

Vulnerable Children and Families: Voices from the National Landscape

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Abstract This article discusses an overview of the current landscape of services available for vulnerable children and families through government, faith-based, and non-profit organizations. It examines systemic barriers to service utilization and problems which encumber positive outcomes for moving people from vulnerability to sustainability and self-efficacy. The article describes the social services movement toward organizational collaboration which takes aim at the effective use of limited resources and the creation of centralized services for those in need. It explores current successful organizational collaborative efforts and discusses ways to duplicate the positive efforts which produce outcomes that effectively promote services to support healthy and empowered children and families.

Keywords Vulnerable children and families · Faith-based organizations · Systemic barriers · Sustainability · Self-efficacy · Childrens services · Family services

Introduction

Since the economic downturn beginning half a decade ago, children and families who meet or exceed the federal poverty line have faced the double incursion of huge jobs losses, which particularly encompass jobs that are filled by low income workers, and deep cuts in benefits and programs that help sustain families with limited resources. Additionally, economic issues continue to erode the middle class so that many who once considered themselves financially secure now find themselves vulnerable to unexpected misfortune.

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The intent of this article is to examine the plight of children and families who find themselves caught in the difficult situation of living on the edge of vulnerability or who have already experienced a downturn in their circumstances. It will discuss an overview of their current situation; efforts to assist them with government, faith-based, and philanthropic programs; information on program innovations through collaboration which address overlap and funding concerns; strategies for empowering vulnerable families and the agencies who serve them; and finally proposed collaborative principles to further develop those opportunities.

Who are the Poor?

One thing is clear, in 2012, the typical stereotype of someone who is poor is no longer clear. Urban renewal programs are pushing more and more of America's poor from the cities to the suburbs. According to the 2010 census, the poor in major cities increased by 23 %, but that increase more than doubled to a 53 % increase in major metropolitan suburbs (Feddes 2011). Suburbs now house one-third of the nation's poor (Kneebone and Garr 2010).

The 2011 American Community Survey (ACS) data shows a significant increase in the poverty rate for children living in the United States between 2005 and 2011. Among the 50 largest U.S. cities, 44 experienced increases in child poverty rates (Chong 2012). In addition to the nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of children who live below the poverty line, another 20 % of children are "near poor," living in households with incomes between 100 and 200 % of the federal poverty line (Yoshikawa et al. 2012). Poverty is a critical risk factor for many of the mental, emotional, and behavioral (M-E-B) disorders of children and youth (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine 2009).

In one major city, statistics show that only one in five families in poverty are paying for housing they can afford, which means four of five poor families are extremely vulnerable to homelessness ("The high quality of life," 2011). The diversity of the city makes up 40 % of the population, but they hold only 17 % of the jobs. Vulnerable families are increasingly at risk for an ever wider gap between reasonable economic stability with a general availability of resources, and a constant lack and need, continually facing multiple barriers to access to those resources.

Vulnerability means that these children and families are at serious risk for problems related to health, safety, mental health, food security, homelessness, and other concerns related to basic living. Research shows that poverty strongly predicts fundamental issues such as reduced life expectancy, unresponsive parenting, and impaired social development (Yoshikawa et al. 2012).

Local systems are especially important for children and families defined as vulnerable or in need. These families face issues of discrimination, domestic violence, mental health problems, housing issues, education deficiencies, health problems and social stigma in greater proportion than the general population (Gray 2002), with fewer resources available. And as the poor move into less populated areas, these Americans earn less, have higher poverty rates overall, have higher

rates of working poverty, attain lower education levels, and are less likely to have health insurance along with lower access to specialists of all kinds such as doctors, social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists. At the same time, they report poorer overall health and they have higher rates of chronic illness (Richgels and Sande 2009).

In general, vulnerable families receive limited support in coping with the stress of everyday living, matters that families with greater resources take for granted. As a result, they are unable to adapt to or cope with the issues they face (Morrison et al. 1997). Because of limited resources, their voices regarding political issues, such as cuts to social service programs, are also less likely to be heard (Zlatos 2011).

In addition to all of these barriers, vulnerable children and families face deeper issues with the very politics of welfare that focus on the behavior and characteristics of the poor rather than on state policies, labor markets, and the dynamics of capitalism that promote poverty (Morgen 2002). Employment for the vulnerable equals low wage, unstable jobs with no paid health insurance or other benefits, and limited opportunity for upward mobility or significant wage enhancement (Morgen 2002).

In order for these families to see improvements in their condition, they require minimal elements for success including: Economic security with jobs that pay a living wage and offer health insurance and other benefits crucial to that economic security (Wood 2003; Morgen 2002); affordable housing; improved nutrition (as “cheap” food is often high in empty calories); and access to education (Wood 2003).

Current Assistance Approaches and Issues

Despite all the problems and issues, the situation for vulnerable children and families has not gone unnoticed. A plethora of government, philanthropic, and faith-based organizations have committed their resources to help. Based on a national survey of human service organizations, it is estimated that government agencies have more than 200,000 formal agreements (contracts and grants) with 33,000 human service non-profit organizations (Boris et al. 2010). The average is six grants and contracts per organization, with 60 % of those organizations counting those grants and contracts as their largest funding source (Boris et al. 2010).

The Department of Health Human Services (HHS), a major government provider of programs and initiatives for vulnerable children and families, recognizes the need for these collaborations to achieve its goals (“Cross-agency collaboration,” 2012; “Participation and collaboration,” 2012). With the increasing complexity of problems, it is logistically and financially impossible for any one entity to tackle the scope of the concerns. The faith-based initiative, which began with the George W. Bush administration and continues through the Obama administration, contends that religious institutions may be relatively untapped resources for addressing social problems (Sherman 2010). Government concerns regarding the utilization of churches as sources for general social programs were addressed through the Obama administration in part by requiring religious groups receiving federal money for

social services to provide those services at different times and places than religious observances; making participation in any religious activity voluntary; and by referring participants objecting to receiving services from a religious organization to other providers (Sherman 2010). It also created an interagency working group, the Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, to ensure fidelity to constitutional principles and to oversee the administration of the faith-based initiative.

The positive dynamic is that churches have committed to assist in the provision of programs that help the vulnerable. Catholic Charities, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and the Salvation Army are recipients of the bulk of faith-based funding, principally because they represent the largest share of the faith-based organizations (Ferris 2005). These organizations work at the national level but administer programs locally, such as the Catholic Services Family Strengthening programs and the Salvation Army programs helping the needy in local communities (Catholic Charities USA 2012; Sherman 2010). This has not precluded smaller, more obscure religious groups competing for and succeeding in obtaining grant money (O'Reilly 2009).

Programs such as the Amachi Program, which began in the Bush-era faith-based schema and which is administered through the Greater Exodus Baptist Church in North Philadelphia, have served more than 100,000 children of prisoners (O'Reilly 2009). Others such as Nazareth Housing Services, the Luther Burbank Family Resource Center, and the Christian Community Development Association, among many, fill in the blanks for pockets of need in their communities providing all kinds of services from housing to after-school programs to food banks to preschools (Smydo 2011; "Family strengthening awards winner, 2009" 2012; O'Reilly 2009; Feddes 2011). Clearly, contributions on the faith-based front should be acknowledged for impact they have made in the communities they serve.

Philanthropic corporations also contribute solutions to poverty problems. Many well-known national organizations have addressed the problems according to specific areas of concern. The Gates Foundation has contributed more than \$1 billion dollars to US organizations helping vulnerable children and families (Heim 2008) even though they are more known for their work internationally. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation seeks to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families by addressing structural racism—meaning racial issues built into systems, such as family outcomes, education and social stigmas (Machelor 2010).

The Heinz Endowments focus on preschooler outcomes and special education programs (Smydo 2009). And, of course, United Way provides thousands of grants to local community and smaller philanthropic organizations to provide services at a basic level, such as paying heating bills, funding day care, providing food and medicine, and supporting homeless shelters (United Way 2012).

Numerous regional and local organizations address poverty issues at their community level. A few examples include: The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut (women's issues such as domestic violence); Community Foundation for the National Capital Region (food, housing, and emergency funds to local families); The Butterfly Project (Illinois foundation to assist local daycare facilities, schools, and domestic violence service providers); Supporting the Safety Net

(Colorado health needs for vulnerable families); The Meadows Foundation (providing air-conditioning for elderly, small children and disabled in Texas—those most vulnerable to heat-related deaths); and Building Strong Families (Eight communities nationally that receive services for low-income couples expecting a baby) (Cronin 2010; Rucker 2008; Brady-Lunny 2009; Selk 2009).

As supportive of all these thousands of programs and services are of vulnerable children and families, a question remains as to why the situation for these families appears to be getting worse instead of better (Buchheit 2013). Some key points rest in the issues of funding. First, in periods of recession or slow economic growth, such as we are now experiencing, will state governments be able to meet the needs of their low-income residents for public assistance? Recessions lead to job losses and make it increasingly difficult for those without jobs, especially those with little experience and education, to find new jobs. Thus, a slowing economy not only reduces state tax revenue, but also increases the need for fiscal assistance for low-income state residents. Second, will states be willing to devote adequate resources to programs that provide either cash assistance or social services to their needy populations? (Chernick and Reschovsky 2003). Since government, through its grants and contracts, appears to be the primary funder of social services, the answer to these questions is significant. In the current climate the answer appears to be a resounding “No,” which means all agencies and programs compete for a diminishing supply of resources.

It is a perilous time for all service organizations as the rise in demand for services has not been countered with an equal rise in resources (Rucker 2008). “Many groups are seeing an unbelievable uptick in demand, but local governments are really struggling with their budget items, including support of non-profits, and private philanthropy is down” (Rucker 2008).

Another issue is an understanding of focus. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University, improvements in a child’s (and family’s) well-being do not result from employment per se, but only when parental employment results in higher family income (Morgen 2002). So low wage jobs which provide no benefits, though highly prized by the government as an indication of a person’s work ethic and industry, are of little help to bring a family out of poverty. These jobs are universally populated by the poor but do little to help their situation, in some instances even precluding them from receiving services such as Medicaid for health issues.

In fact, it appears that focused assistance is problematic for families. In a systems environment where so many factors play into a family’s success, money alone is not the answer. “Increasingly, we are learning that the health, education, social service, and recreational needs of vulnerable populations cannot be isolated into discrete categories. To the contrary, they are connected, if not interdependent. And because of these connections and interdependencies, single profession, single-agency, single-policy approaches—categorical strategies—will always be of limited effectiveness, if they help at all. In the worst of circumstances, categorical approaches may harm people” (Hooper-Briar and Lawson 1996, p. 5). Empirically, there is a high correlation among many of the most troublesome problems such as educational outcomes, poverty, and teen pregnancy, that a single solution will not affect all of

them (Morrison et al. 1997). One can understand that higher paying jobs are limited by a person's education. Their education is limited by access, which is limited by the economic features of the environment in which they live. Better education is positively correlated with higher incomes (Knack and Keefer 1997). Access to health care, food, adequate housing, a safe social environment all affect outcomes. To look at and address any one issue precludes how all the others also affect the family system. Even something as simple as a positive role model (or lack of one) can make the difference in outcomes for vulnerable children.

Beyond these issues are the targets of funding themselves. Because government is the primary funder of social programs it means government has the say where the money is spent (Burstain 2012). In some cases a mere 6 cents of every dollar of a program budget goes to the actual purpose for which it was intended (Burstain 2012) with the rest of the funding being eaten up by administrative costs, overhead, and other expenses. As the resources are spread increasingly thinner, the capacity of community-based and faith-based organizations to meet the expectations of government contracts is profoundly limited by their financial and human resources (Alexander 1999). Sometimes the market-driven aspect of results can conflict directly with the mission of the organization, making it more susceptible to funding cuts.

And finally, though it appears that generally government wholly subscribes to organizational collaboration both within and without government confines, they yet remain, in some cases, suspicious of non-profits, particularly when these non-profits are perceived to challenge the prevailing political attitude (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002). Unfortunately, government repression, rivalry, and adversarial relationships with the non-profit sector have not disappeared (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002). The origins of the government–nonprofit relationship can influence the nature of the interactions between the two. When governments initiate relations with nonprofits, the interaction patterns tend to be top-down and to focus on nonprofits' role as service providers. When nonprofits are the initiators, interactions tend to be bottom-up with an emphasis on policy advocacy and constituency empowerment (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2002).

The Future of Assistance

Vulnerable families have poor functioning systems in many areas with little ability to compensate. Helping a family with food may keep hunger from the door but does not help with other areas of struggle such as employment, housing, etc. Yes, they have food but they are still unable to address problems of overall functioning. In theory, families can get help for all of their problems, but it often means accessing many agencies, many different resources, each with its own application process, requirements, and outcomes. Sometimes receipt of help in one area disqualifies a family for help in another area. The end result is a multitude of barriers daunting enough to keep any but the most determined individuals from succeeding. If the barriers appear to be insurmountable, people may turn to “easier” ways to get their

needs met, including criminal behavior, co-dependency, disengagement, and dysfunction.

More and more service providers are coming to understand that answers lie within the family system itself. Theoretical perspectives such as the ecological approach (addressing the cultural, social, and political environment), holistic approach (addressing all issues as a “package”), strengths-based perspective (looking at the abilities and building upon them instead of focusing on what is broken); and empowerment approach (instead of simply delivering services, involve the client(s) in helping themselves), inform social services organizations as to new ways of thinking (Morrison et al. 1997).

Many organizations have adopted one or more of these perspectives as the basis for the model in how they provide services. Some non-profits have merged from necessity, yet the unification results in less overlap of services, greater and more creative use of funds, and reduced competition for funding (Capuchina 2005). Other organizations recognize the many needs for families and the barriers to help for those needs, so that they have created a “one-stop shopping” approach where one organization provides one assessment resulting in referral to a number of services and programs in that same organization or conglomerate or collaborative of providers to address all the identified needs integrally. The following examples were selected either for their size and renown (such as Head Start), or for their success rate in collaborative interface.

An excellent long-term example of a successful approach is the Head Start Program. Founded in the 1960s by the Johnson administration, Head Start began by addressing child development issues through an understanding that intervening in a child’s formative years (by age 5 the brain is 90 % developed) is vital to ensuring the child has the necessary skills to navigate class and life (Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families [OPREACF], 2012). But Head Start additionally involved all aspects of family life, involving parents in their children’s education, providing assessments and services for many family-poverty issues (Smydo 2009). This program has become of model of success and it is one of the few that has a proven track record of improving outcomes for vulnerable children (OPREACF 2012).

More recently, the Nicholson Foundation provides a model in the Newark, New Jersey area of collaboration for addressing barriers with vulnerable populations (“Programs: Vulnerable families” 2012). The Foundation and community stakeholders recognize that the cumulative impact of the economic and social challenges facing many of Newark’s families contributes to a pattern of intergenerational family dysfunction. Given the central role of the family and the importance of nurturing and consistent parenting for healthy child development, Nicholson’s partners have been developing programs to enhance family stability and child well-being.

In implementing these programs, they have incorporated evidence-based and promising best practices—in particular, community-based family support programs, the one-stop program model, and specialized one-stop centers (“Programs: Vulnerable families” 2012). Together the foundation and its partners provide a wide range of services including financial, legal, housing, and other supportive

services, as well as referrals to community providers for educational, health, and mental health services. A partner, the Essex County Family Justice Center, designed to be a one-stop multidisciplinary center for victims of family violence, provides and coordinates all needed emergency, medical, counseling, social, and legal services in one location (“Programs: Vulnerable families” 2012).

An example of government and non-profit collaboration can be found in the model created by FaCT—Families and Communities Together (FaCT 2012). FaCT, is a network of 12 Family Resource Centers (FRC) located throughout Orange County, California’s highest-risk communities providing essential family support services, education and resources. Since 1994, the FaCT program has been led by a public–private partnership between Orange County Social Services Agencies and the Orangewood Children’s Foundation which facilitates the planning, implementation, evaluation and support of services and activities that maximize the benefits offered by the Family Resource Centers (FRC). Core FRC Services are offered at all FaCT funded FRCs including: Counseling; parenting education; family advocacy/case management support services; domestic violence prevention & treatment; community resources and referrals; and comprehensive case management (FaCT 2012). Additional FRC Services vary across FaCT funded FRCs and include: Family health & wellness; family economics & self-sufficiency; child development activities; emergency assistance; family literacy and education; and adoption promotion and support (FaCT 2012).

A referral form to the program is a simple one-page document that identifies the family seeking support with an individual in the family as a point of contact. It then has a number of boxes to check on issues across a variety of education and informational classes and programs emergency assistance, counseling, case management, parenting classes, family activities, health information and assistance, after-school programs, teen mom, new mom, immunizations, etc. (“FRC referral” 2012). The FaCT Program also provides a yearly report on services that is available to the public. Outcomes show that in 2009–2010 more than 32,000 call-in/walk-in contacts were made to local Family Resource Centers for information and referrals to community services. This represented 9,256 families and included more than 10,000 children (Families and Communities 2012). The report stated that over 98 % of families who received the Family Advocacy/Individualized Case Management Services from Family Resource Centers participated in most or all of the services recommended to address their needs (Families and Communities 2012). This statistic for the number of families served speaks to the on-target approach to providing services.

Faith-based initiatives are a part of this holistic picture as well. Catholic Charities Community Services of Phoenix, Arizona revised its mission last summer to read, “helping our community’s most vulnerable with solutions that permanently improve lives” (“Family strengthening awards winner, 2011” 2012). The new mission reflects the agency’s emphasis on providing programs that have a permanent impact on their clients’ lives instead of merely assisting people through immediate crises. Programs focus on matching people in vulnerable situations who have desire, determination and drive with the people and resources they need to chart a course to a stable life.

The program begins with a free, three-part financial education series, where participants set savings goals, learn how to create and maintain a budget and receive tips on managing credit. The next step on the path is *Getting Ahead in a Just-Getting-By World*, a 15-week series of personal development, resource building and planning workshops. Participants graduate from *Getting Ahead* with their own dream plan for prosperity. The programs continue through *Circles of HOPE*, which are volunteer mentor teams that help participants work their dream plan and achieve long-term prosperity. Along the path, Catholic Charities Community Services of Phoenix provides individuals and families with free tax preparation through their IRS-certified VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) volunteers (“Family strengthening awards winner, 2011” 2012).

The Luther Burbank Family Resource Center of Santa Clara County, San Jose, California, in addition to educational programs for children, offers a menu of services in one convenient location, which allows families to self-select the programs that best suit their family needs, such as employment training and job development, money management and tax assistance, parenting development, and literacy. Families can opt to have a Family Partner, a bilingual, bicultural case manager trained in an assets-based approach that encourages them to make a Family Development Plan, with goals focused on the healthy development of their children and on meaningful family self-sufficiency. Family Partners also provide links to community resources and services (“Family strengthening awards winner, 2010” 2012). The fact that families self-select what opportunities they wish to participate in gives them an empowerment component to their own initiative for success.

River Oak Foundation in Sacramento County, California, has an impressive interagency participation in holistic services to clients. In addition to local non-profits, participatory agencies include Sacramento County Access Team, Sacramento County Child Protection Services, Sacramento County Probation Department, Sacramento County Head Start, Sacramento County Mental Health, Sacramento County Children’s Coalition, CalWorks (Welfare to Work), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the Department of Human Assistance (“Government collaboration,” 2012). The fact that each agency is “talking” to the others about assisting common clients is a significant change from the previously splintered method of various agencies providing services.

Going one step further, the Department of Health and Human Services seeks to involve public input in the development and utilization of resources, opting for a “new emphasis on transparency and ‘sunshine’” in the decision-making process (“Participation and Collaboration,” 2012). The agency intends to utilize technology, meetings, public forums, and other venues to engage public discussion. This has the potential to reach not only service recipients but others involved with those at-risk who can speak for a population that cannot speak for itself (such as children, the uneducated or unaware, the disempowered, the elderly, and the disabled).

Elements of Success

The future direction of services for vulnerable children and families appears to lie in comprehensive and collaborative services that empower individuals to take control

of their lives and provide them the necessary resources to do so. Beginning with the families themselves, some attitudes and general approaches that invite empowerment include: (1) Encourage parent–child interaction. Often, families in crisis are emotionally drained, and parents may not have the energy to devote to quality parent–child interactions. (2) Keep information digestible. Most parents living in poverty worry everyday about basic necessities like food and shelter, so overwhelming them further by sharing too much information or irrelevant information creates barriers. (3) Reinforce family routines. Routines are comforting, providing stability for families who may not always have stability in other areas of their lives. (4) Support parents from their perspective. Parents usually know what their family needs, and professionals are responsible for sharing the appropriate resources that can help families with their own unique issues (“Parents as teachers,” 2012).

At the next level, organizations need awareness of the larger picture. For example, they need to understand that relationships drive resources, not categorical funding. Categorical funding streams should not drive the development and allocation of human services resources; instead, the ongoing, working relationships between systems, agencies, programs, and individuals should drive how resources are allocated. Organizations should build on personal, family, and community strengths, with workers assessing the strengths and needs of children, youth, and families as early as possible and always in the context of their culture and community environment. Additionally workers should use this assessment to enhance families’ growth, health, and well-being (Hornberger et al. 2006).

Some organizations on the forefront of systems analysis contend that structural barriers must be reduced for change to take place, beginning with the need for new policies and practices. They hypothesize that effective problem solving for vulnerable children and families in relation to policies, programs, intervention strategies, and technologies hinge on appropriately framing the problem. Ask the questions: First, “To what extent are our conceptions of needs, problems, and characteristics complete, correct, and correctly stated?” and second, “How can professionals collaborate – integrating services, supports, and resources?” Karp (1993) posits, “Let us resolve to develop professionals committed to a new way of thinking about children and families—one that enables vulnerable populations to identify and build on their strengths, to feel good about themselves, and to develop a vision of what they might achieve rather than what they have failed to do” (as cited in Hooper-Briar and Lawson 1996, p. 11).

“Leadership all over this country is beginning to speak in one voice about a future child and family service system—from the National Governors’ Association, to the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Child Welfare League of America, and the National Commission on Children” (Hooper-Briar and Lawson 1996, p. 29). The following summarizes key points of this consensus: Begin with early intervention and prevention services to help children and families before problems intensify; develop a more comprehensive system of meeting the basic needs of children and families for housing, health, food, clothing, etc.; move toward a more comprehensive, holistic response, moving away from categorical programs with separate eligibility criteria, to a community system of care where professionals

from schools, courts, mental health, law enforcement, social services, and substance abuse treatment work together; de-stigmatize or normalize parents' need for help (who would deliberately design a system of services that required you to be completely "broken" to get help?); become more outcome oriented and less process oriented; locate supports and services at the neighborhood and community level; develop more ways to connect children and families to their neighborhoods and communities and to connect people who want to help in more natural ways with people who need help; make service systems more culturally competent; and finally, learn to view and use the natural identities of children and the richness of community culture as a resource for children and families (Hooper-Briar and Lawson 1996).

These proposals speak to how policy and attitudes, as much as lack of resources, create the structural barriers which keep people in a position of vulnerability. Looking beyond the "seen" to the unseen obstacles can go a long way to providing the necessary environment in which people can truly help themselves instead of being judged for their appearance of indifference.

Fundamentals of Collaboration

Several organizations have blazed the trail of agency and government collaborations and offer some insights into this process. "Collaboration arises from need—the need of citizens, or the need of government agencies striving to streamline processes or combat tight budgets" (Jamison 2007). Funding models for state-local collaborations posit that for any collaborative effort between state and local governments to begin, financial resources must be dedicated in some capacity toward starting and maintaining the initiative.

Crossing organizational boundaries is an endeavor that requires a great deal of trust on all sides, particularly in state-local collaborations, where the processes and the players can differ greatly. It is important to construct and cultivate trust at the outset of collaboration. Establishing a sound governance model is the first step. It is a model that encompasses shared accountability, establishes leadership, encourages mutual trust and promotes collective dedication to achieving the same strategic goals (Alexander and DeBoer 2011).

Communication is essential in developing the leadership necessary to create a culture of collaboration that is self-sustaining and that transcends future organizational, political and funding changes and challenges. This includes communicating to stakeholders, participants, and citizens, and communicating with collaboration innovators (such as other states or localities that may have already developed successful state-local collaboration initiatives) (Jamison 2007).

In order to develop human potential, a collaborative leader needs to know people well, look for strengths in individuals, and build upon them. Effective communication is instrumental in establishing collaborative relationships and is a key aspect of building leadership capacity (Slater 2008). It makes little sense to seek collaboration if an organization's informal goals conflict with the overall objectives for collaboration or if the collaborative tasks involved inherently have little effect

on change (Campbell and Campbell 2011). The work of Hackman and Oldham (1975) helps inform effective collaboration, which potentially includes five dimensions: (a) the variety of skills and talents needed to perform work; (b) task identity as to who will do what and what is the best fit for whom (c) task significance and the impact of work on the work of others and the work as a whole; (d) the level of freedom and independence to complete work; and (e) feedback. Working through these steps can potentially identify and ultimately create a good fit between collaborative organizations.

It can be a challenge for organizations that are used thinking one way to shift their focus or even their basic paradigm for operating. Often, new ideas are incorporated but only as attachments to older frames without altering the basic frames of thinking and action (Blundo 2001). This does little to create effective teamwork. However, when change is embraced, collaboration plays a vital role in the generation of new knowledge (Dybicz 2011). The emphasis for effective coordination should shift towards an understanding of to help these vulnerable families survive and regenerate even in the midst of overwhelming stress, adversity or life-altering transition (Kaplan 1986) based on the resources and assets of all collaborators. Change and adaptation will involve some kind of confrontation with the presenting problem while still keeping a focus on the desired outcome (Dybicz 2011).

Perhaps more than organizations in the private or public sector, nonprofits must address the economic and sustainability challenges that ultimately will change the way they do business in order to ensure their survival. To compete for these scarce resources, nonprofits will be required to become ever more strategic in the ways they accomplish their mission. Nonprofits in the future will need to place an even greater emphasis on entrepreneurial ventures and social marketing; rely less on public money and more on collaboration between all three sectors; share responsibilities and funding resources within a new framework of intergovernmental cooperation; and place more responsibility on their boards and other external stakeholders to engage in fund development roles and responsibilities (Mesch 2010).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that vulnerable children and families in the United States face an acute crisis of availability and access to resources whose lack places them ever closer to complete disaster. While many government, faith-based, and private organizations have made inroads in addressing the needs of these families, their efforts are eroded by ever-increasing demands for a diminishing pool of resources.

Innovations in how non-profit foundations, faith-based organizations and governments agencies do business have led to improved delivery of services, which, in turn, improves outcomes for utilization of services. Also, new perspectives in understanding the barriers for the vulnerable populations they serve have led to program improvements. Despite some obstacles in government and non-profit collaborations, it appears as though these models have the potential for the greatest success in helping the poor, as economic conditions call for increasingly leaner and more efficient ways of doing business.

Research shows that individual empowerment comes from challenging traditional attitudes, recognizing institutional and societal barriers, and building a foundation on current strengths. From this perspective, vulnerable individuals will be able to see a “friendly” landscape that supports their growth and progress toward self-sufficiency, a goal that is hugely appropriate and extremely desirable for the individual, the family, and for society at-large.

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