



**Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base- A Federal Perspective**

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# Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

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## Background

Each year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau spends approximately \$110 million on discretionary activities to fund a variety of research and demonstration grants, training and technical assistance cooperative agreements, and multi-year research contracts with the purpose of building the knowledge base for child abuse and neglect and child welfare services. As part of this effort, the Children's Bureau manages more than 200 grants, cooperative agreements, contracts, and interagency agreements, with most individual awards ranging from \$100,000 to several million dollars per year. Each project is testing a specific research question or service model, covering a wide range of topics related to child maltreatment, child protective services, child welfare, adoption, and child abuse and neglect prevention, treatment, and intervention (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003).

Because of the sheer magnitude and scope of this work, the Children's Bureau has been interested in testing a new approach to managing some of these discretionary grant activities. In addition, the Children's Bureau is also interested in enhancing our ability to provide more intensive training and technical assistance to the various projects being funded. Other federal agencies have embarked on major efforts at regionalizing their grant making activities. For example, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently funded six social work infrastructure development research programs (centers), each based at a single graduate school of social work. More recently, the Administration for Children and Families funded 21 Intermediary Organizations out of the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, Compassion Capital Fund, as part of the President's Faith and Community-Based Initiative, which will provide training and technical assistance to local faith and community agencies seeking federal funds. In addition, these intermediary organizations will fund local projects testing models of best practice in working with these organizations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

## The Children's Bureau Quality Improvement Centers

In fiscal year 2001, under the Adoption Opportunities Program and the Child Abuse and Prevention and Treatment Program, the Children's Bureau awarded cooperative agreements<sup>1</sup> to five organizations to implement regional Quality Improvement Centers (QICs) in the areas of adoption and child protective services (CPS). Four of the QICs (one focusing on adoption and three focusing on CPS) are moving forward.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the QICs is to promote knowledge development with the overarching goal of improving child welfare services. The QICs represent an experiment by the Children's Bureau to examine the feasibility and benefits of increasing regional involvement in designing and managing research and demonstration efforts. In addition, each QIC is required to disseminate the findings of their activities research throughout their region and nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

## The QIC Model

The QICs are charged with planning and implementing research or demonstration grants on topics the QICs selected with input from an individual, a regional advisory group, and with federal approval. The QICs established their regional advisory group, collected data and identified a general area of interest, and undertook a

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## Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

needs assessment activity to collected data and identified a specific research topic during the first year. They are funding, monitoring and evaluating research or demonstration projects during years 2 through 4 and disseminating findings during year 5. Required tasks for the cooperative agreement include:

- Phase I**
- Forming a regional advisory group;
  - Conducting a literature review;
  - Conducting a needs assessment;
  - Selecting a focus topic in conjunction with advisory group members and others;
  - Submitting a plan for Phase II (June 2002) and making an oral presentation to federal staff for approval;
  - Announcing the competition for research or demonstration sub-grants in the region; and
  - Providing technical assistance to prospective local grantees.

- Phase II**
- Awarding and monitoring the 42-month research or demonstration project sub-grants in the region;
  - Providing technical assistance to local grantees;

- Conducting an evaluation of the research and demonstration projects; and
- Disseminating findings to practitioners and policymakers (including presentations each year at federal grantee meetings and other conferences and articles in relevant journals).

In the planning year, the QICs defined their regions and created regional advisory groups and local networks that assisted them in selecting research or service demonstration topics and designing a demonstration initiative. QIC regional advisory group members included academics/researchers, state/local government representatives, and service providers from each QIC's region. The size of the regions varied by QIC and was not prescribed by the Children's Bureau. One QIC planned to serve only the State of Virginia, while another QIC selected a ten-state region. The other two QICs included three and four states. In total, all four QICs are serving 18 States across the country.

Ten months after the initial award, each QIC was required to submit their Phase II Implementation Plan to the Children's Bureau for review and approval as a condition for continued funding. As part of this approval process, all of the QICs were required to prepare a formal presentation to federal staff regarding their needs assessment, selection of research topic, plans for issuing the request for application for sub-grant funding, and proposed cross-site evaluation plans. Based on significant federal feedback on their written plans and oral presentations, the QICs revised their implementation plans, and four of them received approval to move forward with their proposed projects.<sup>3</sup>

### The QIC Research Topics

Each QIC was given considerable latitude in how they conducted their needs assessment and selected their research topic. All four QICs approved for continuation funding invested significant staff and regional advisory group time and resources to insure that their needs assessment was comprehensive and representative of the public, private, and community constituents within their regions. All of the QICs conducted extensive literature reviews, in-depth interviews, and focus groups with numerous key stakeholders from their regions. In

<sup>1</sup> A Cooperative Agreement is Federal Assistance in which substantial Federal involvement is anticipated. Under a Cooperative Agreement, the respective responsibilities of Federal staff and awardees are negotiated prior to the award. The awardee is required to submit to the Children's Bureau for review and approval prior to finalization and dissemination: work plans, topics to be covered in technical assistance, plans for or actual resource lists, syntheses, summaries or literature reviews to be disseminated within the network, and draft reports, training agendas, newsletters, and other materials as appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete listing of the Quality Improvement Centers that were funded, visit <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/funding/fy2001ga.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> In the original competition for QIC funding, the Children's Bureau awarded five cooperative agreements. One grantee was discontinued at the stage of moving from planning to implementation. Contrary to past experience, and perhaps to public expectations, the Children's Bureau exercised considerable forethought in crafting explicit grant announcement and award language to support their authority to exercise an option to discontinue funding based on progress at that stage.

## Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

---

addition to gathering information about the critical child welfare issues within their regions, each QIC also used the needs assessment process as an opportunity to share information about the project in general and to cultivate the interest of prospective organizations who may have wanted to apply for the sub-grants to be administered by the QICs. Throughout the first year, and especially during the review and approval process for the QICs' implementation plans, federal staff strongly recommended that each QIC be very specific with their research questions and be more prescriptive in the language used for their draft funding announcements to insure that prospective applicants be very clear about the expectations of the sub-grants as research and demonstration projects.

Responsive to their regional advisory group, and affirming the cogency of the process, after several months of collecting and synthesizing the input for the needs assessment, all four QICs selected research topics with the assistance of their regional advisory group that address critical issues facing child protective services and adoption. Each of the QICs is addressing a critical practice issue in CPS or adoption that, in fact, has been highlighted in findings from the final reports of several of the states who have undergone the federal child and family services review as required by the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). The research topics by QIC are as follows:

- *Southern Regional QIC at the University of Kentucky:*  
*"Enhancing worker skill in assessment and the application of that assessment data to case planning and targeted interventions through specific improvements in supervision."*
- *Frontline Connections QIC at the University of Washington:*  
*"Implementing and evaluating promising culturally appropriate interventions that increase the capacity of the system to engage parents, kin, and communities of Native American or African American families involved with CPS due to child neglect."*
- *Rocky Mountain QIC at the American Humane Association:*  
*"Assisting and evaluating efforts to strengthen fam-*

*ilies who struggle with both child maltreatment and substance abuse."*

- *QIC on Adoption at United Methodist Family Services of Virginia:*  
*"Evaluating the impact on the adoption of children from foster carechildren of a 'success' model of adoption practice implemented by public-private collaborative staff with specialized adoption expertise partnerships, adoption staff specialization, and specific delineated high standards of practice in assessment, and pre- and post-placement services."*

### The Management and Oversight Role of the QICs

In year two, the QICs were responsible for awarding their sub-grants and monitoring their implementation. The QICs were charged with awarding and managing local grant projects that would allow the QICs to evaluate multiple approaches and/or multi-site implementations of single interventions on the selected focus topic to ensure that the number of subjects was large enough for a rigorous, methodologically sound implementation and evaluation plan. The evaluations will determine the effectiveness of the evidence-based models and its components or strategies, and evidence-based findings will guide dissemination and replication or testing in other settings.

The QICs are charged with ensuring that evaluation findings are disseminated in a manner that promotes change in child welfare practices for their regions. Through their new role as funder and manager of their own sub-grants, the QICs are responsible for ensuring that each funded site develop its own evaluation plan and also facilitate and implement a larger cross-site evaluation across all their funded projects, and participate in and support the national evaluation.

In addition, the QICs will insure that evaluation findings are disseminated in a manner that promotes change in child welfare practices for their regions.

### The QIC External Evaluation

At the federal level, the Children's Bureau has funded a contract with James Bell Associates to conduct a feasibility study and overall external evaluation for the QIC approach, being tested by all four QICs.

## Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

The purpose of this evaluation is to examine the ways in which each of the QICs implements its mandate, the lessons it learns, and the successes it achieves in support of the overall Children's Bureau mission and goals for this project as well as their individual, site-specific goals and objectives. The evaluation will focus on the extent to which the QICs: (1) identify and are responsive to local issues concerning effective child welfare practice; (2) successfully award and manage sub-grants; (2) document and disseminate useful information to practitioners and policy makers; (3) develop a methodologically sound evaluation design and provide evaluation assistance to grantees; (4) successfully award and manage subgrants; (4) document and disseminate useful evidence-based information to practitioners and policy makers; and (5) create viable, sustainable, networks. Also, the evaluation will examine the efficacy of decentralizing the grants management process on the Children's Bureau and the grantees.

James Bell Associates' staff have conducted multiple site visits and interviews with QIC staff and members of their regional advisory groups. They plan to interview the funded sub-grant programs throughout the five years of the cooperative agreement. In addition, James Bell Associates' staff plan and participate in the monthly calls and yearly grantees meetings with the QICs and the Children's Bureau. A listserv has been established to provide another forum for information sharing among the QICs, which is also monitored by the James Bell Associates' staff. The evaluation will also, to the extent possible, explore the potential of a Children's Bureau management goal of creating a stronger infrastructure for peer-to-peer professional problem-solving and practice improvement.

### Lessons learned from the First Two Years of implementation

At the federal level, staff have worked hard to create a strong semi-autonomous network among the QICs and provide strong guidance on the project from their initial grant award to the present time. Three months after the initial award was made, all of the QICs attended a meeting in Washington, DC to review the expectations of the grant, learn more about the

Children's Bureau vision, and become familiar with the plans for the external evaluation by James Bell Associates. As stated earlier, monthly conference calls have been held since October 2001. Two division directors from the Children's Bureau—who developed the initial funding announcement—provided significant oversight and remained actively involved with the assigned project officer in the meetings and calls for the first year of this new project. The QICs were brought together again in June 2002 to present their implementation plans and most recently in April 2003 for their yearly grantees meeting. We have learned a great deal over the past 20 months of this project, which tells us that—for this particular approach—the process is, in many ways, as valuable as the outcome. Some of the highlights from our experience thus far:

- **Establishing and maintaining the QIC regional advisory group and their networks may have lasting impact for the region.**

Each QIC established their regional advisory group to insure representation of key decision makers from the public and private agencies in their regions. Although not all regional advisory group members have been actively engaged at all times, the QICs report that strong networks have been built among the members, which have facilitated greater coordination and collaboration across states lines regarding common practice issues. One QIC reports that, as a result of their shared experience from this project, members of their advisory group are considering ways to jointly apply for foundation and federal funding to support their projects beyond the scope of their QIC research topic. This particular QIC has also assigned specific tasks and provided stipends to the members of its regional advisory group to function as mentors for their funded sites. The QIC on Adoption is planning a symposium on best practices research for their region and has have invited its regional advisory group to be the key conveners of the meeting.

One of the challenges with which several of the QICs are grappling is the loss of knowledge and buy-in from regional advisory group members and key child welfare managers that leave a sub-grant agency or are reassigned when changes in the administration at the state level occur. Although it will be an ongoing chal-

## Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

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lenge to maintain the active involvement and engagement of public agency managers with changing priorities, this public agency support will be critical for ensuring the credibility and long-term sustainability of the QIC projects in their regions. Some of the QICs have raised concerns about the loss of some of the support in their region from states who do not have a funded sub-grant. Interestingly however, the regional advisory group members from another QIC have overwhelmingly expressed their continued support for the QIC even though their own state may not have been awarded funds in the sub-grant competition.

- **The needs assessment process had the added benefit of being a good mechanism for gaining broad based support for the QIC projects in their respective regions.**

Each QIC has reported that the actual information gathering process in its regions used to select and define its research topics was instrumental to gaining greater support and interest in this project. Many of the agencies involved in the needs assessment were the same agencies who also applied for funding from the QICs. In addition, the process of soliciting and gathering input on the topic gave participants a greater sense of buy-in for the concept and a sense of truly local responsiveness. The information gathered has been used for multiple purposes in the region. One of the QICs developed a database of all the participants in their needs assessment and uses this list as a dissemination tool to provide updates to the larger group regarding the QIC project activities. For many Native American communities, who have been distrustful of the child protective services system, the opportunity to provide input from their unique perspective on the needs of their community was welcomed and greatly appreciated. Most participants expressed the desire to stay informed as the QICs implemented their projects.

- **Funded projects need much more technical assistance than previously anticipated, and start-up takes longer than anticipated.**

At this time, all of the QICs have been working with their funded projects for approximately six to eight months. Across all four QICs, each one has reported a need to provide intensive training and technical assis-

tance to one or more of their newly funded projects. Although a majority of the technical assistance has focused on the working with the sites to enhance and develop their individual evaluation plans, a few QICs have had to work closely with projects to insure that the funded research or demonstration sub-grant program that was proposed is actually operating and that the activities outlined in their proposals match the reality of their current work. Two of the QICs, which mandated some type of collaboration between the public agency and another entity, such as a university or non-profit agency, have needed to provide in-depth technical assistance with the various agency partners on around collaboration and what it really means to be "working together."

Other challenges in collaboration were associated with delays in obtaining Institutional Review Board approval for the evaluation plan from the university partners. Two other QICs—which are funding smaller, non-profit organizations and tribal organizations—are discovering that it is much more important to take the time to develop their the relationships and build trust before they can do anything else. These QICs also are learning that traditional modes of communications, such as email and voicemail, are not as effective at engaging the tribes in the project as using face-to-face meetings and spending the time to get to know the community and gain its trust. All of the QICs have learned the value of investing more to invest greater in the upfront, time intensive efforts to building the relationship with each of their grantees. Each of the QICs anticipate that this initial investment will yield more productive, long-term benefits with respect to the successful implementation and operation of the research projects and sustainability of good regional problem-solving relationships.

- **Leadership and vision are important to the success of the project.**

As other research on organizational successes and prior experience with Children's Bureau funded projects has shown, leadership and vision are key to the success of any project (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Each of the four QICs has hired strong leaders and project managers to implement the work. It is clear from the conference calls and meetings with these QIC managers that they are knowledgeable about

## Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective

and fully supportive of the Children's Bureau vision and mission of the Quality Improvement Centers as a strategy. The QICs have also benefited from strong organizational commitment from each of the QIC's parent organizations who view this cooperative agreement as an opportunity to further their own mission and support efforts to building the evidence base for child welfare services. Each of the QICs receives support from its parent organization through in-kind administrative support, grant and fiscal support, and use its existing agency mechanisms for communication and dissemination through websites, listserves, newsletters, etc.

### **A Process with Promising Early Effects**

Although it is too soon to determine whether the Children's Bureau experiment of implementing Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption will be successful, the first two years have shown significant promise for implementing a model of engaging a region to develop and test research and demonstration projects and to build the evidence-base for child protective services and adoption. There are still numerous factors to assess and many questions left unanswered. It will be important to assess whether the QIC-funded projects will have adequate sample sizes and the data to draw meaningful conclusions from their outcome evaluations to support positive outcomes for their selected interventions. It also will be important to determine whether the QICs themselves can plan, develop and implement a strong cross-site evaluation that can measure outcomes across different sites, despite the vastly different program models being tested. The same can be said of evaluating across the QIC sites—will the Children's Bureau have sufficient data for drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of this funding and management strategy? Another area we will continue to monitor—which could have significant effects—is the impact of the technical assistance the QICs provided to their grantees and whether this can, in fact, increase the capacity of public, private, non-profit, and tribal organizations to fully evaluate the effectiveness of their inter-

ventions, both this specific funded one and others they undertake. Is there a "trickle down," or in this case, a "trickle across," effect? Two of the QICs funding tribal organizations may make significant contributions for how one can engage tribal organizations in research and evaluation activities. One of the outcomes, which may be difficult to measure over the long-term, but is of interest to the Children's Bureau, is whether the QICs will be able to increase the capacity in their respective regions, particularly among the state child welfare agencies, to use findings from the research to guide program and policy decisions.

The outcome of the external evaluation being conducted by James Bell Associates will provide significant guidance to the Children's Bureau regarding the success and feasibility of the continuation of the QICs model beyond the original five-year demonstration project, and whether this funding model can be applied on a larger scale for use with other discretionary grant activities. At this stage, the progress of the QICs is encouraging. Nevertheless, it is important to note that each of the QICs has been successful at their initial charge: all have formed a regional advisory group, conducted comprehensive needs assessments in their region, selected a research topic, issued a request for proposals, selected and funded three to four sub-grants testing projects based on to their topics, and all are very involved with providing extensive training and technical assistance to their grantees. In many respects, the process of delivering the implementing the QICs have already produced positive results. If the QICs can, in fact, demonstrate positive findings on key interventions designed to address the critical research topics they have each identified, they will contribute to expanding the knowledge base and building the evidence in the field. At the same time, the Children's Bureau will benefit from the experience of developing and testing a more innovative approach for the administration and management of federal discretionary grant activities.

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**Quality Improvement Centers on Child Protective Services and Adoption: Testing a Regionalized Approach to Building the Evidence Base — A Federal Perspective**

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