



## ACTION BRIEF

### CREATING & SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE & OUTCOME-ORIENTED CHILD WELFARE UNIVERSITY-AGENCY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

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#### > OVERVIEW

There are long-standing alliances between social work education programs and child welfare agencies across the United States. The traditional focus is on the agencies serving as sources of field instruction for students. Such training collaborations can often result in research collaborations and vice versa. To be more deliberative about research collaborations, in this era of outcome-focused, evidence-based service delivery, the NASW Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) is developing this brief to provide guidance on research-based principles to guide effective partnerships.

This brief draws heavily from *Strengthening University/Agency Partnerships to Enhance Child Welfare Outcomes: A Toolkit for Building Research Partnerships* developed in 2008 by the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR). It was created in partnership with Casey Family Programs and an

advisory group of agency, government, think tank, foundation and university stakeholders ([www.socialworkpolicy.org/publications/iaswr-publications/university-agency-child-welfare-research-partnerships-toolkit-available.html](http://www.socialworkpolicy.org/publications/iaswr-publications/university-agency-child-welfare-research-partnerships-toolkit-available.html)). Developed by Joan Levy Zlotnik, now the director of SWPI, the *IASWR Toolkit*:

- > Identifies existing strategies that result in effective partnerships and attributes to guide successful endeavors.
- > Highlights practical strategies to strengthen child welfare research partnerships between universities and child welfare agencies.
- > Provides guidance to address sticky issues that often bog down such partnerships and identifies common technical assistance needs.
- > Identifies examples of research centers.
- > Identifies sources of funding and gaps in funding.
- > Recommends national, state and university action steps that can be taken to build and sustain child welfare research partnerships.

#### What Forces Drive the Creation of University/Agency Research Partnerships?

- > Implementation of evidence-based practices (EBP)
- > Findings of Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR)
- > Analysis of the increased amount of available data from multiple sources
- > Evaluation and testing of “what works for whom and under what conditions”
- > Assessment of current research
- > Piloting new interventions

#### What are the Leverage Points between Universities and Agencies to Implement EBPs?

- According to Proctor (2007) there are a number of transactions that can occur between universities and agencies in implementing EBPs, requiring both partners to offer up their resources and expertise in identifying, adapting, implementing and evaluating evidence-based practices in real world settings.
- > Identifying and accessing EBPs –

asking the question and finding the evidence

- » Access to research (library, web, journals)
- » Understanding and interpreting the research
- > Accepting, assessing, adopting and adapting EBPs
  - » Assessing the evidence for
    - Cultural, client and community relevance
    - Cost, caseload, time – is it feasible?
- > Implementing EBPs in practice
  - » Feasibility
  - » Organizational issues
  - » Fidelity
- > Evaluating effectiveness of EBPs
  - » Components
  - » Transparency

### What Agencies Receive from Research Partnerships with Universities?

Research partnerships can:

- > Provide information that can inform the BSW, MSW, and PhD curricula and help to keep the curricula current.

- > Support the creation of field placements in child welfare to test and implement new and innovative practices.
- > Inform professional development and training efforts offered through universities or through the agencies (Collins, Amodeo & Clay, 2008; McRoy, Flanzer, & Zlotnik, 2012).
- > Link agencies to university resources such as libraries, research infrastructure, and analytical, statistical and technological expertise that might not exist within the agency.
- > Report findings using a neutral and objective perspective that is frequently valued by policymakers.
- > Provide an available and flexible workforce where students and staff can assist agencies with short-term projects and initiatives, without agencies needing to hire new staff.
- > Provide agencies with more flexibility than might be feasible if the research efforts were established within the agency itself.

### What are Key Partnership Success Factors?

Drawing from the work of Lawson and his colleagues (2006), the following key factors have been identified for overall successful university/agency partnerships.

- > Unity of purpose
- > Development of interdependent relationships

- > Negotiation of specialized roles and responsibilities
- > Shared power and authority
- > Conflict resolution mechanisms
- > Norms of reciprocity cemented by social trust
- > Strategies to break down barriers
- > Evaluations and continuous improvement

### What are the Elements for Effective Research Partnerships

- > Develop and sustain ongoing working relationships.
- > Learn from and understand each other's cultures and contexts.
- > Plan for leadership transitions by garnering support and involvement of leaders while establishing peer-to-peer relationships.
- > Establish clear parameters for project time frames.
- > Understand the processes for and develop clear parameters for data access, sharing, multiple IRB reviews, and confidentiality.
- > Develop procedures and timelines for the intellectual property that results from the study - review of findings, publications, how authors will be listed, and who will participate on presentations from the research.
- > Understand the academic pressures of tenure, promotion, service and the need to publish.
- > Understand the agency constraints related to public and funder accountability.

- > Work with agencies on how to use available data.
- > Create a continuous training, research, practice loop.

### What are Challenges to Sustaining Partnerships?

- > Surviving staff turnover – when the key partners leave — new relationships need to be established. It is helpful to not have the partnership dependent on just one relationship.
- > Dependence on external funding sources
  - » When the funding is over, the partnership might end, thus it is useful to be able to access multiple funding streams and have some deliverables that are not dependent on time-limited funding resources.
  - » There is no specific pool of funds from the federal government that specifically and consistently supports child welfare research.

- » A 2008 survey of child welfare researchers found that the researchers used an array of funding sources (IASWR, 2008).
- > Beyond relationships and funding, universities and agencies might also struggle to maintain partnerships due to:
  - » Differing organizational values and philosophies.
  - » Differing reward systems.
  - » Differing priorities.
  - » Lack of institutional commitment for the long term.
  - » Agencies’ need to work in shorter time frames than universities.
  - » Complexity of child welfare practice.
  - » Lack of emphasis on professional social work credentials in child welfare agencies (which limits incentive for social work graduates to seek employment there).
  - » Agency bidding and contracting processes that are inconsistent with long-range partnerships.

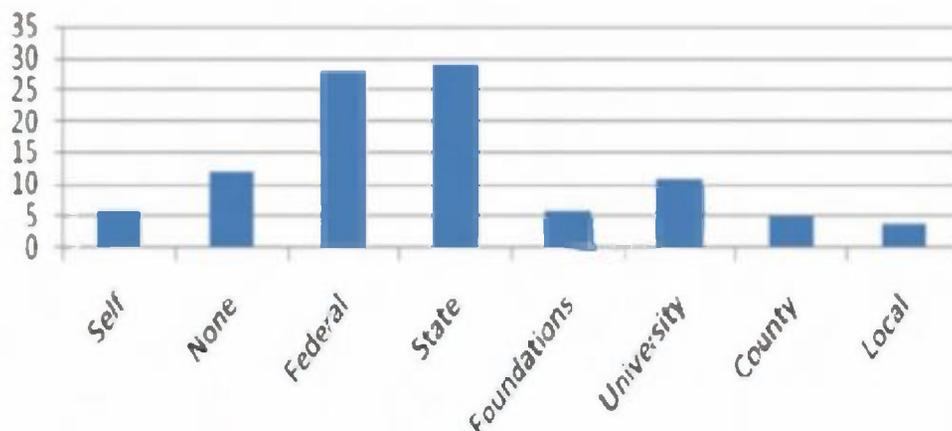
- » Funding streams that are not stable enough for long-range planning.
- » Cost (in time and resources) of maintaining working relationships (Zlotnik, 2010).

### > REFERENCES

Collins, M., Amodeo, M.A. & Clay, C. (2008). *National Evaluation of Child Welfare Training Grants: Final Report*. Retrieved from <http://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/gateway/Record?rpp=10&upp=0&m=1&w+=NATIVE%28%27recno%3D64247%27%29&r=1>.

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Chart1. Funding Source



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- > To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
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- > To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

Social Work Policy Institute > NASW Foundation  
Director: Joan Levy Zlotnik, PhD, ACSW  
750 First Street NE, Suite 700 > Washington, DC 20002-4241  
SocialWorkPolicy.org > swpi@naswdc.org > 202.336.8393