



FACT SHEET 1

Citizens Review Panels

by Blake L. Jones, Program Coordinator, Kentucky Citizens Review Panels,
University of Kentucky College of Social Work Training Resource Center

T“This whole Citizens Review Panel thing is nothing but a public relations ploy to make our child welfare agency look like they really care what citizens think!” This frustrated comment burned from the pages of a survey I recently read as part of a research project on the effectiveness of citizens review panels. What can be done to ensure that these panels generate useful, meaningful results that are apparent to everyone? The purpose of this article is to provide state child welfare agencies with a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” from someone who has been “in the trenches” as a Citizens Review Panel (CRP) organizer, a doctoral candidate who has done extensive research in citizen participation, and the conference chair of two national CRP conferences.

A CRP Primer

Citizens Review Panels for child protective services came about through a 1996 amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). In order to continue receiving money through CAPTA, states were mandated to create three CRPs by July 1999. The 2003 annual report from the state of Oregon sums up the purpose of these panels nicely:

“The mandate of the citizens review panels is to ‘evaluate the extent to which the agencies (state and local) are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.’ The panels must examine policies, procedures, and, where appropriate, specific cases handled by the state and local agencies providing child protective services. The panels also evaluate the extent to which the agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities in accordance with the state’s CAPTA plan, child protection standards, and any other criteria that the members consider important to ensure the protection of children. This may include a review of how well the child protective service program is coordinated with foster care and adoption programs and a review of child fatalities and near-fatalities. The mission of the CRPs blends nicely with that of the Community-Based Child



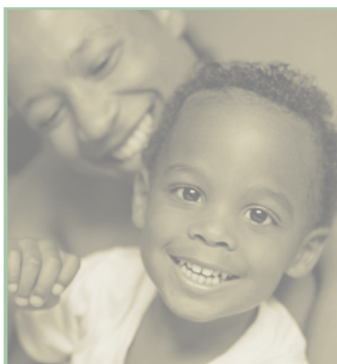
Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) programs; both are concerned with addressing child maltreatment and family well-being through a community, grassroots effort. The CRPs and CBCAP agencies can work hand in hand to promote the engagement of families and community partners in ameliorating the effects of child abuse and neglect.

“The panel members are to be volunteers who are broadly representative of the community in which the panels are established and should include parent/consumer representatives and members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. The panels are also mandated to ‘prepare and make available to the public, on an annual basis, a report containing a summary of the activities of the panel.’ The CAPTA panel report should include, at a minimum, a summary of the panel’s activities, the recommendations of the panel based upon its activities and findings, and information on the progress the state is making in implementing the recommendations of the panels.”

There are many steps that can be taken to maximize the constructive potential of Citizens Review Panels. Likewise, there are pitfalls to avoid. This fact sheet shares some of each.

Tips for Success

Be proactive, not reactive.



One of the hallmarks of effectiveness in citizen participation is involving citizens at the beginning of policy-making decisions. To tell citizens “after the fact” about important policy deci-

sions defeats the purpose of a true community effort to deal with child maltreatment. It is also discouraging to the citizen volunteers.

Help define the agenda, but don’t dictate it.

Panel members can become frustrated, feeling like the panel has “spun its wheels” over a period of years. Because the mandate for the panels is so enormous, citizens may have difficulty defining concrete goals and tasks. Working together with panels to develop a strategic plan is the best approach.

Provide staff support.

Citizens review panels are expected to evaluate very large child welfare systems. This means gathering reports, looking through policy manuals, talking to staff, etc. CRPs simply cannot do their work without a dedicated staff person who assists them with such tasks as obtaining information, recruiting new members, arranging meetings, and preparing reports.

Provide information and ongoing training.

Research in this area consistently identifies training as a crucial variable to making citizen advisory boards effective. CRP members should be exposed to a variety of speakers, videos, case presentations from frontline workers, and other relevant information.

Attend to human needs.

Remember that people like to be told “thank you” and to be fed at meetings. This may seem simple, but very small things like having lunch meetings for your volunteers or paying for them to attend conferences goes a long way in relationship building. Some states have annual recognition dinners or retreats for their volunteers.

Give feedback.

This is perhaps the most important tip. Across the nation, citizens are devoting literally thousands of volunteer hours to improving child protective services. If their work is ignored (or dismissed) by state agencies, not only does the child welfare agency lose out on a chance to promote community involvement in protecting children, it is highly likely that the citizen volunteers will become disillusioned and angry. This is the worst outcome for the citizens review process and, ultimately, for children and families.

Pitfalls to Avoid



Don't hide the truth.

With the arrival of the Child and Family Services Review and other forms of review, state child welfare systems are being scrutinized like never before. As painful as it is sometimes, the results of these reviews needs to be shared with CRPs. However, someone from the child welfare agency should assist the panel in understanding and using the information.

Don't ignore the citizens review panels.

Incredibly, I've heard from some state CRP members who are unsure where their annual reports go, who uses them, or even if they are read at all. State agencies need to be reminded that they are required by federal law to implement citizens review panels. By connecting with members from other states' CRPs,

panel members across the country are becoming empowered.

Don't overwhelm people with information.

Just as it is important to give CRPs access to information, it is also important to choose which information will be most helpful to them as they review the state's child protection system. Don't overwhelm CRP members with thick reports, loads of statistics, or other confusing data, especially if it is not relevant to their work. It may be helpful to for a child welfare agency liaison to brief CRP members monthly on things that are happening in the system.

Use the CRPs as more than a public relations tool.

Many states are doing a wonderful job in using citizens to strengthen child protective services. They are accomplishing this through careful planning, good communication, and an openness to change. However, states that wish only to "trot out" their citizens review panels as a model of community involvement, but who do not truly seek authentic citizen participation, are engaging in a dangerous game.

Remember the 3 C's: commitment, communication, and cooperation.

These are the essential foundation of any good collaboration between a public agency and citizen volunteers. The political landscape, personalities, and hidden agendas all work against these principles, and each of these dangers must be dealt with in turn. Seeing the collective knowledge of citizens as an asset, not a threat, is the whole idea behind citizens review panels.

Resources

Internet

Citizens Review Panel Guidelines and Protocols

www.dss.cahwnet.gov/pdf/CitizenReviewPanelsGuidelinesandProtocols.pdf

This guide, the most comprehensive published resource on CRPs, gives a history of the legislation leading to the panels and walks the reader through the process of recruiting members, developing review protocols, and other training issues.

National Citizens Review Panel Web Site

www.uky.edu/SocialWork/crp

This site contains CRP reports from 22 states as well as numerous resources for panel members and organizers—including a national CRP member list-serv, which allows members and coordinators to share information and strategies, and an online database of state panels and contacts.

FRIENDS National Resource Center

www.friendsnrc.org

FRIENDS, the National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP), helps create and support statewide networks of community-based, family-centered, prevention-focused family resource and support programs, in order to strengthen families and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

Publications

The Challenge of Promoting and Sustaining Meaningful Citizen Participation

Callahan, K. (1999) *International Review of Public Administration*, 2(4), 23-31.

In this article, Callahan reviews the problems with citizen participation efforts in the past and offers the following guidance to agency officials who want to involve citizens: provide clear goals and expectations, communicate effectively and regularly, build trust by working with the citizens, value other forms of

knowledge, provide education and training activities, reward citizens for their participation, and reward public administrators and elected officials for their collaborative efforts.

Early Citizen Review: Does It Make a Difference?

Jennings, M.A., T. McDonald, & R. A. Henderson (1996) *Social Work*, 41(2), 224-31.

This article reports the results of a study on the impact of an external citizen review initiated 14 to 45 days after a child entered the court system, and discusses implications for policy and practice. The study compared two groups to determine the impact of early citizen review on services planned and provided, court delays, completeness of written case plans, number of placements, time in placement, and achievement of permanent placement. Although there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups, the authors say that a consistent pattern favoring citizen review emerged.

CRP members should be exposed to a variety of speakers, videos, case presentations from frontline workers, and other relevant information.

Variables Impacting the Effectiveness of Citizens Review Panels for Child Protective Services: A Multi-State Study

Jones, B. L. (Under review).

This study reports the findings of a survey on variables that contributed to the effectiveness of CRPs in a 10-state area in the Midwest and South. The findings suggest that the perceived effectiveness of panels in influencing policy is related to increased communication, an awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals. Factors that impede effectiveness include: lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication. Available from Blake Jones at bljone00@uky.edu.

The Value and Role of Citizens Review Panels in Child Welfare: Perceptions of Citizens Review Panel Members and Child Protection Workers

Jones, B. L., P. Litzelfelner, & J. P. Ford (2003) *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal*, 27(6), 699-704.

The only study published thus far on CRPs for child protective services, this research found a significant need for increased communication among child welfare agencies and the panels. Such communication, as well as ongoing education, is crucial to building trust between the two entities.

The Use of Citizen Review Boards with Juvenile Offender Cases: An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Pilot Program

Litzelfelner, P. (2001) *Journal of Juvenile and Family Court Judges*, 52(1).

Litzelfelner evaluated the effect of citizen review in juvenile offender cases and found that the youth whose cases went through the citizen review process had statistically fewer placement changes during the course of the study than those whose cases were not reviewed by the citizen boards. In addition, the study found that more time elapsed between the date of the original offense and the re-offense for youth reviewed by the citizen review boards than for those not reviewed.

Public Participations in Public Decisions: New Skills and Strategies for Public Managers

Thomas, J.C. (1995) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


The author offers a decision-making tree for managers who want to involve citizens in policy making, encouraging managers to ask such questions as “what type of information is needed?” and “what resources are needed?” Though the book is written from the perspective of public administration, child welfare managers could benefit from its in-depth discussion of citizen participation.

The Future of Child Protection: How to Break the Cycle of Abuse and Neglect

Waldfoegel, J. (1998) Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

In this excellent and forward-thinking book about child protection in the United States, Waldfoegel compares the U.S. model of dealing with child maltreatment and offers suggestions such as a differential response mechanism. She calls for child protective services to join with citizens and other community-based stakeholders to create a more responsive system.



 FRIENDS, a service of the Children's Bureau, is the National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) program grants, under a cooperative agreement between Family Support America and the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, ACF, HHS. FRIENDS assists and supports the CBCAP state lead agencies by providing training, technical assistance, and information. Contact: FRIENDS Director, Family Support America, 20 N. Wacker Dr., Ste. 1100, Chicago, IL 60606, 312/338-0900, www.friendsnrc.org.