



**Partnership to Improve the Lives of Children across the Spectrum of Child Welfare Services: A Land Grant University's Opportunity**

<b>Journal:</b>	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
<b>Article Title:</b>	<i>Partnership to Improve the Lives of Children across the Spectrum of Child Welfare Services: A Land Grant University's Opportunity</i>
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<b>Volume and Issue Number:</b>	<i>Vol. 10 No. 1</i>
<b>Manuscript ID:</b>	<i>101002</i>
<b>Page Number:</b>	<i>2</i>
<b>Year:</b>	<i>2007</i>

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org) contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org)

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# Partnership to Improve the Lives of Children across the Spectrum of Child Welfare Services: A Land Grant University's Opportunity

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and Pamela Weeks, JD*

## **Introduction**

Partnerships between child welfare agencies and public universities for the purpose of child protection workforce development have expanded greatly over the past fifteen years. By 1996, 68 programs in 29 states were accessing Title IV-E funds for BSW and MSW education (Zlotnik & Cornelius, 2000). Agencies have typically used these funds to make links with universities with the goal of producing more and better applicants for child welfare positions (Alwon & Reitz, 2000). The use of this funding source has served to create new bonds between social work education and child welfare (Zlotnik, 2003).

## **The Role of the Land Grant University**

Thelin describes the university as a product of the 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, in that as a result of growing commerce there was a need for the development of systems of law, theology, medicine, and administration (1982). Higher education's historical roots were set to serve society in a very real sense. Later, colonial and denominational colleges were strongly oriented toward service and may have been intended to garner public support for the educational mission of preparing professionals, originally cleric, but later expanding to many others (ASHE-ERIC, 2002b, Crosson, 1983). The modern land grant university has become defined by a triadic mission entailing teaching, research, and extension (Roberts, 2003). The term "extension" has been largely supplanted by the term "service," reflecting a broader conception of the dissemination of practical information to the people.

The importance of the service mission was codified with the Morrill Land Grant Act of

1862, which required at least one institution in each state to extend higher education to the populous (Vandenberg-Daves, 2003; Danforth; 1957; Kerr, 1963). Although the Act concentrated on the efforts of the land grant institutions, the operationalization of service spread to other institutions as well (ASHE-ERIC, 2002a). The Hatch Act of 1887, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the development of cooperative extension services, and the so-called "Wisconsin Idea," which also included faculty provision of technical assistance to government through sharing of their expertise, followed this up. In urban settings, too, engaged service played an important role, as exemplified by the work of faculty members such as Jane Addams at Hull House and John Dewey at the University of Chicago (ASHE-ERIC, 2002b).

Roberts (2003) argues that land grant universities have performed unevenly in meeting these three missions. They have excelled in research, but oftentimes have tended to produce research aimed toward impressing colleagues, rather than that which would address practical problems. The teaching mission has been devalued, and may now be primarily accomplished by community colleges and regional universities. Roberts states that extension service has had unparalleled success in achieving its original purpose, but that this mission is at greatest peril in the context of agriculture due to the decreasing population directly involved with agriculture.

Although often associated with the disciplines of agriculture and teaching, the service mission of the land grant university is particularly relevant to schools of social work. Social work educators and researchers are in a unique position to provide training and

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evidence-based information to those professionals charged with the welfare of at-risk children. These efforts can have direct and substantial influence on the health and well-being of the citizenry, and thereby actualize the land-grant charge within the realm of child welfare.

### **Partnering with Agencies across the Spectrum of Child Welfare**

Children at risk for harm typically come to the attention of child welfare agencies due to a report of suspected abuse or neglect. The child welfare system may access children at any point in their childhoods. Intervention into the life circumstances of a child may be as minimal as one initial family assessment, or range on up to removal of the child through the courts, provision of foster care placement, and long-range permanency planning, such as adoption and independent living services. State intervention can have a profound impact on the ability of these children to become healthy and productive adult members of their communities.

This spectrum of contact with some of the state's most vulnerable citizens at relatively early points in their lives provides an ideal opportunity for the land grant university to perform its function to improve the welfare of the state. Clearly, the preparation of individuals to competently intervene in families relates to the teaching mission. The effectiveness and efficiency of techniques used in this intervention, the array of services provided, and the structural functioning of the child welfare agency and its partners fall soundly within the research and service missions of a land grant university.

University-child welfare partnerships provide a unique avenue for the realization of the principles embodied in the land grant mission. Through training of child welfare workers and foster parents, schools of social work can target

educational efforts in a highly pragmatic way, by dissemination of specific knowledge that will serve to protect some of the state's most vulnerable citizens. Through a planned array of service programs, university-child welfare collaborations can build community capacity to support children and youth. Finally, the land grant university can employ its research expertise to infuse evidence into collaborative programs and to conduct ongoing program evaluation and quality improvement. Through the successful integration of teaching, research, and service, the interests of the university and its faculty are realized and the community at large reaps the benefits.

### **Teaching**

The accessibility of Title IV-E funds for the purpose of providing education for foster parents and targeted training for child welfare workers, provided by the Child Welfare and Adoption Assistance Act of 1980, allowed universities to re-conceptualize the educational mission as it relates to the profession of social work. Beyond providing a broad-based education for social workers, the colleges of social work could develop highly-specialized curricula aimed at improving the lives of abused or neglected children. The two examples for accomplishing this mission are programs that provide customized undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education to child protective services workers. These initiatives target workforce development within the child welfare system.

### **Public Child Welfare Certification Programs**

Producing competent social workers is a traditional role of the land grant university. Public Child Welfare Certification Programs (PCWCP), or similar programs under various titles, are collaborations specifically targeting workforce development within child protective

services. PCWCPs are pre-service education and training programs for undergraduate junior and senior social work students designed to support the recruitment and retention of child welfare workers and to prepare BSW students for public child welfare work. These certification programs are partnerships between state child welfare agencies and public and private universities that offer social work programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education.

Program evaluations conducted and documented by the University of Louisville indicate a consistent pattern that, within Kentucky, PCWCP graduates tend to: intervene more aggressively in cases and provided more services; use practices more consistent with the rating of risk; place more children with relatives, fewer children in private child care facilities, more in adoptive homes and fewer in emergency shelters; visit children in out-of-home care more regularly; be rated by foster parents as providing more satisfactory visits to the children in out-of-home care; complete past due referrals in a significantly shorter period of time; and establish a permanency goal more often than the non-PCWCP group (Huebner, 2003). The goal of PCWCP is to increase the number of professional bachelor's level social work graduates in the child welfare system by providing financial and academic support to qualified social work students.

### **Professional Education for Child Welfare Staff**

Child welfare agencies and universities have also initiated collaborative relationships for the purpose of advancing the knowledge and skills of current employees. Typically, colleges of social work dedicate faculty and staff to work with regional child welfare offices in developing and implementing specialized curricula to enhance educational experiences and

professional development for practice with children and families.

Oftentimes, within these arrangements, students can earn graduate credit for their continuing education efforts, transferable toward the Master of Social Work degree. Faculty members assist the state child welfare agency by increasing the number of graduate trained staff through recruiting, advising, and mentoring those interested in pursuing a Master of Social Work degree. The goal of these programs is to facilitate child safety, permanency, and well-being. Additionally, by encouraging workers to pursue the MSW degree, more masters-level supervision is available for child welfare agencies, thereby addressing an important COA standard.

### **Service**

The university-child welfare relationship provides a conduit to ply the land grant service mission. In 1997 the Kentucky General Assembly passed the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act, which established postsecondary goals to be achieved by the year 2020. Goal VI of the bill calls upon the universities to elevate the quality of life for Kentuckians, and prescribes a renewed commitment to outreach "... We must recognize outreach as a means of education that transcends traditional classroom experiences" (Kentucky House Bill 1, 1997). Colleges and schools of social work frequently offer service programs aimed at improving the welfare of children. However, rarely have these efforts been conceptualized as primary mechanisms to deliver the third leg of the land-grant university's triadic mission. These partnerships provide support across various points in the spectrum of state intervention into the lives of abused or at-risk children and youth, and focus to varying degrees on safety, permanency, and child well-being. These programs provide

linkages with numerous community entities that are concerned with child welfare.

#### **First Contact with Vulnerable Youth**

Oftentimes, vulnerable children first come to the attention of state through a report of suspected abuse or neglect. Early interactions between the family and child welfare workers typically involve assessment of the validity of the report, safety assessment, and specification of the family's service needs. Facilitated Family Team Meetings are increasingly being used as a way to assist families in meeting treatment goals and identifying issues related to safety and well-being of families. The meetings are scheduled for families involved with the child protective service agency and other parties to discuss and develop a case plan and assess progress made through service delivery. University staff may facilitate these processes as an objective third party.

#### **Creating Safe and Stable Environments for Children**

When safety concerns dictate that children be removed from their homes, the state assumes great responsibility for providing safe and stable placements. Recent acknowledgement of the importance of permanency and child well-being (P.L. 105-989, 1997) has prompted states to focus on the quality of these environments. Universities can play a key role in training and supporting foster and adoptive parents in order to give them the best chance for success.

#### **Resource Parent Training and Mentoring Programs**

Resource parent training programs, and similar programs, provide training and support to foster and adoptive families in an effort to promote the safety and well being of children. These programs work closely with the public agency and community partners, as well as

foster and adoptive families, in identifying their training and educational needs. Educational and training services may include: curricula development for out-of-home care staff and providers; tuition assistance for foster parents; newsletters for foster and adoptive parents; facilitation of child welfare workgroups involving parents; networking of child welfare resources; speakers bureaus; conference planning and coordination; medically fragile training; and education advocacy training.

Resource Parent Mentoring Programs are designed to reinforce the knowledge and skills developed by new resource parents in training once they have children placed in their homes. New resource parents are matched with an experienced resource parent who mentors them for several months. These mentors may be under contract with the university to provide ongoing information, referral, and support to the family, in concert with the services provided directly by the child welfare agency itself.

#### **Adoption Support Programs**

State child welfare agencies must develop and retain foster and adoptive homes for child placement. In order to reach compliance with permanency provision of AFSA, The Child Welfare League of America implores state agencies to ask themselves, "Does the agency have a range of services available either directly or through referral to community resources to support adoptive families following adoption?" Adoption support programs aim to optimize chances for successful adoption and to reduce adoption disruptions. These support groups can offer emotional support for adoptive parents, mentoring with an experienced adoptive family, information on policies and procedures, educational/training programs, advocacy assistance, lending libraries' statewide referrals to resources, and information on medical or behavioral issues.

### **Facilitating Transition to Independence**

It is a reality in child welfare that, despite best efforts to find adoptive placements, many children will spend a significant portion of their childhoods in foster care, and will transition from these placements to independent life. In 2002, over 61,000 youth aged out of foster care nationwide (AFCARS, 2004). For these youth, achieving independence may prove especially daunting. Negative life outcomes in areas such as education level, employment, wage levels, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system continue for former foster care youth at levels considerably higher than the general population (Anderson, 2003). Child welfare-university collaborations can support youth in foster settings in making this transition.

### **Mentoring and Advocacy Programs**

Connecting youth who are likely to age out of foster care to adult mentors, especially adults who themselves were foster youth, serves to diminish the sense of isolation and may increase positive coping behaviors. Programs may use peer-to peer and/or adult mentoring models to enhance the quality of life for older youth in foster care. University sponsored services may include connection to mentors, leadership development training, provision of linkages to educational and community resources, financial support, and career planning. Hosting of an annual statewide conference can serve to create a sense of community among this group of youth and young adults.

Advocacy collaborations can help to improve policies that govern the care of foster youth. These programs seek to get feedback from youth on their experiences in foster care. Youth give suggestions on how to improve situations for themselves and other foster youth. University staff relays this information to

lawmakers, and thereby these programs serve a liaison function between foster youth and lawmakers. The goals of foster mentoring and advocacy partnerships are to prepare foster youth for success in adulthood by developing independent living skills and interdependent support networks, and to advocate for policies that support foster youth.

### **Creating Healthy Communities**

The initiatives described above focus service provision on children and youth who have been harmed or placed at imminent risk. The state has a particularly solemn responsibility to these vulnerable citizens. However, community response is inherently limited if it occurs only after the abuse or neglect of a child. Reducing risk to children through primary prevention strategies may provide a more efficient mechanism for protecting children. Prevention promotes the actions, thoughts, and interactions that lead to familial well-being and the healthy, optimal development of children (Britton, 2001).

Through partnerships with child welfare agencies, the land grant university can improve social conditions for families who may not have come to the attention of state agencies due to a child maltreatment allegation, but who are at high risk for future dysfunction. Programs that support parents who are losing temporary income assistance benefits, such as TANF, are one such example. These programs can offer "safety net" services, such as additional temporary aid for paying a fixed amount of bills, and support services to help former TANF recipients to take advantage of university education or job training. The goal of such programs is to provide opportunities for these parents to develop their intellectual, social, and work-related skills to prepare them for self-sufficiency.

Other vehicles to facilitate the land-grant university's participation in improving the health and well-being of the community's children and youth are models, such as health education collaboratives. These programs serve as catalysts for change by bridging people, resources, ideas, and actions, using the unique model of the land grant system of outreach and education, combined with university-based research and formal collaborations with long-term, university-community partnerships. This involves partnership with multiple colleges within the university to bring a multidisciplinary approach to addressing community health issues. These partnerships can create innovative strategies for improving health outcomes and reducing the burden of chronic disease at local, regional, and state levels. Social work's contribution to this multidisciplinary project may be focused upon social-emotional well-being, family violence (child maltreatment and domestic violence), and substance abuse. The goal of these health education collaboratives is to educate and empower individuals and families to adopt healthy behaviors and lifestyles, build community capacity to improve health, and educate consumers to make informed health choices.

### **Research**

Recent federal legislation and new federal monitoring procedures have mandated that child welfare systems measure outcomes and increase their accountability to the general public that supports them and the children and families they serve (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). The expansion of university-child welfare collaboration has created an opportunity to deploy an array of educational and service programs aimed at improving the welfare of children and youth. These programs, in turn, provide venues to facilitate the third land-grant mission-- research. The university's expertise in

knowledge development and program evaluation can be harnessed to inform best practices across a broad range of child welfare initiatives. Addressing criticisms of "Ivory Tower" detachment, the university can direct research to address real-world problems and questions that are of keen interest to the community.

The evaluation of programs administered through university/public agency partnerships is critical to furthering primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention of child maltreatment and promoting the well-being of children and their families, whether biological, foster, or adoptive. Despite calls for accountability and the achievement of positive outcomes in these systems, research informing these efforts has been minimal, and is only recently emerging (Waldfogel, 2000; McGowen & Walsh, 2000). Conducting research associated with programs of the array described meets the needs of faculty for producing scholarly work and developing knowledge while providing a tremendous service to the agency in identifying evidence to support their decision-making regarding service provision and resource allocation. When universities provide leadership and share their research expertise through joint program evaluation efforts, capacity for independent evaluation and research activities is built and fortified within the community agency.

### **Conclusion**

"If our American way of life fails the child, it fails us all." This statement, by author and activist Pearl S. Buck, reminds us that the safety and wellbeing of America's children are crucial to the wellbeing of the entire country." (American Humane Society, n.d.). Child welfare professionals perform a crucial role in shaping the future of our society. These workers face daunting challenges in responding to highly

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complex situations, with each decision potentially actualizing grave consequences for the state's most vulnerable citizens.

Land grant universities are charged with improving the welfare of the citizens of their respective states. Nevins (1962) describes the founding philosophy that led to the creation of land grant universities, "The original imperative undergirding the land-grant movement rested in a moral conception consistent with Thomas Jefferson's yeoman republicanism, an ideology that fused education, liberty, and civil society into a politico-ethical holism." Bringing the unique strengths and capacities of schools of social work to child welfare services across a spectrum of intervention opportunities provides an avenue for the land grant university to implement its triadic mission and to positively affect the health and welfare of children and families within the state.

The use of Title IV-E funds to provide university-based training for current and future child welfare professionals began in 1990 and led to an expansion of partnerships between state child welfare agencies and public universities. This collaboration provided a mechanism to link social work educators with state child welfare agencies for the common purpose of producing a competent and stable child welfare workforce. However, an opportunity for a broader partnership has been facilitated by this initial collaboration.

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