

**CHACE WOONSOCKET FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORK
EVALUATION REPORT: 2005-2007**

By

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Executive Summary

The Chace Family Support Network was created to make services more accessible to families in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. It joined the resources of two agencies—Family Resources Community Action (FRCA) and Connecting for Children and Families (CCF)—to provide a more coordinated response to families. The project had three goals: (1) to develop parental capacities, (2) to assist families in becoming more self-sufficient, and (3) to stabilize families in crisis and strengthen their connections with the community. The Network facilitated the development of Family Support Centers within each of the agencies, where families can come for commodities, emergency basic needs, and referrals for services. With the support of this initiative, staff have been able to apply principles of family support throughout their agencies. Through the Family Support Centers, families can access other more comprehensive services, including long-term case management, home-based services, and parent groups and workshops, which are available through the agencies' family support programs. Families are also linked with other service providers in the community. This initiative supported community building and outreach efforts that focused on bringing resources to high-risk neighborhoods, in particular the Fairmount, City Center, and Social districts of Woonsocket. As a capacity building initiative, it included activities designed to strengthen parental leadership and improve service agency coordination.

Families served by the Chace Family Support Network (CFSN) are dealing with significant stresses in their lives. They are dealing with inadequate finances, unemployment, limited housing options, increasing utility costs, and problems in family interaction. Through the Family Support Centers, families received food, clothing, housing assistance, utility assistance, parenting education, job training, physical and mental health services, and assistance in meeting their educational needs. The Network facilitated access to a number of programs within FRCA and CCF and other community agencies—including Comprehensive Emergency Services, FRCA and CCF Counseling, Early Start, Parents as Teachers, Parenting in Progress, Thundermist Health Center, the Woonsocket Housing Authority, NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, Blackstone Valley Community Action, and Network Rhode Island.

The Chace initiative increased the capacity of FRCA and CCF to respond to the needs of at-risk families in the Woonsocket area. Both agencies added staff to respond to the increased demand for services. They increased and reconfigured their facilities to better serve the families. The two lead agencies increased the number of families they serve, offering a broader range of services and resources. The number served in the agencies' two Family Support Centers showed strong growth in demand. Families seeking assistance with basic needs now have a path into the agencies' more intensive services if they wish, while those receiving services from the agencies' existing programs have more coordinated resources to assist them with addressing basic needs. The Network expanded the number of agencies and programs sharing information and resources.

The evaluation shows that the Network accomplished the goals it set out to achieve. Outcome data show that parents made significant improvements in their parenting abilities and that the risk of abuse and neglect decreased among families receiving parent support services. Families have become more self-sufficient, making significant improvements in their housing,

health, and employment situations. Through the extensive number of activities offered families, parents and children have far more opportunities to become involved in their community. **Notable accomplishments** during the three years include:

- Increased capacity to respond to Woonsocket families' needs for basic services and parenting support. The Network facilitated the development of two Family Support Centers, which served over 10,000 families in the past three years. These centers facilitated families' access to community resources and to other more comprehensive programs. The two lead agencies' family support programs, which together served approximately 1000 families over the past three years, have been able to use the Family Support Centers to address families' needs through a more coordinated response.
- Expanded collaboration among community agencies, including Blackstone Valley Community Action, Thundermist Health Center, the Woonsocket Housing Authority, and NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, as well as local schools and churches. Collaboration with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families was strengthened through the Woonsocket Community Initiative, which was successfully expanded to include all of Region IV in 2007.
- Expanded outreach to the community through hundreds of events and community activities which were designed to increase families' involvement in their community and reduce isolation.
- Development of parent leadership skills through the Parent Advisory Group and workshops. Parents have participated in legislative advocacy and have developed their skills in communicating with community and state agencies.
- Significant improvements in the family's environment, parenting, relationships, safety, and child well-being. The great majority of families receiving parent support services either showed improvement in these areas, or were able to be stabilized. Notable were improvements in housing, income and employment, and child well-being, and a decrease in safety risks, including risks associated with domestic violence. Findings showed a decreased need for state intervention among those receiving parent support services.

As the agencies participating in this initiative continue to seek ways to support at-risk families, the evaluation points to a number of **challenges**:

- Adequacy of community resources to respond to a wide range of needs, including needs for safe and stable housing, utility assistance, employment and training, and parenting support. With the cuts proposed in supports for needy families, there will need to be heightened advocacy.
- Stresses on families resulting from increases in food and energy costs. Increased transportation costs may also lead to greater isolation of families.
- A growing Hispanic community with needs for English language support and trained bilingual staff to work with non-English speaking families. Agencies are encouraged to

support strategies that will allow bi-lingual parents to further their education, and bi-lingual staff to advance their professional training.

- Employment and job readiness. Given Woonsocket's high poverty rate, these are critical priorities for Woonsocket's families. Families need educational supports, such as GED preparation and literacy programs, to enhance their job readiness. Other employment supports, such as resume preparation, job interviewing skills, and access to suitable clothing are among the supports to which agencies will need to link families.
- Meeting the needs of two parent families. The agencies' parent support programs are serving an increasing percentage of two parent families. Services will need to be tailored to these families, their schedules, and their needs. Staff will want to be particularly attentive to strategies for engaging fathers in service, and furthering their involvement in parent leadership initiatives.
- Strengthening linkages and enhancing supports for children with behavioral issues and needs for educational supports. Although significant improvements were noted in children's behavioral issues and school performance, a number of children remained at-risk for difficulties in these areas. Linkages with schools and mental health providers continue to be an important piece of the family support continuum.
- Supporting concrete service delivery for at-risk families. Funding streams need to be identified for supporting the staff and facilities that are integral to offering families coordinated access to those services necessary for meeting basic needs. Without access to these services, parents will struggle with meeting their day-to-day needs, thus limiting the effectiveness of longer-term, more intensive services. Support for such services should be a core part of any plan designed to enhance families' well-being.

The Chace Woonsocket Family Support Initiative is the third neighborhood-based family support initiative supported by the United Way of Rhode Island, and the second Chace family support initiative. It builds on the earlier successes of Children's Friend and Service and the John Hope Settlement House's Family Renewal Center. Each initiative provided resources which have been leveraged to expand capacity, increase families' accessibility to service, and more seamlessly link families with services on an individualized basis. Services build on families' strengths and are designed to reduce the need for more extensive and costly state intervention. Each of these initiatives consistently showed improvements in the well-being of the children and families served and resulted in stronger ties between the agencies and the communities they serve. The efforts of the programs involved in these initiatives demonstrate the results that are possible with carefully planned, coordinated community-based efforts. There are common themes that run through each of these efforts. Each was characterized by:

- Flexible, non-categorical services coordinated by professionally trained staff
- Collaboration among community providers
- Connections with neighborhood based resource centers and parent support services
- Culturally competent services
- Parent involvement and leadership development
- Accountability through evaluation
- Leadership directed toward building strong communities

With funding from these initiatives, these agencies have shown us that it is possible to support families and their children in a way that wisely uses resources and enhances the well-being of children and their parents. Their work provides a guide for others seeking positive outcomes for Rhode Island's families.