that information to identify new partners who could meet the needs of families (e.g., direct service providers with a trusted presence in their community) or could provide services not offered by their existing partners (e.g., culturally specific services, concrete supports). Six grantees identified these gaps using a specific child abuse and neglect prevention framework, such as the Protective Factors Framework,[4] to select partners whose work aligned to one or more factors in the framework.

Gathering and Analyzing Data

Eleven grantees described **using data to help identify partners,** particularly during the planning period. For example, grantees reported using community and family needs assessments, child maltreatment data, and qualitative data on community needs and services to select partner organizations that could meet identified needs. Some grantees collected the data themselves in the form of community or family needs assessments, while other grantees used secondary data sources to identify needs. For example, five grantees used data on child maltreatment rates to identify specific geographic areas of focus and then narrowed their partner outreach to organizations in those areas. One grantee described using data on the source of child maltreatment reports (e.g., law enforcement, medical professionals) to identify potential partner organizations. Another grantee described how seeing data on the child welfare system's disproportionate scrutiny of Black and Indigenous families led them to seek out partners who could provide culturally-relevant prevention services. Finally, three grantees described using qualitative data (gathered via surveys, partner meetings, and community meetings) to understand their communities' service needs. They then used this information to identify partners who might help address underlying issues contributing to maltreatment or help meet the service needs identified by communities.

> *"Our evaluator, they did some mapping… [of] where [child maltreatment] reports were coming from within each county… and then… our current implementation team [was] able to pinpoint specific communities, …think through some of the needs assessment planning, and… [examine] the root causes for the implementation plan. It helped our county implementation teams identify locally who they needed to be working with."*
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> **—Grantee Interviewee**

Soliciting Community Input

Five grantees **used community input from individuals with lived experience and/or local service providers to identify partners**. All five grantees specifically engaged individuals with lived experience navigating relevant systems (e.g., child welfare, public benefits) or receiving family-strengthening services to help identify partners. For example, one grantee asked parents with lived experience to review the applications from prospective partners seeking project funding to provide direct services. Four of the five grantees also solicited input from local service providers (e.g., child care providers) to identify community needs and partner organizations well-suited to meet those needs.

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4   For more information on different protective factors strategies, see Protective Factors in Child Welfare (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

What Factors Were Key to Building and Maintaining Partnerships?

Interviewees identified several key factors that facilitated building and maintaining strong partnerships and posed challenges when not in place. Some of these factors were external to the project and related to community and organizational history and context, while others were internal and specific to the ways in which each grantee implemented their CWCC project (see **Exhibit 3** below). As we discuss each factor, we also highlight areas where data from the collaboration survey echoed its importance.

Exhibit 3. Key Factors Influencing Grantees' Ability to Build and Maintain Partnerships

Factors External to the Project
- Community collaboration & coordination
- Partner capacity
- Mutual trust

Factors Internal to the Project
- Clear and consistent communication
- Role clarity
- Strong grantee leadership
- Shared decision-making

Key External Factors for Building & Maintaining Partnerships

Grantees' ability to build and maintain collaborative relationships was influenced by external factors such as the collaboration and coordination dynamics among family-serving systems and organizations in the community, partners' organizational capacity, and the level of mutual trust across partners.

Community Collaboration & Coordination

Interviewees described successful partnerships as being built on partners' ability to collaborate and coordinate services in their community. In some instances, the CWCC projects brought together organizations who had never worked together, as well as those that had previously served as competitors (e.g., competing for funding opportunities or to serve individual families). These existing dynamics sometimes made partnerships challenging, but interviewees reported that the CWCC projects helped to build new relationships across silos, shift mindsets towards collaboration, create a shared mission, and reduce competition.

When collaborative relationships needed to be built or strengthened, interviewees across 12 projects described the **importance of breaking down existing silos, strengthening service coordination, and shifting partners' mindsets to a collaborative focus on community priorities**, rather than a narrow focus on their individual organizational priorities. In many communities, family-serving systems (e.g., housing, mental health, education) have historically operated in their own silos, and the CWCC projects intentionally brought together partners across these systems to improve coordination. In some cases, CWCC projects were able to become the "connective tissue" across the different partners and to provide an infrastructure for more regular cross-system coordination. For example, interviewees described new and strengthened relationships across organizations that led to greater service referrals.

To build consensus around and action toward shared community priorities, interviewees from all 13 projects highlighted **the value of building and working with a shared mission**. Grantees and their partners described enhancing connections by using the same terms and language, identifying common needs, developing a shared definition for maltreatment prevention, and engaging in joint planning and discussion throughout project implementation. These efforts to establish a shared mission appear to have been successful since collaboration survey respondents indicated that, overall, grantees and their partners had clearly defined and agreed upon goals and objectives.[5]

"[For the project's success, we've learned the importance of] having the right partners, having a good mission statement, having shared goals. Obviously, incorporate everyone's thoughts and opinions where everyone feels like they're not only attending but they are also having valued participation and we are appreciating their time."

—Grantee Interviewee

A well-defined and clear purpose for the CWCC project also helped to reduce the sense of competition among partners and increase partners' willingness to collaborate. Interviewees from 10 projects described challenges related to partners' sense of competition for funding and/or clients – both between different partner organizations and between partner organizations and the grantee. Grantees reduced the sense of competition among partners by seeking to coordinate with or join into existing initiatives, rather than trying to change or compete with them. One grantee also described intentionally forming relationships with prospective partners before issuing an RFP. To minimize the sense of competition, interviewees felt it was important to adopt an "It takes a village" mentality and create teambuilding and networking opportunities for leaders and frontline staff at partner organizations. These consistent, sustained interactions helped to foster a collaborative mindset and strengthen relationships.

Partner Capacity

Interviewees emphasized that the collaborative nature of the **CWCC projects required partner organizations to have the capacity to devote their time, input, and expertise** throughout project planning and implementation. Partners had varying levels of engagement and time available to commit to their projects, and their participation in project-related meetings and activities added to their existing workloads.

Partners' limited capacity to participate in the CWCC projects was the most prevalent challenge noted by interviewees across all 13 projects. Interviewees identified a variety of factors that limited partners' capacity to dedicate staff time to CWCC project meetings and activities, including:

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[5] The CAT function subscale asks respondents to rate whether they agree that the collaborative's goals and objectives are clearly determined and articulated. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT function subscale was 4.13 on a scale of 1 to 5, indicating that respondents agreed that this was an area of strength. Individual project scores ranged from 3.58 to 4.64.

- **Heavy workloads and responsibilities within their own organizations** limited partners' ability to participate. Frontline staff at direct service providers, in particular, faced challenges balancing participation with their other responsibilities. This underscores the importance of partner organizations committing to and prioritizing staff's participation in the project (e.g., by adjusting workloads). Interviewees also highlighted the importance of partner organizations' leaders participating regularly in meetings to maintain project momentum that can stall without the needed decision-makers.

> *"I think people are busy, it's really hard to engage and a lot of agencies don't have resources to spend time on collaboration or let staff have time for collaborative meetings. Their contracts and resources they have are to do X work, not work on collaborative planning or more system work. This is a challenge."*
>
> **—Grantee Interviewee**

- **Staffing challenges, including turnover and layoffs at partner organizations** increased workloads and/or redistributed responsibilities for remaining staff. This sometimes required re-engaging the partner organization if their primary point of contact for the CWCC project changed.

- **Time constraints**, such as conflicting meeting schedules, limited participation for some partners.

- **Funding constraints** also sometimes limited partners' ability to support their staff/leaders' participation in the CWCC project.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic** introduced new community priorities, pulled partners such as schools, health care providers, and direct service providers in different directions, and impacted the personal lives of partners' staff.

While most of these capacity-related challenges fall outside the scope of CWCC projects' influence, interviewees did suggest that **making partners' efforts on the CWCC projects a funded and designated part of partners' workloads may help mitigate these barriers.** This theme was also echoed by respondents to the collaboration survey who rated resources lower on average than any of the other collaboration subscales, suggesting that additional financial and human capital resources would strengthen the CWCC projects.[6]

Mutual Trust

Interviewees discussed how trust between partners is developed over time and **mutual trust forms the foundation** on which partners can build their shared efforts. In some instances, long histories of successful collaborative efforts and pre-existing relationships between the grantee and community partners positioned grantees to begin their CWCC projects from a place of mutual trust. In other instances, grantees needed to navigate and address historical distrust or build trust with new partners in

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[6] The CAT resources subscale asks respondents to rate whether they agree that the collaborative has the financial and human resources needed to achieve its goals. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT resources subscale was 3.75 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating that this was an area that might deserve further attention. Individual project scores ranged from 3.20 to 4.47.

new communities. Interviewees identified the **importance of being transparent and naming former breaches of trust** within the community to support healing and the ability to move forward together.

Interviewees across all 13 projects consistently described the importance of **building relationships over time to lay the groundwork for trust.** Taking time to get to know partners as individuals helped to bolster these relationships, and team-building and inter-agency networking opportunities for leaders and frontline staff helped interviewees to see the benefits of participating in the CWCC projects.

When mutual trust was not present among community partners and/or the grantee, interviewees from eight CWCC projects reported that partnership challenges arose. For example, interviewees described general distrust of the child welfare agency by the community due to the child welfare system's harmful impacts on families and communities. They also described partners' distrust of the child welfare system arising from specific past experiences in which the child welfare agency solicited but did not act on community feedback, or initiated but did not sustain similar prevention efforts. These experiences made it difficult to repair and rebuild trust. Additionally, a power differential was noted in some instances where the child welfare agency funded other partner organizations (outside of the CWCC project), which made it challenging for partner organizations to be completely forthright.

Key Internal Factors for Building & Maintaining Partnerships

Factors internal to the CWCC projects also influenced grantees' ability to successfully build and maintain collaborative partnerships. In particular, frequent and clear communication, clear roles and responsibilities, grantee leadership, and shared decision-making all contributed positively to developing and sustaining partnerships.

Clear and Consistent Communication

Interviewees identified that effective communication plays an important role in ensuring partners are connected, informed, and have opportunities to contribute their expertise. **Establishing clear and consistent communication channels** was the most common partnership facilitator, cited by interviewees at all 13 projects consistently over time. Interviewees described fostering partner engagement by creating opportunities for consistent, purposeful communication such as formal meetings with partners, informal networking, and individual conversations with partners to build relationships. Collaboration survey respondents echoed this and reported that communication was a strength across the projects.[7]

"[Through discussion groups that bring together multiple organizations], we're learning much more about what our partners are doing at the state-wide level which has been really helpful. We're also much more knowledgeable about what's going on at the community level."

—Grantee Interviewee

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[7]   The CAT communication subscale asks respondents to rate whether they agree that there is effective communication between collaborative members and the larger community. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT communication subscale was 4.07 on a scale of 1 to 5, indicating this was an area of strength. Individual project scores ranged from 3.45 to 4.68.

To establish clear and consistent communication, interviewees pointed to the importance of:

- **Consistent meeting structures** that kept partners engaged and informed. Interviewees described meeting cadences that varied from weekly to quarterly depending on factors such as meeting type (e.g., planning meetings vs. broader project update meetings) and stage of implementation (with meeting frequency tending to decrease over time).

- **Mechanisms for openly sharing information** both between the grantee and the partners and from partner to partner (e.g., meetings, electronic tools such as a shared Slack site, or joint trainings)

- **Environments where partners felt equally heard and valued** through open dialogue, consensus building, and group-based decision-making that centers the voices of parents, people of color, and smaller grassroots organizations.

- **Ongoing, purposeful communication outside of meetings** (e.g., emails, informal check-ins, and meeting minutes that build connections across partners and provide opportunities for sharing needed information outside of scheduled meetings).

- **Communication tools and technology that increased access to meetings** (e.g., video platforms like Zoom that allow partners to easily participate without having to travel for meetings).

Even with their overall positive reflections on communication across partners, interviewees identified **some specific communication challenges**:

- **Limited in-person relationship and rapport building during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic**. Interviewees across 12 projects described challenges building relationships and connecting with partners while working remotely. Interviewees noted a lack of informal time to connect, less deep interactions, and more time-consuming processes for building trust and rapport in the absence of in-person time together. Interviewees also mentioned "Zoom fatigue" and other technological barriers (e.g., the learning curve for adopting new technology tools). By the second year of implementation, most of these challenges had dissipated with the return of more in-person activities.[8]

- **Lack of a shared understanding of the CWCC project**. Interviewees from 12 projects described how some partners lacked a shared understanding of the CWCC project's goals, activities, and key partners. This challenge appeared to be more prevalent in the early stages of the projects, with some interviewees noting that partners benefited from seeing more tangible outputs from the CWCC projects as they reached full implementation.

- **Unclear verbal and written communication** was a concern noted by interviewees from 11 projects. For example, some noted that written communication needed to be more clear, concise, and tailored to audiences who are less well-versed in the CWCC project. Interviewees also identified the need for meetings to include clear agendas with specific goals.

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[8] For more information, see "Community prevention of child maltreatment: Lessons learned and promising practices during the COVID-19 pandemic"

- **Challenges distinguishing between multiple, sometimes overlapping, collaborative prevention efforts in their communities**. Interviewees from 11 projects described how some partners struggled to understand how the CWCC project was connected to and/or differentiated from pre-existing initiatives. This barrier was primarily reported among projects that were implemented within a collaborative structure that pre-dated the CWCC funding.

Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Interviewees highlighted that collaborative efforts with multiple partners benefit from a clear division of roles and responsibilities. These roles and responsibilities can be determined and codified in a variety of ways. Interviewees from 11 projects reflected on the importance of having a **clear delineation of each partner's roles and responsibilities supported through an established structure and, where applicable, corresponding funding.**

As part of this structure, at least six projects established a **leadership team, steering committee, or leadership council with community representation to guide their work and keep partners engaged**. In the early stages of the cooperative agreements, these leadership teams helped to refine the project strategies (e.g., types and locations of services to be funded) and reviewed and gave input on RFPs. Throughout the project lifespan, grantees brought implementation data back to their advisors to seek guidance. For example, one grantee described regularly bringing data to their leadership team on referrals to the CWCC project and data on protective factors within the community to identify opportunities to strengthen referrals and address community needs.

Beyond clearly articulated roles, interviewees from six projects also described **the value in having structured guidelines** (such as memoranda of understanding or MOUs[9]) to clearly articulate responsibilities, provide financial incentives for partners to increase participation, and encourage partners to focus on their shared priorities. Half of the grantees used MOUs to formalize at least some of their partnerships, and some grantees directly contracted with and paid partners to provide services. Others articulated responsibilities through less formal conversations and commitments from prospective partners.

> *"We've been collaborating for many, many years with many of our agencies. I think the main other difference was making sure that we had our MOUs for some of the people we work with... the main thing is having the documentation... It's important to do the work but also important to show it on paper."*
>
> **—Grantee Interviewee**

Clearly defined roles and expectations for partner organizations are necessary to avoid confusion. When clear roles were not specified, confusion arose among interviewees from 12 projects about why they were involved, their responsibilities, the roles of other partners, the expected time commitment, and certain aspects of project implementation (e.g., referral processes, eligibility criteria). This theme also emerged in the collaboration survey data where respondents rated the processes and organization

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[9] An MOU is a written agreement between two or more parties detailing each party's commitment and responsibility toward achieving shared goal(s).

of the CWCC projects as an area that might benefit from additional attention.[10] In some instances, interviewees noted that the lack of clarity emerged early on as the projects formed and some partners struggled to understand how they fit in. This challenge was reported by fewer interviewees in the second and third years of implementation, but its sustained prevalence emphasizes the importance of clarifying roles and expectations at each stage of the project.

Strong Grantee Leadership

Interviewees from nine projects and collaboration survey respondents identified the importance of **strong leadership from the grantee**. Strong leaders brought in partners through their existing relationships and had the skillsets needed to convene and support partners, as well as navigate conflicts within partner relationships. Interviewees also described the importance of grantee leadership for identifying and inviting missing voices to the CWCC projects (e.g., individuals with lived experience and from marginalized communities). Collaboration survey respondents similarly identified leadership as a strength of the CWCC projects; the leadership subscale of the CAT had the highest average score across the 13 projects.[11]

"I can't say enough positives about [CWCC Project Director]. I think [they're] able to hear a lot of what's coming in and convey information to everyone. [They're] also able to filter out frustrations that people are expressing... and meet those frustrations, even if it's just hearing them, and then acting on them if... it's something [they] can act on."

—Partner Interviewee

Shared Power and Decision-making

Interviewees and collaboration survey respondents reflected on the importance of **sharing power and engaging partners to make collaborative decisions** within the CWCC projects. Interviewees from nine projects identified this as an area for growth. For example, one interviewee said that their organization had been engaged symbolically but was not meaningfully engaged in decision-making. Others described hearing the same voices in meetings and highlighted the importance of engaging organizations that can bring forward community voice in decision-making. This theme also appeared in the collaboration survey findings where grantees and partners rated the collaborative's context (i.e., the extent to which they

"I think that the way you do this work, because of existing power dynamics and other things, is you have got to have a conversation in five different places, and then bring those conversations together in meaningful ways and draw meaning. And you may have the same conversation at different levels because... people with lived experience cannot participate in a meeting with child welfare staff...in a way that eliminates existing power dynamics."

—Partner Interviewee

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[10] The CAT processes and organization subscale asks grantee and partner organizations to rate the extent to which they agree that their collaborative has the processes and organizational structures for successful collaboration. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT process subscale was 3.99 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating that this was an area that might deserve further attention. Individual project scores ranged from 3.46 to 4.62.

[11] The CAT leadership subscale asks respondents to rate whether they agree that the collaborative has effective leadership. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT leadership subscale was 4.29 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating that this was an area of strength. Individual project scores ranged from 3.58 to 4.70.

had representation from community members and community support) as an area that might benefit from additional attention. [12]

Relatedly, **interviewees identified specific partners with whom they wished to strengthen engagement on their projects, most commonly including:**

- **Individuals with lived experience**. While many projects have taken steps to support and engage individuals with lived experience in their work (see the [Supporting Equity through CWCC Brief](#)), interviewees from eleven projects felt their engagement efforts with these individuals could be strengthened. In particular, **interviewees emphasized the importance of**:

  - **engaging parents and youth with lived experience** navigating the child welfare system and/or receiving primary prevention services,

  - **engaging individuals whose identities and experiences mirrored those of the families served** by the projects (specifically recognizing the need for greater engagement of Black/African American individuals, American Indian/Alaska Native individuals, refugees, and individuals from financially under-resourced communities, as well as tribes and community organizations that provide tailored services to these populations),

  - **developing grantee and partner skills** in engaging individuals with lived experience, and

  - **bringing in a range of voices and perspectives** rather than relying on one individual to represent an entire community (e.g., engaging multiple Tribal partners to ensure the CWCC project understood and addressed the needs of Indigenous children and families), and

  - **acknowledging and building structures that mitigate power differentials and create compassionate spaces** where families and community members can share their experiences and inform decision-making.

- **Schools**. Interviewees from six projects wanted to foster greater partnership with local schools. In addition to pandemic-related challenges that lessened over time, interviewees found it difficult to identify the appropriate individuals within school systems to engage (e.g., district-level vs. school-level) and reported that education partners had limited capacity to participate.

- **Child welfare agencies.** Interviewees from six projects desired greater engagement of the child welfare agency in their CWCC projects. They pointed to turnover in child welfare agency leadership as a common challenge that required ongoing re-engagement. While interviewees desired greater frontline child welfare agency staff participation in the projects, they also acknowledged workload challenges that made this difficult.

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[12] The CAT context subscale asks grantee and partner organizations to rate the extent to which they had representation from community members and community support. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT context subscale was 3.97 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating that this was an area that might deserve further attention. Individual project scores ranged from 3.53 to 4.60.

How Did Grantees and Partners Perceive their Partnership Experience?

Interviewees and collaboration survey respondents reflected positively on their partnership experiences. Interviewees across all 13 projects **overwhelmingly perceived their partnership experiences as positive** and remained enthusiastic about their overall experience each year. Interviewees explained that their participation in the CWCC project created opportunities to pursue a more collaborative strategy to supporting families in their communities. Moreover, benefits of this close-knit network spilled out beyond the project. For example, interviewees said they were able to leverage the relationships established through the CWCC project to apply for additional funding. Relatedly, collaboration survey respondents reported that the CWCC projects effectively brought together a combination of partners whose skills, characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes would contribute to successful coalition outcomes.[13]

Very few interviewees described negative partnership experiences (interviewees from only five projects across the three waves of data collection). Of those, negative feelings were attributed to communication challenges and a desire to engage more frontline staff and community members (described above). These negative partnership experiences were reported more often in the first year of program implementation, compared to the second and third years. This suggests that grantees and their partners may have successfully mitigated concerns over time.[14] This may also reflect the significant challenges faced during the early stages of the pandemic.

"Working with [the grantee agency] has been very relational. I have found their culture to be very intentional in everything they do. There isn't a meeting that is just a meeting, it's always about how you are and who are you serving and what can we do for you. I think that's a model for business that has changed how I think about my partnerships within the community and what I am bringing to them in terms of really caring about who they are prior to considering what they can give to my organization."

—Partner Interviewee

"When I reached out on a partnership level to talk about my concerns about underreporting [of maltreatment during the early stages of the pandemic], how this has influenced [project activities], [and] what we're going to do in anticipation for the fall, it just got kicked back to me with, 'well, those are interesting points, maybe we can talk about this another time.'"

—Partner Interviewee

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[13] The CAT membership subscale asks grantee and partner organizations to rate whether they agree that members of their collaborative have the characteristics, skills, attitudes, and beliefs needed for successful collaboration. Across all years and CWCC projects, the mean score on the CAT membership subscale was 4.27 on a scale from 1 to 5, indicating that this was an area of strength. Individual project scores ranged from 3.72 to 4.65.

[14] The number of interviewees describing both positive and negative partnership experiences all decreased from the first year of implementation to the second, which may also indicate that the study team asked questions about the partnership experience less frequently over time.

Summary and Conclusions

Collaborative partnerships are essential for community-driven strategies that prevent child maltreatment, yet they present complexities that must be navigated. Interviews with CWCC grantees and their partners suggested several **key ingredients to successful partnerships**:

- **Structured and inclusive communication during and between project meetings.** Effective, inclusive meetings with clear agendas and facilitation that fosters open dialogue and provides opportunities for group-based decision-making enhance partner engagement. Consistent communication between meetings (e.g., sharing meeting minutes and providing regular email updates) sustains the momentum of that engagement among partners.

- **Clearly communicated roles and expectations of partners**. Clarifying responsibilities for each partner is important throughout each stage of implementation. When all partners understand their role and the importance of their participation, project implementation flows more smoothly.

- **Ongoing relationship development with new and existing partners.** Strong working relationships facilitate collaboration. CWCC projects leveraged existing relationships and developed new partnerships over time, investing in teambuilding and networking at all levels of the partner organizations.

- **A shared understanding of the project's mission, goals, and strategies for prevention.** Clearly articulating the project mission, goals, and strategies helps to unify partner organizations, ensure coordination, and break down silos. With this clarity, partners can better align the strengths of their individual organizations toward their shared goals.

- **Strong project leaders.** Complex, multi-system strategies require strong project management to maintain progress. Leaders with strong interpersonal and communication skills cohesively assemble partners and guide discussion to generate consensus across a collaborative network.

As communities seek to build and strengthen collaborative partnerships that incorporate these key ingredients, **communities can benefit from other lessons learned by the CWCC projects**:

- **Collaborations take time and ongoing attention to trust and relationship development**. Working together and sharing ownership and decision-making is a different way of doing business for many family-serving organizations and public agencies.

- **Allocating project funding to compensate staff and leaders' contributions to the project can help ensure dedicated, ongoing participation of partner organizations**. While time is a precious commodity for leaders and staff at partnering organizations, time is also needed to build relationships, trust, and a shared understanding of the path forward. Financial support may help partner organizations create dedicated time for their staff and leaders to participate.

- **It is important to think creatively about who to can engage as partners** and move beyond the traditional players to include a wider range of perspectives and expertise. For example, the CWCC projects specifically sought to partner with community members directly impacted by the

child welfare system, as well as individuals who reflected the identities and experiences (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status) of the communities served.

- **Acknowledging and actively addressing imbalances of power** (e.g., between families and systems, and between smaller and larger organizations) is essential to building more inclusive coalitions to prevent child maltreatment and to elevating the voices and solutions of those most directly impacted by the child welfare system.

Each collaboration is uniquely situated within its local context and shaped by the decisions that project leadership and their partners make. By **building on community strengths, transparently identifying and addressing present and historical community context, and co-creating maltreatment prevention strategies**, communities have the opportunity to transform systems that serve families and improve the well-being of children, youth, and families.

Suggested Citation

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