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Letter to the Editor

Citizen review panels: The connection between training and perceived effectiveness

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To the Editor:

In the United States, citizen participation has long been held as a core value fundamental to democracy. Citizen Review Panels (CRP) for child protective services were born from the idea that the larger community should have a stake in the welfare of children. In 1999, the federal Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act ([US Department of Health and Human Services, 1998](#)) mandated states to implement at least three Citizen Review Panels as a prerequisite to receiving federal child welfare funding.

A challenge for Citizen Review Panels has been to ensure that its volunteer members are prepared to provide the appropriate level of oversight without becoming bogged down in issues which do not result in improving the child welfare system. Accordingly, a recent study we conducted highlighted the importance of training for Citizen Review Panel members.

A total of 332 Citizen Review Panel members responded to a survey in which they were asked about the training they received in order to perform their duties as members. Among 56 items appearing on a research questionnaire, respondents were asked about any training they received, their perception of their panel's effectiveness, their CRP's involvement in the policy-making process, and other variables which have been shown to be important to effective citizen participation (see [Jones, 2004](#) for a full report on the larger study). A subset of relevant variables from that study allowed for three different ways of accessing effectiveness of the panels and these variables are the focus of this study.

Three questions from the larger survey were combined to create a scale that served as a measure of CRP effectiveness. The items asked if the CRP influenced decisions made by the child protective service system, if the reports and recommendations of the CRP were acted upon, and if the suggestions made have been implemented. Using this index of perceived effectiveness as a dependent variable, it was found that respondents who received training had significantly higher ratings of perceived effectiveness than respondents who had received no training relative to their roles as CRP members.

In a second comparison, this variable was examined by whether or not the respondents had received training. It was revealed that more than twice as many of those believing that their CRP had a "large" or "enormous" effect received training compared to those who received no training. Similarly, almost twice as many of those stating that the CRP had "no" or "slight" effect had no training compared to those who had received training. This variable was also significantly impacted by whether or not the Panels had access to a paid staff person.

A third measure allowed respondents the opportunity to assess the level and quality of their CRP's relationship with the child welfare system by using a "ladder" with steps indicating low or higher levels of involvement. Their choices were that the child welfare system (a) uses the CRP to push its own agenda, (b) engages in one-way communication, (c) consults with citizens but does not give them any power, (d) allows citizens to share in decision-making but retains all the power to change things, or (e) citizens on the panel have the needed power to actively change the child welfare system.

When these categories were examined by the training variable, it was found that an astounding 86% of those who felt that the CRPs had the needed power to change the child welfare system had received training. And on the lowest rung of the citizen participation ladder (where it was felt that the child welfare system used the CRPs to push its own agenda), 80% of the respondents had received no training.

States were given broad leeway by the federal government in terms of the resources provided to CRPs (i.e., staff support and budgets), the narrowness or broadness of their tasks (i.e., combined coverage with foster care or child fatality review boards), and the training that Panel members received to perform their tasks. The findings of this study reveal that this final consideration, the training of panel members, is crucial in fostering perceptions of effectiveness among Panel members.

From anecdotal conversations with CRP members, it was learned that “training” for CRP members can run the gambit from a brief overview of the duties of Citizens Review Panel members to extensive, multi-day in-services on, for example, on how to review evidence in child fatalities.

The findings from this study make a compelling argument for the provision of orientation and training for Citizen Review Panel members in order to assist them in becoming competent evaluators and overseers of state child welfare systems.

Citizen Review Panels were envisioned by the US Congress as a way to move state child welfare agencies toward increased accountability and as a way to provide local communities the means by which to comment on and possibly improve child protection policy and practices. Although the “jury is still out” with regards to whether or not CRPs are actually achieving the goal of enhancing state child protection systems, findings from this study suggest that training of CRP members is directly related to citizen panel members’ perceptions that they are effective in their responsibilities to monitor and bring about improvement in child welfare systems.

References

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