

# Strategic Plan

## Letter from Our Leadership

*September, 2010*

To our Partners in Child Welfare:

On behalf of the board of directors and staff, we are pleased to present our plan for a new strategic direction for POC. This represents an evolutionary step in a new direction, building on the foundation laid during our first three years of operation, while focusing on the possibilities ahead. Our new strategic direction further refines our activities and reflects a broader approach to enhancing the work of Washington's public child welfare system and, ultimately, outcomes for children and families.

Over the last three years we have come to appreciate both the unique nature of our collaboration, and its potential for enhancing child welfare policy and practice in our state. POC will continue to conduct research using the highest scientific standards while placing greater emphasis on adapting good ideas and developing best practices. We will become a more visible participant in the national dialogue on creating sustainable change in our nation's child welfare systems.

Our interests are centered on research, training and policy analysis that are both actionable and directly related to improving outcomes for children who are either currently involved in the child welfare system, or at high risk of becoming involved. We recognize that to be effective, our work cannot be centered on a single state agency. Our future is focused on leveraging the unique perspectives and experiences of many partners. Together we can make a huge impact on child welfare in our state.

As we embark on this next stage, we will honor our previous commitments and work to expand and strengthen our relationships with key partners and diverse stakeholders. We will redouble our efforts to make our research findings accessible to the public and the broader child welfare community.

As the chair of the board and the new executive director, we welcome your thoughts about how we can continuously improve our work and to join more effectively with you to better serve Washington's most vulnerable children and families.

*Sincerely,*

*Connie Ballmer  
Board Chair*

*Benjamin de Haan, PhD  
Executive Director*

## Introduction

Founded in 2007, Partners for our Children (POC) is a unique collaboration between the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), the University of Washington School Of Social Work and the private sector, committed to working toward positive change. We focus on children who are involved in the child welfare system or at risk of being involved.

From our perspective, the child welfare system is a complex and dynamic network of organizations and stakeholders, each with a unique role in developing strategies for improving outcomes for children and families. Our approach includes working directly with the courts, children's advocates, public and private agencies, philanthropy, policy makers, the private sector, and members of the community.

While collaboration and communication are critical, POC must also remain independent and autonomous in order to provide unbiased information, experience and evidence that will inform public policy impacting decisions regarding the well being of children and families.

And though evidence is the foundation of our work, we recognize that durable systems change and innovation also require strong community partnerships so that key stakeholders have the ability to take action and implement that information into practice.

## Mission

We bring evidence to improve child welfare policy and practice to strengthen Washington's vulnerable children and families.

## Vision

We envision children living safely at home, supported by families who have the resources and access to the services they need.

## Values

- We strive to work in a collaborative, transparent and open way with our stakeholders.
- We respect individual and community values and perspectives.
- We're committed to long-term, sustainable systems change.
- Our work is informed by rigorous, scientific evidence.

## Approach

### Using Research to Improve Child Welfare Practice:

- We follow the evidence and provide objective and independent responses to the questions that shape policy and practice change.
- We focus on testing and implementing innovative policies and practices.
- We try to identify children and families' needs to help align with the service array.
- We use research to identify training innovations to improve the workforce.

### Engaging Stakeholders:

- We convene, listen to, and learn from our community.
- We act as a catalyst to support child welfare stakeholders in taking programs and best practice to scale.
- We work with those stakeholders to adapt our research of children and families' needs so that there is better fit of services to needs.
- We take our research that identifies training innovations and transform it into practice for the child welfare workforce.

## Our Work

We invest in projects that allow us to leverage our flexible funding for the highest impact, and provide information, experience and evidence to inform public policy that will impact decisions regarding the well being of children and families.

### Child Welfare Systems Research

For the last three-and-a-half years, we have been conducting research to better understand how services affect outcomes such as length of stay in foster care, factors affecting family participation and engagement in resolving their issues, and the role that supervision plays in case outcomes. This type of research is crucial because, typically, most child welfare agencies have very little information about how well interventions actually protect children, how well children do once they are removed from their own homes, or the extent to which services are comparable across an agency's service locations. There has been a dependence on federally subsidized data systems that often provide limited or conflicting information. Our research includes expanded information, with periodic examina-

tion of key issues that provides critical information to help policymakers and CA leadership make more informed decisions about what services to purchase, how to better train workers, and how to better communicate information to legislators, the public and community leaders.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Identify strategies to help expedite the process of children either reunifying with their families or finding a permanent home; help to inform training innovations; become a trusted source of information, focused on identifying and sharing best practices.

### Testing Program Innovations

As part of our mission to improve policy and practice, we research and test the effectiveness of program innovations and work with stakeholders to take the ideas to scale:

- **Permanency and Reunification.** Our work with CA includes studying the agency's data to improve understanding of how reunification and other permanency decisions are made in Washington, learn from efforts outside Washington, and identify promising practices directed at improving family reunification, permanency and related court processes. The resulting effort has yielded a wealth of information in the areas of parent visitation, cross-training with court partners, and reducing disproportionality.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Improvements in the areas of visitation, reunification and case resolution; increased early engagement of parents in visitation with their children; improved local rates and timelines to reunification; improved consensus-based (timely) permanency planning; increased capacity by CA in using data to inform practice changes.

- **Kinship Care.** A collaborative effort by POC, the Court Improvement Training Academy at the University of Washington, CA and Attorney General's Office. The goal is to use subsidized guardianship more broadly in order to decrease the time it takes for children and youth (particularly African American and Native American children and youth) in long-term, stable kinship care to reside in a permanent home.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Increased number and rate of exits from care to permanency, in particular exits to Kinship guardianship through R-GAP in regions 3 and 4; decrease the number of children in care over 1 year and at specific intervals beyond 1 year; describe and understand the barriers to permanency including resource and legal barriers; develop training and education for CA, courts, and community stakeholders regarding the long-term support needs of children living with relatives.

- **Performance-Based Contracting.** As the state implements a new law (2HSB2106) passed by the Washington State legislature in 2009, POC's role should help policy makers and CA determine if the emphasis on evidence-based and evidence-informed practices contributes to better outcomes for children and families receiving services from contracted providers. The law requires the state's child welfare agency – Children's Administration (CA) – to convert, by July 1, 2011, all of its contracts for child and family services to contracts based on performance standards and measurable outcomes. It is believed that performance-based contracting has the potential to achieve a better fit between the services children and families need and the services the state buys.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Better defined outcomes for lead contract agencies and better alignment between the array of contracted services and what families need.

- **Staying Connected With Your Teen.** This 3-year feasibility study, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), combines the expertise of the UW School of Social Work's Social Development Research Group (SDRG) with Partners for Our Children. The goal of the study is to adapt Staying Connected With Your Teen (SCT), a family-focused, substance abuse prevention program, for use within the child welfare system. Staying Connected with your Teen is an evidence-based parenting intervention that has been shown to be successful at strengthening family relationships and reducing initiation into drug use and sexual activity and has reduced the frequency of violent behaviors especially among low-income African American teens. The goal of this study is to work with relative caregivers/foster parents and their teens, as well as Children's Administration staff to adapt and test this program within the child welfare system.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* A well-developed, low cost, parenting intervention adapted for use with foster parents and kinship caregivers. Child welfare workers/supervisors trained and equipped to support the use of this evidence based practice with their families caring for foster teens to strengthen families and prevent teens' engagement in high risk behaviors. Better understanding of how to develop and test methods for dissemination and implementation of evidence-based interventions within the child welfare system.

- **KEEP Parenting.** This project – a joint effort with CA and the Oregon Learning Center – is a modified, evidence-based intervention for birth parents with children who have challenging behaviors. This project presents a unique opportunity for child welfare administrators and practitioners to collaborate with researchers in modifying an evidence-based intervention, thereby maximizing up-take in a child welfare framework.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Evaluation of a new evidence-based parent training model. If results are promising, the program can be taken to scale within the context of 2HSB2106.

### Training and Professional Development System for Child Welfare

POC is collaborating with Eastern Washington University, the University of Washington's School of Social Work, and CA to redesign training for social workers. Outcomes for children are directly related to the skill level of their social workers and it has been shown that child welfare systems have improved their workers' direct practice and leadership skills by creating comprehensive, university-based training models. The redesigned training model will include new ideas from POC's research in Washington and innovative practices from other states, reinforce CA's practice priorities, and better integrate the academic curriculum for social workers from both universities. The redesign efforts will also focus on supervisory and leadership skills for agency and private sector workers. POC believes this training model will increase resources by better leveraging federal dollars used to train child welfare workers.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Child welfare training that is competency-based, job relevant, accessible, consistent, responsive, and timely; all training would support culturally responsive services rooted in strengths-based, family-centered and evidence-based practices that support child safety, permanency, and well being.

### Web-Based Data Sharing for Washington State

In Washington State, child welfare professionals, policy makers, and the public have requested more detailed, real-time, access to information about the child welfare system. POC – with the support of the Stuart Foundation and the Thomas V. Giddens Jr. Foundation – is currently working with CA, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Kansas to create a web-based portal that will provide direct access to child welfare data (within the bounds of confidentiality). The platform will be extremely flexible, and the site can include performance measures and data to support a variety of child welfare activities including child level outcomes, critical systems measures and program effectiveness measures.

*Expected outcomes in 3 years:* Generate community awareness, education, and involvement; provide access to relevant and timely web-based administrative data to improve transparency, learning, and decision support across the child welfare system; expand our partners within the project through collaboration with other states and research centers in the development of public data sites.