Effective child welfare systems require a committed, high-performing, and stable workforce in order to produce optimal outcomes for children, youth, and families. This work is complex and compels an approach beyond the isolated tactics of individual organizations. For this reason, the Children's Bureau (CB) has funded the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) to implement a partnership approach to workforce development that enables independent organizations to accomplish objectives together that they cannot bring about alone.

This article provides an overview of NCWWI and focuses specifically on the development of unique partnerships through the Leadership Academy for Deans and Directors.

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE INSTITUTE

Funded by the Children's Bureau in 2013 for a second cycle of five years, NCWWI is a six-university collaborative whose purpose is to increase child welfare practice effectiveness through diverse partnerships that focus on workforce systems development, organizational interventions, and change leadership, using data-driven capacity building, education, and professional development. This work provides significant investments in ensuring that professionals impacting children, youth, and families in the child welfare system have the requisite education, skills, knowledge, and support to provide high-quality, effective services.

This second round of funding for NCWWI is distinguished by our focus on the delivery of targeted and integrated interventions designed to sustain comprehensive improvements in the child welfare workforce through partnerships. These integrated interventions include:

- Preparation of social work graduates for employment in local and tribal child welfare systems
- A leadership academy for state, county or tribal directors/commissioners and deans/directors/chairs of social work programs
- Academies for middle managers and supervisors to develop leadership and change management skills
- Support for transfer of learning through coaching and field education
- Intensive organizational interventions in selected sites
- Web-enhanced platforms and technology to support communities of practice and peer networking
- Resource development and dissemination to a national child welfare audience

NCWWI's guiding philosophy of integrated partnership approaches links our purpose of increasing child welfare practice effectiveness with our vision of sustainable workforce excellence and innovative leadership.

UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

Thirteen University Partnerships are implementing traineeship programs designed to increase the knowledge and skills of scholars to be expert child welfare professionals. Each scholar will achieve a Bachelor of Social Work or Master of Social Work degree and repay each year of financial support with one year of child welfare employment. Each agency-university partnership is also collaboratively addressing specific systems challenges in social work programs and local child welfare agencies and tribes that hinder the retention of traineeship graduates. Finally, funded social work programs are developing and delivering specialized child welfare curriculum focusing on evidence-based and trauma-informed practice that will enhance graduates' practice effectiveness.

The jurisdictions of these 13 agency-university partnerships are the context through which NCWWI is implementing an integrated workforce systems development approach with professional preparation, leadership development, and organizational interventions to produce outcomes that could not be separately realized.
Achieving this synergy requires an ongoing commitment to partnership, adaptive leadership practice, and willingness to learn from experience.

**LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR DEANS AND DIRECTORS**

The Leadership Academy for Social Work Deans/Directors and Child Welfare Agency Directors (LADD) is NCWWI’s newest component. A leadership enrichment program for experienced administrators, LADD will create a learning community of agency-university partners to advance the preparation and support of an expert, culturally responsive, and inclusive workforce that can effectively deliver high-quality services.

Since 1985, federally funded agency-university partnerships have emerged and matured in more than 35 states and are critical components of the education and employment of a professional child welfare workforce. What sets LADD apart is its innovative focus on workforce systems development with partners at the executive levels of child welfare—commissioners/directors in public, tribal, and private systems, and social work deans/directors. The program structure will focus on the strategic question of what has to happen to promote greater investment in the workforce on the part of agencies, tribes, and schools alike, addressing cross-systems change, simultaneous renewal, collaboration, and partnership-building skills.

Through yearly activities that include two virtual convenings, two learning community meetings, and executive coaching over a four-year period, LADD will:

1. Strengthen leadership skills
2. Promote systems change through effective change initiatives
3. Increase understanding of workforce development
4. Foster partnership skills and strategies to build and steward successful school-agency workforce development

LADD will advance change initiatives and leadership enhancements that address child welfare workforce needs and services and related capacity-building to improve retention of professionally prepared staff. The work of LADD members is expected to foster transformational change across agency-university partnerships and enhance workforce outcomes.

Since early 2014, LADD partners have been developing the focus for their change initiatives. Virtual and face-to-face community learning meetings provide opportunities for partners to be exposed to innovative and transformational approaches to the challenges faced by the child welfare workforce. At the first face-to-face convening in September, 2014, LADD partners had the opportunity to share their change initiatives and consider commonalities of approaches to complex and diverse workforce challenges with their peers from across the country. One participant expressed the opinion that “LADD is providing us the opportunity to form strong and lasting partnerships.”

Executive coaching is provided by a team of three coaches with both extensive child welfare agency and academic leadership experiences. Experienced social work education coaches are Gary Anderson, professor at Michigan State University and team lead for the NCWWI University Partnerships; and Katharine Briar-Lawson, professor and dean of the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany, and co-principal investigator of NCWWI. Cathy Fisher, organizational development consultant and board-certified executive coach, uses her extensive child welfare agency leadership experience to guide and support the LADD partners. Each LADD dyad is paired with two coaches, which together represent social work education and the child welfare agency. The focus for the coaching is to support the development of the LADD partnership and
the implementation of their joint or parallel change initiatives. Through careful examination of workforce data and child welfare and university environments, LADD partners develop their theory of change to support their workforce initiatives. The change initiatives run the gamut from promoting a data-driven workforce, to implementation of an evidence-based practice model, to the development of a healthy and productive workplace culture. Through the development of logic models that support their theory of change, participants will define desired outcomes and core strategies to support implementation of their change initiatives.

Coaching provides an opportunity for LADD partners to explore strategies and consider barriers and challenges throughout the implementation of change initiatives. Particular focus is placed on the role top leaders play championing their change initiative, maximizing partnership synergy, and being good stewards by anchoring the change in their respective organizations. At the close of each session, LADD participants provide feedback to their coaches on the helpfulness of the coaching session. Early feedback from LADD participants indicate that the coaching sessions are providing opportunities to consider partnership possibilities and to explore more deeply their approach to change.

Over the course of the next four years, the journey of the LADD partners will be chronicled by NCWWI evaluators. Formative and summative evaluation methodologies will examine the impact of partnerships on the implementation of change initiatives, including barriers overcome and influences on key change goals, such as workforce retention, enriched agency and academic cultures, and improved child welfare practices. Evaluation will also discern how leadership practices and change implementation help deans and directors optimize workforce development and agency-university partnerships.

**CONCLUSION**

Through diverse partnerships, NCWWI's integrated approach to leadership and workforce development targets (1) simultaneous leadership development of agency and tribal directors, social work deans and directors, middle managers, and supervisors; (2) placement and support of skilled social work students and graduates in strong learning organizations; and (3) comprehensive assessments and interventions that address workforce challenges and improve agency culture and climate. The urgent need for an expert child welfare workforce requires partnerships of well-functioning agencies and universities and change leaders who are committed, prepared, and responsive to the complex needs of children, youth, and families.

**References**


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