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Report of the Funding Working Group

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REPORT OF THE FUNDING WORKING GROUP¹

CHARGE

What should the Conference recommend about the stream of funding to support justice for parents in the child welfare system?

INTRODUCTION

The Funding Working Group represented the various stakeholders involved in the public child welfare system, including: city and federal social services officials; the State Legislature; non-profit service providers; parent advocates and families of children in foster care; Family Court; and attorneys for parents. Approximately half of the group was familiar with the existing stream of funding for child welfare services. Several of the participants were directly involved in the budget processes for the city, state, and federal governments.

Since members of the group represented various segments of the public child welfare system, many came with preconceived ideas of where to invest funding to improve the system. To establish some consensus on the priorities to pursue, the facilitator led the group in a brainstorming session, listing possible ways to improve the current public child welfare system.

I. DEVELOPING A PROCESS

The facilitator of the working group led the participants in prioritizing recommendations through voting on the various ideas gathered during the discussion. The reporter used large sheets of paper to list the suggestions provided by the participants. Since the initial discussion was devoted to producing suggestions, many of the ideas and concepts were found to overlap. Each member was asked to identify her or his top three recommendations. During this selection process, some recommendations were subsumed by, or became subordinate to, others. The group clearly favored a few of the recommendations over others, and the reporter wrote the

1. This report was authored by Edith Holzer (reporter). Other working group members were Eric Brettschneider (facilitator), La Tonya Baskerville, Nicki Bazer (student secretary), Denis Berger, Irene Berthel, Patricia Brownell, John Courtney, Barbara DeMayo, Janet Fink, Linda Gibbs, Alison Harte, Sania Metzger, Martin Needelman, James Purcell, Andrew Scherer, Junius Scott, Lonnie Sherrod, and Nakea Walker.

recommendations in the order of preference as expressed by the group.

II. DISCUSSION

The facilitator framed the group discussion by asking the participants to focus on the issue of "families." The group quickly agreed that the best way to assist families is to provide support services before children are removed from their homes. In addressing the best strategies to reach families at risk, the group identified the community as the target for services. Some members in the group were quick to point out that the community should define its own needs, while others thought that there should be a common database and consensus to determine need. The working group also agreed that it is important to evaluate and research the effectiveness of preventive services in helping families at risk safely maintain their children. The group agreed that the economic stresses prevalent in certain communities, such as high unemployment and substandard housing, needed to be addressed to assist families at risk. Specific programs that presently exist to promote the economic stability of families and to provide or improve housing were identified as models.

Much of the discussion focused on problems in the current public child welfare system; thus, proposed solutions were sometimes framed in opposition to the existing problems. A significant number of participants in the working group agreed that too many families are unfairly caught in the public child welfare system's investigations. The group noted that more families are reported for neglect than for abuse. Even though in many instances neglect can result in great danger and even death, some families who risk losing their children because of their neglect might be helped in less coercive environments.

The working group agreed that African-American and Latino families are represented in larger numbers in the public child welfare system than their percentages among other demographic groups based on indicators such as poverty and low birth weight. The group agreed that racism was a contributing factor that accounted for both the higher proportion of African-American and Latino families in the public child welfare system and the corresponding injustices suffered by African-American and Latino parents during their involvement with the system.

The working group agreed that the task of achieving justice for parents, whose children have been removed, rests with the courts and social services providers, but it could not be accomplished so long as the inadequate numbers of 18-B attorneys and not-for-profit or contract agency caseworkers, relative to the number of cases, persisted. The group stated that the inadequate legal representation of parents and the high turnover of child welfare workers result in

prolonging the time children stay in foster care. Quality legal representation was identified as the goal, and community-based legal services that also provide or facilitate quality representation to families on issues collateral to child protection, such as housing and government benefits, were identified as the model.

The working group agreed that another factor limiting justice for parents was the public's negative perception of these parents. Since the media devotes so much attention to child abuse cases and the horrific deaths of children, many people presume that a parent whose children have been placed in foster care must be an abusive parent. In order to correct some of these misperceptions, many members of the working group agreed on the need for public education through the media.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The working group, by an overwhelming vote, endorsed the following changes:

1. Increase the amount and proportion of funding for preventive and support services and training designed to keep children out of foster care and reunite families. Under this heading, the group proposed additional funding for: (a) programs to promote the economic stability of parents; (b) a pilot program to create a "dual track" for families reported to the State's Child Protective System for investigation, so that appropriate families could be evaluated for services; (c) services to adolescents transitioning from foster care, including job training, college assistance, and ongoing support; and (d) living spaces for "families at risk" to centralize services and support.
2. Improve legal representation for parents in the following ways: (a) fund community-based full service legal representation for parents; (b) increase funding for 18-B attorneys, minimally to a suggested level of \$75/hour, and provide social workers; and (c) fund an evaluation and monitoring system for 18-B attorneys, which would include the views of the parents they represent.
3. Fund peer support groups for parents, which are structured and controlled by parents, with the economic power delegated to them.
4. Pay parent advocates and organizers based on the following measures: (a) fund recruitment of parents who have been involved in the child welfare system; (b) increase the number of advocates so that parents have greater access to advocates; and (c) provide funding for training, leadership, and supervision of these advocates/organizers.
5. Identify unspent public funding for family support services through reporting and monitoring of public funding, since money

dedicated to family support services is not always used by government.

6. Increase funding for caseworkers and child care workers by establishing salaries that support retention and develop career ladders.

7. Fund a media campaign, developed and designed with the assistance of parents, to promote understanding of parents in the child welfare system and dispel the myths surrounding these families, with a view towards promoting a positive and realistic image of parents and communities.

8. Fund innovative programs in the court system in the following manner: (a) provide enhanced funding for services similar to those found in the Family Treatment Court (a model court in New York); (b) provide enhanced funding for expansion of the Family Treatment Court; (c) replicate the model court, creating a liaison between the courts and the public child protection agency to expedite processing, front-load services to families, and offer a "sitting around the table" rather than confrontational approach; and (d) fund conflict resolution and mediation services based on an interdisciplinary approach.

The working group agreed that any recommendations produced by the Conference should be discussed with communities affected by the public child welfare system.²

2. One working group member dissented from the specifics of many of the recommendations.