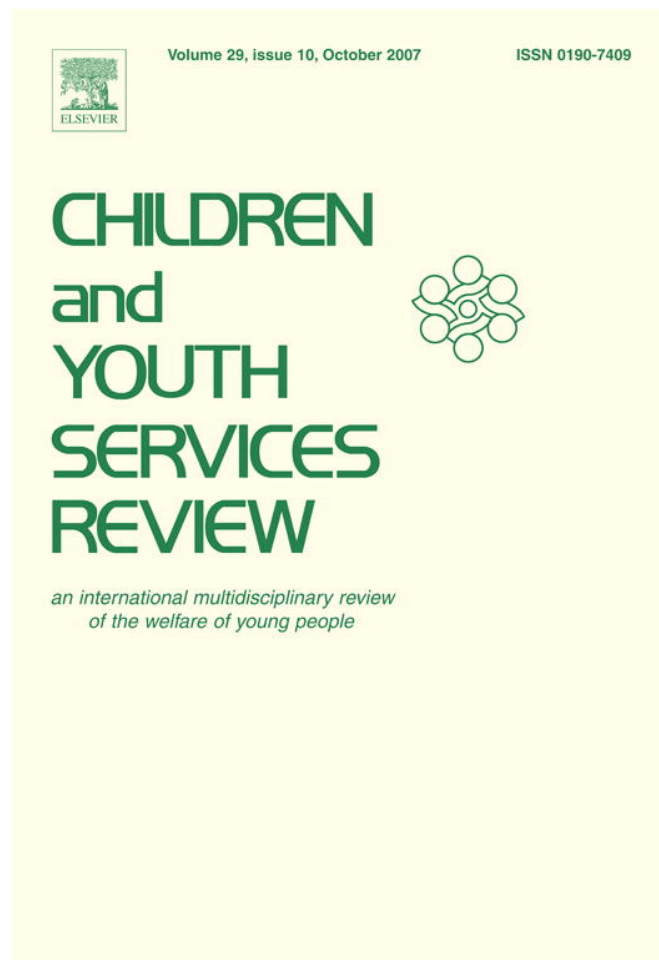


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Civic engagement or token participation? Perceived impact of the citizen review panel initiative

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Abstract

State child welfare systems in recent years have been increasingly compelled to include citizen stakeholders in public policy evaluation. A key mechanism for increased citizen involvement has been the development of citizen review panels (CRPs) in the area of child protective services. Citizen review panels are groups of citizen volunteers who are federally mandated through the CAPTA Amendments of 1996 to evaluate state child welfare agencies. Despite the age of the mandate, very few researchers have examined the impact of the initiative upon child welfare services. This article describes the process of and results from a statewide evaluative study of the federal citizen review panel (CRP) initiative to improve child protective services in a rural southern state. The study employed multiple methods to capture a variety of stakeholder views, including the use of panel member surveys and focus groups, content analysis of CRP annual reports and state responses, and semi-structured state stakeholder interviews. Results from these efforts were analyzed and synthesized to identify prevalent, convergent and divergent themes of state agency and panel perspectives. Findings from the study are discussed as well as recommendations for improvement in the functioning of the panels.

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1. Introduction

State child welfare systems in recent years have been increasingly compelled to include citizen stakeholders in public policy evaluation (Myers, 2006; Schorr, 2000; Waldfogel, 2000). A key

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mechanism for increased citizen involvement has been the development of citizen review panels (CRPs) in the area of child protective services. Created through a 1996 amendment (Public Law 104–235) to the federal Child Abuse and Treatment Act (CAPTA), citizen review panels are directed to evaluate state child welfare agencies and make recommendations for improvement in child protective services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).

The panels are composed of volunteer members, often including many with expertise in the prevention of child abuse and neglect (Jones, 2004b). Though the federal legislation gave states considerable leeway in how panels were to be implemented and what activities would define their purpose, it is clear that the law intended for them to serve an oversight function in promoting more responsive public child welfare systems (United States Congress, 1996). Among other provisions, Public Law 104–235 called for the implementation of at least three citizen review panels in each state by July 1999 (Jones, Litzelfelner, & Ford, 2003). According to the law, a citizen review panel is to be representative of the community, meet at least once every three months, and submit an annual report to the federal government outlining their activities and recommendations (Jones et al., 2003). There was also a directive that child protection agencies be cooperative in providing needed information and technical assistance to the panels (Jones et al., 2003). In summary, the legislation provided the panels with a broad mandate: to ensure that the state was in compliance with the state CAPTA plan; to assure that the state was coordinating with the Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs; to assess the CPS agency in its compliance with the review of child fatalities; and to evaluate any other piece of the CPS system which the panels deemed important.

1.1. Prior studies and related research

Despite the broad mandate given to states regarding citizen review panels and the potential resultant ramifications, only a sparse literature regarding citizen review panel involvement in child protective services has developed. There have been only two published studies on citizen review panels to date, and these were somewhat limited in their methodology. Additionally, one of the studies involved multiple states with disparate types of panels (e.g., states which used existing panels, such as child fatality review boards, to fulfill the function of their CRPs, and states that had created a “hybrid” of panels by adding new members to existing panels), thus challenging the validity of any cross-group comparisons.

In a small study of citizen review panel members’ and child protective service workers’ opinions regarding their respective roles, Jones et al. (2003) found a significant difference between these two groups when asked whether or not the child protection system was in need of change. CRP panel members indicated that there was a need for change, but child protection workers did not share this view. The findings from this study also suggested that citizen review panel members should spend a considerable amount of time becoming familiar with the child welfare system before attempting to evaluate it.

Researchers have also studied citizen review panel members’ perceptions of effectiveness (Jones, 2004a,b). The findings from these studies suggest that the perceived effectiveness of panels in influencing policy is related to increased communication between the panels and the child welfare agency, an awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals. Factors found to impede effectiveness included a lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication.

Other related studies have focused on the functioning of various citizen boards. These panels have been utilized in efforts to initiate citizen involvement in areas including but not limited to community mental health (Morrison, Holdridge, & Smith, 1978), AIDS research (Cox, Rouff,

Svedsen, Markowitz, & Abrams, 1998), and law enforcement (Barton, 1970). Research generally indicates that citizen advisory boards are most effective when they have clearly communicated goals and objectives, and when they are given access to needed information to make decisions (Callahan, 1999; Zander, 1993).

In a meta-analysis of fifteen studies on citizen participation in environmental cleanup efforts, Peelle, Schweitzer, Munro, Carnes, and Wolfe (1996), found the following features to be essential in developing successful citizen participation: agency clarity on goals and stakeholder roles in public participation; top management commitment to the public participation process; manager/leaders' willingness to go beyond legal minimum; agency responsiveness to stakeholders; two-way communication and education; interactive and iterative public participation; adequate resources; development of provisional trust between agency and public; giving priority to trust building actions; and openness of the agency. Given the similar intent behind the development of these various forms of planned citizen participation in public policy discourse, it may be the case that these critical elements of successful citizen engagement also apply to the specific case of citizen review panel involvement in child welfare, but comparisons remain speculative without further examination.

1.2. Context and purpose of the current study

The state under study complied with the CAPTA Amendments of 1996 by establishing three citizen review panels in the spring of 1999. Since then, the state added two more regional panels. At the time of this study, all five regional panels were active, ranging in size from nine to 17 members. Citizen review panels in this state also have one attendee assigned to each from the state agency responsible for child protection who serves as a liaison between the panel and the state. Each year since 2000, the panels have formally communicated with the state by submitting an annual report containing an activity summary along with recommended changes to child welfare practice and policy, and the Cabinet has issued a written response to the annual CRP report since 2003, after a Memorandum of Understanding between the two entities was adopted in 2002. The panels' efforts have been coordinated by state university personnel to organize and structure their efforts across regions.

Citizens review panels had been operating within the state for over 7 years when, in the spring of 2006, child welfare state administrators and the CRP coordinator determined that evaluating the effects of the CRP initiative was a timely and necessary endeavor, given the panels' development and growth over this time frame. It was decided that obtaining current information about CRP activities, perceived benefits of citizen review panels' efforts to the child welfare agency and to system-involved children and families, challenges and obstacles to effective partnership between the agency and CRPs, and recommendations for future CRP initiatives would be useful to examine for the purpose of improving and strengthening citizen review panels and their impact upon child welfare practice in the state. For this reason, the study described herein was launched in May 2006.

The current study fills a gap in the literature by providing not only the results of an evaluation of a state's citizen review panels, but also a potential prototype of how the effects of a complex public policy initiative such as this may be investigated. This study is the first of its kind to conduct a comprehensive, statewide evaluation of citizen review panels in which all of the panels are similar in terms of their development, function, and administration.

The evaluation design focused upon expected outcomes of CRP involvement in child welfare and partnership with the state agency. The study's findings summarized here resulted from the

investigation of the following five questions: 1.) How effectively do citizens review panel members perceive their efforts to be in positively affecting child protective services delivery?; 2.) How effectively are the citizen review panels and the child welfare agency communicating with each other?; 3.) How responsive is the agency to the panels' recommendations given in their annual reports?; 4.) What do state child welfare agency officials perceive the role of the panels to be in developing and enacting child protection policies?; and 5.) What can the panels do to further assist the child welfare agency in developing and implementing effective child protection policies? Answers to these questions were pursued through a multi-method evaluative approach including focus groups with citizen review panels, an online survey of citizen review panel members, and content analysis of CRP reports and child welfare agency responses. Findings from these activities were cross-validated and compared with the results of interviews with regional and state-level child welfare agency personnel to obtain a multiple stakeholder perspective and to identify areas where viewpoints were divergent between panels and state agency representatives. These activities were approved by both the university's and the state agency's Institutional Review Boards, and carried out by university researchers within the college of social work.

2. Methods and procedures

Five focus groups with citizen review panels ($n=34$) were completed on dates when panel members were convened to conduct business during May and June 2006. Agency liaisons who typically attend CRP meetings were asked to leave the group at the end of the CRP panel meetings, leaving only citizen review panel volunteers present for the focus group discussions. After obtaining informed consent from participants, the focus group process began by following the general outline provided by discussion questions, but participants also were encouraged to discuss any additional concerns or ideas. Participants were not asked for identifying information, except for their signatures on consent forms. Notes taken during focus groups by researchers and comments made during focus group discussions which were written on an easel board were used as data sources for analysis. These data were entered into qualitative analytic software for thematic analysis.

The online citizen review panel member survey was distributed to all 81 citizen review panel members via email during July and August of 2006. Despite sending a reminder message after the survey was deployed for two weeks, only 34 panel members completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 42%. The survey instrument was developed by adapting an existing instrument pertinent to assessing communication flow, including two questions related to the federal mandate's requirements involving adequate community representation and participation, and adding two open-ended questions requesting feedback on perceived barriers to and recommendations to improve the partnership with the state agency. Responses were recorded anonymously into a password-protected database, and data were retrieved for analysis at the end of August 2006. Because the survey was responded to anonymously, information about the 47 panel members who chose not to participate was not available.

Content analysis of citizen review panel annual reports to the child welfare agency offering recommended changes to service provision and policies affecting services, and of written responses from the Cabinet pertaining to these recommendations was conducted in order to describe and assess the quality of communication exchange between the agency and CRPs. Four pairs of reports were available for the years from 2003 through 2006. All documents were made available by the CRP program coordinator, and analysis was conducted during September and October 2006. Textual analysis was completed by examining recommendations and responses to

identify how recommendations were addressed, to what extent responses from the agency reflected an adequate recognition of problem areas identified by the CRP reports, and what, if any actions or strategies were planned to implement recommended changes.

A total of fifteen interviews with local, regional and state child welfare agency representatives were completed in August 2006 during fourteen face-to-face meetings and one liaison telephone interview. Agency liaisons, regional administrators, and agency headquarters officials were asked questions about their perceptions of the impact of citizen review panels, the purpose of the mandate which established citizen review panels, barriers to citizen involvement in public child welfare, and recommendations for future involvement. All who were invited through telephone and email contacts agreed to participate. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 min. Extensive notes were taken during interviews with agency personnel, and these data also were entered into a qualitative analysis software program for thematic analysis.

3. Instrumentation

3.1. Selection of focus group and state agency personnel interview questions

Questions presented to citizen review panel members during focus groups and to regional and state headquarters child welfare agency personnel during interviews were developed in consultation with the CRP coordinator and the agency-appointed statewide CRP liaison. Both had familiarity with the panels' efforts for several years and were able to advise the researchers as to the most pertinent topical areas in relation to the panels' activities and perceived effectiveness.

3.2. Online survey construction

The online survey was developed to assess panel members' perceptions of adequate community representation among panel membership and information flow between the panels and the state agency. Two questions were included to assess the extent to which panel members believed that their panels were representative of the communities in which they were located. Two open-ended questions asked for general feedback on panel members' greatest perceived obstacles to effective citizen–system partnerships and recommendations to improve the partnership. Remaining survey items included a subscale designed to assess information flow.

Perceived quality of communication with state agency personnel was evaluated by using an adapted form of an original instrument used in prior citizen review panel research to assess information flow (Jones, 2004b). This subscale consisted of seven questions, inquiring about how routinely agency officials seek CRP input, how early in the decision making process CRP input is sought, if information is willingly provided by the state agency that the CRPs need, how timely this information is provided, how understandable the information provided is, if the CRPs receive feedback about their annual written report submitted to the state agency, and if they perceive their reports and recommendations to have positively impacted child welfare policies and practices. Possible responses were on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. As this was a modified version of a previously used instrument that had not been psychometrically analyzed, testing was conducted to determine if it was an appropriate measure of effective information flow. Reliability testing returned a Cronbach's alpha score of .873, indicating strong internal consistency of items. Principal components analysis was then conducted to examine the information flow subscale's underlying structure. Testing to determine if the items contained within the scale were intercorrelated enough to measure a common construct provided convincing

results that this was the case, resulting in a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy equaling .801 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reporting $\chi^2 = 99.652$ ($df = 21$, $p = .000$).

4. Results

4.1. Citizen review panel focus groups

Thirty-four citizen review panel members attended and participated in the five focus groups. Thematic analysis of notes taken during the focus groups elicited twenty-two different content areas among responses to the nine questions posed to participants. This broad base of themes was then evaluated to develop larger categories under which discussion topics could be classified. This process developed eight primary themes, which were identified by having been raised at least five times during focus group discussions.

Findings from five focus groups indicated that citizen review panel members viewed themselves as primarily a source of support to the child welfare agency and to its goals. They reported being a source of support to the agency by being expert community partners, advocating for attention to child welfare issues, and by providing an objective lens through which to evaluate the child welfare system. CRP members appeared to perceive themselves as more effective when working with local and regional issues and agency personnel. In fact, most beneficial activities that panel members described were local efforts, such as appreciation breakfasts for front line staff, the creation of resource directories for workers, and exit interviews with resigning state workers.

Panel members reported concerns about two specific issues: the quality of formal communication with the child welfare agency, and their level of participation with the child welfare system. The CRPs believed that the work involved in investigating issues throughout the year and finalizing a set of thoughtful recommendations warranted a close inspection and equally thoughtful response, and many raised serious criticisms of the written responses CRPs received from the agency. Very similar responses across panel focus groups indicated that the general perception of the agency's written responses is that they were a "reframe" of recommendations, often lacking substance and identifiable action plans, and that in some cases, served merely as a "pat on the back."

The identified problems with communication may be symptomatic of a larger issue, raised very frequently in focus groups, that CRPs were not convinced that the agency viewed them as true partners in child welfare. Though they reported progress and achievement of genuine, productive relationships with workers at local levels, most perceived that agency officials viewed them, at best, as token partners. As a group, they did not appear to believe that they influenced child welfare policy makers.

Other obstacles CRP members reported which limited their abilities to take an active leadership role in child welfare were resources, and recruitment and retention of panel members. Their operational budgets were limited, lacking funds to make face-to-face visits with front line staff or to meet with headquarters officials on statewide concerns. Many also identified the need for more members to regularly attend meetings, and the need for more representative membership reflective of the communities in which the panels are located. Panel members reported a loss of valuable time when experienced members left panels and new members who replaced them needed to be educated and oriented to citizen review panel priorities and efforts. Several panel members indicated that they would like to see former clients become panel members but they also identified several barriers to their recruitment and retention. Four of the five panels reported that member recruitment and retention was an area in which they hoped to improve.

When asked what conditions were necessary for effective CRP involvement and partnership with the child welfare agency, panel members offered very similar responses across focus groups. All reported that they wished to improve the quality and frequency of communication, and some offered that this could be accomplished through the agency liaisons who attend panel meetings. Several discussed the need for mutual trust and respect and for the agency as a whole to understand that “we are not the enemy.” Last, a primary theme which emerged from these discussions was the need for agency accountability, most notably with regard to the annual reports. As one stated, “The recommendations and response should be the start of a conversation.”

4.2. Citizen review panel member survey

4.2.1. Respondent descriptive characteristics

Thirty-four panel members participated in the online CRP survey, with 30 answering all questions included in the survey. The survey instrument gathered background information on respondent gender, age, professional affiliation, and panel tenure. Panel members who completed the survey were predominately female ($n=29$, 85.3%), and ranged in age from 21 to 65 years old with a median age of 46. The majority of respondents identified themselves as social service professionals ($n=15$, 44.1%), with few respondents selecting other available work categories (including, medical and legal professions, homemaker, and retired). Ten respondents selected “other” (32.4%), and responses among these included five who identified themselves as educational professionals, two who responded that they were mental health professionals, one who was a school-based youth and family services director, one who worked in pastoral ministry, and one who worked in the area of improving child care quality. The median length of time respondents had served was just over a year, at 13.5 months. The range of time served on panels varied from one to 72 months.

4.2.2. Online survey findings

Responses regarding panel composition indicated that panels were not perceived as representative of the communities in which the CRPs are located. Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents supported this perception, as most were female former or current social services professionals. This finding mirrored the focus group results, indicating a need for enhanced recruitment efforts.

Overall, CRP members responded neutrally to questions regarding the flow of information between panels and the child welfare agency, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with four of the seven items regarding information flow. The most negative finding was in response to the item, “Citizen input is sought by the child welfare system early in the policy-making process, before decisions are made,” with all measures of central tendency anchored at 2, equaling “disagree.” The most positive result was in response to “My panel receives feedback from child protective services about the recommendations in our annual report,” wherein both the median and modal scores were 4, suggesting that most CRP members agreed with this statement. However, the item was not designed to assess the quality of the feedback CRPs receive.

The three most often identified obstacles to effective panel/system partnership by panel members included limited access to child welfare agency personnel, perceived public apathy to child welfare issues, and a lack of true engagement of and regular communication with agency personnel regarding the work of CRPs. Large caseloads and small CRP travel budgets were offered as reasons for why access to agency workers was inhibited and barred more effective partnership. The lack of public engagement was believed to be the result of a general perception

that the public could not facilitate change within the system, and a negative view of the child welfare agency as one that “breaks up families and steals children.” This finding implied that public apathy may inhibit panel recruitment efforts. As was noted before within focus group findings, survey respondents again identified a general sense of mistrust and suspicion of the panels by the agency as a barrier to authentic partnership and open communication that restricted the development of a productive working relationship.

In response to a request for three suggestions for how citizens can work more effectively with the child welfare system, panel members encouraged more widespread citizen involvement, for instance, by volunteering as court-appointed special advocates. Many also emphasized the need for citizens to become more generally aware and knowledgeable about child welfare concerns affecting their communities, such as by educating themselves on abuse reporting laws, the criminal justice system, and the foster care system. Others commented upon how strengthening the panels could improve the effectiveness of citizen involvement, by recruiting more representative membership from across service regions, and by retaining CRP members longer to benefit from their accumulated experience. Some identified the importance of a clearly defined purpose and focus of CRP efforts, though respondents viewed what this should be differently. A few respondents recommended specifying the federal mandate’s language to more clearly delineate the CRPs’ work scope. Last, a frequently noted recommendation was to improve the relationship and communication between the child welfare agency and CRPs, and with other stakeholders, such as legislators, schools and other community agencies.

4.3. Findings from state personnel interviews

Interviews with child welfare agency liaisons who serve on panels, service region administrators and state headquarters agency personnel largely supported findings from the citizen review panel focus groups and survey. A frequently emergent theme across agency personnel interviews was the positive perception they hold of the panels and the roles they fulfill as CRP members. Interviewees emphasized the support and advocacy that the panels provide to the agency, and identified specific examples of how CRP members had benefited local staff (e.g., writing letters to the media and legislators in the support of workers and agency policy, and advocating for resources). Like panel members, agency interviewees believed that the panels’ most effective initiatives were those concentrated at the local level. Interviewees particularly valued their ability to serve as a neutral group who could view the child welfare system “with fresh eyes,” which was perceived to be a strength that helps services and practices to evolve by offsetting the agency’s “tunnel vision” about policies and practices.

As discussed by CRPs during focus groups, liaisons and regional administrators, who work most directly and frequently with the panels, confirmed difficulties in the extent to which CRPs were treated as authentic partners in child welfare by state headquarters personnel. For example, one liaison stated, “I don’t see evidence that they are listening to CRPs at the state level.” Liaisons reported they knew that several of their panel members were frustrated by headquarters officials’ lack of responsiveness.

State headquarters interview participants discussed other problematic influences affecting the effectiveness of CRP efforts which supported the panel members’ perceptions. They too identified the lack of adequate representation on the panels as an obstacle limiting knowledge about what is needed in all regions CRPs serve. Also like others interviewed, they discussed the impact of the vague wording of the federal mandate which established the panels, identifying it as a source of confusion and misinterpretation. A few interviewees recommended the creation of

more defined guidelines for the panels at the state level, with specificity regarding what CRPs are to do in order to fulfill the mandate's purpose. State headquarters informants identified the liaison as the critical link between themselves and the CRPs, as did CRP focus group participants.

Although many comments offered during agency interviews echoed CRP focus group and survey findings, divergent perspectives also were offered by liaisons, regional administrators and headquarters personnel. For instance, though a number of CRP members perceived their participation as only token involvement, several headquarters interviewee responses seemed to contradict this perception. Headquarters interviewees acknowledged CRPs' authority to request data and their right to review case files as part of fulfilling their duties.

Also, though headquarters officials acknowledged difficulties in working effectively with CRPs over the years, agency interviewees often attributed the source of these problems to panel members' past behavior and challenges with fulfillment of their panel roles, as opposed to the reasons most frequently identified by the panels. Some expressed concerns that panel members were not working in a collaborative way with the agency, as two headquarters interviewees recalled instances wherein panel members misinterpreted their role and attempted "to tell the agency what to do." One interviewee raised a concern pertaining to individual panel members carrying personal agendas into their CRP efforts, noting that this negatively affected the working relationship with the agency. A few liaison and regional administrator informants recognized that the agency's past mistrust and misunderstanding of panels and their role within the system still existed currently in some field offices.

State headquarters interviewees expressed concern over panel members' lack of knowledge regarding the child welfare system and the nature of bureaucracy, and the unrealistic nature of some CRP recommendations. Interviewees suggested that unrealistic expectations may result from CRP members' lack of experience with the system and their stance of serving as an outside, neutral observer: "What may make sense to them is totally impossible for the agency to do." Additionally, one informant noted that the wide variability in the purpose of and justification for CRP recommendations within the annual reports made interpretation and follow through difficult, and served as a barrier to fully addressing what the CRPs suggested.

One interviewee offered that because child welfare issues exist beyond the agency's reach, that systemic issues in which the CRPs are interested need to be investigated in a broader manner, including other involved elements of child welfare, such as the family courts, public health, and community-based agencies who work with children and families. Headquarters personnel reported that they would also like to see solutions offered more frequently to the problems CRPs identify in their reports. Specific recommendations were offered: specification of the federal mandate to clarify the realm, scope and purpose of CRP activities; commitment from the agency to follow through on recommendations and an acknowledgement of accountability to the CRPs; assurance that experienced, dedicated liaisons were appointed to all panels, who would serve as the key intermediary between the agency and the panels through which information could be shared; and improved panel recruitment resulting in panel composition which was representative of the regions in which panels operate. State headquarters interviewees recognized the need for citizen review panels to be active participants in child welfare issues, noting, "We can't do this by ourselves. We need to share that burden and come up with solutions together."

4.4. Content analysis of CRP annual reports and agency responses

The citizen review panels' annual reports contained both a description of each panels' activities during the reporting year and recommendations arising from these activities. The panels

over the years have identified key areas which garner attention very frequently through their evaluative efforts within their annual reports, including improving the process of communication between the panels and the child welfare agency; strengthening the relationship and partnership between other involved systems and the child welfare agency, including law enforcement, the courts, and the school system; developing uniform protocols in the case of a child fatality or serious incident; supporting workers and advocating for resources; retaining workers and preventing turnover; and increasing trainings across a variety of content areas. Frequently, panels reported breaking into subcommittees to conduct more targeted and organized evaluative processes. CRP recommendations often clustered around and reflected panel subcommittee investigations and activities pertaining to specific topics of interest, and extensive rationale for recommendations resulting from subcommittee efforts was offered. The agency's responses to some of these recommendations were comprehensive, providing at times strong agreement with the recommendation and a description of strategies either in motion or in a planning stage to address the recommendation. When some recommendations were deemed unfeasible or untimely, these also were responded to with a thorough explanation as to why the matter could not be taken up at the time of the recommendation.

Though these examples of effective communication through the written reports from panels and the agency were identified, several instances of panel recommendations without sufficient justification and incomplete agency responses were also encountered, indicating problematic communication. For instance, in the 2003 annual report, one regional panel recommended "the expansion of the Memorandum of Understanding (between the agency and CRPs) to include development of communication channels and to obtain feedback from reports;" however, this recommendation was not identified as a source of difficulty within the panel's activity summary, and therefore presented inadequate explanation as to the source of the recommendation. The agency responded by stating, "Currently the [regional] panel and local management have an excellent relationship. We work together to solve problems and to create solutions." The language within the agency's response appeared avoidant of the issues raised; however, the panel also did not describe the reasons for why the recommendation was justified. It may have been the case that headquarters personnel who prepared the response in question were unaware of the extent to which the panel perceived communication or relationship barriers, and some context for the recommendation may have enlightened agency officials.

Starting in the 2005 annual report, the panels included at the beginning of their report the agency's response to the 2004 annual report. This format change provided a useful historical perspective which served to maintain timelines on when particular ideas and issues surfaced, what occurred over time, and how issues have transformed. This modification reflects the CRP initiative's developmental maturity as it currently exists in its seventh year.

5. Synthesis of findings

The study described herein focused on answering specific questions to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the CRP initiative to involve citizens in public child welfare as it has occurred in a rural southern state. The multi-method evaluative approach included information from all available sources and different stakeholder perspectives. Findings from these combined efforts are summarized as they relate to each of the study questions below:

- 1.) How effectively do citizen review panel members perceive their efforts to be in positively affecting child protective services delivery?

Findings from CRP focus groups and the CRP survey demonstrated that panel members' perceptions regarding their effectiveness in making a positive impact upon service delivery were mixed. Panel members view themselves as primarily a source of support to the child welfare agency and its goals, through their roles of expert community partners, advocates, and neutral observers of the child welfare system. CRP members perceived themselves as more effective when working at the local level on community issues rather than statewide policy matters. Panel members identified communication problems and a lack of authentic partnership with the agency, as well as resource and membership recruitment issues, as obstacles to reaching their full potential.

Responses to suggestions for more effective citizen involvement indicated that panel members would prefer a more clearly defined purpose and scope of work, and re-emphasized the need for improved communication with the agency.

- 2.) How effectively are the citizen review panels and the agency communicating with each other?

Findings from all sources (focus groups, interviews, survey, and content analysis of reports/recommendations) suggest that the current nature of communication between the agency and CRPs presents a serious obstacle needing attention. As noted above under question #1 panel members identified communication problems as a primary obstacle to fulfilling their duties effectively. All panels reported a need improve the quality and frequency of communication, and some offered that this could be accomplished through the child welfare agency liaisons who attend panel meetings. A primary focus group theme which emerged was the need for agency accountability, most notably with regard to the annual reports. Survey responses also identified communication problems as affecting the CRPs' perceptions of their own efforts. Most survey respondents disagreed with the statement, "Citizen input is sought by the child welfare system early in the policy-making process, before decisions are made." This indicates once more that the panel members who participated in the study did not perceive themselves to be true partners with the agency in the search for solutions to child welfare issues. CRP members do not appear to believe that they have actual influence upon agency policy makers, and this most likely affects how effective they perceive their efforts to be. Regional administrators and liaisons echoed these concerns about communication by recommending that experienced, dedicated liaisons be appointed to all panels, who could serve as the key intermediary between the agency and the panels through which information could be shared. A few state headquarters interviewees expressed concern with the quality of recommendations CRPs offer in their annual reports, indicating that the panels at times make recommendations without really understanding what the process of change may entail. Despite these communication difficulties and misunderstandings, headquarters officials also recognized that the agency needs to respect the panel members' efforts, and that this should be made evident in their communications with the panels. One respondent stated that the panel members should be "at the table" in the decision making process and they should offer thoughtful input, with the understanding that the agency must make the final decisions about policy and practice changes and improvements.

- 3.) How responsive is the child welfare agency to the panels' recommendations given in their annual reports?

Findings from focus groups, regional administrator and liaison interviews, survey results and content analysis indicate that the agency could improve the quality of its written response to CRP reports. Many panel members criticized the written responses CRPs

received from the agency as merely reframing or restating the panel recommendations without directly acknowledging if or how they may address the identified issue. Regional administrators and liaisons interviewed also expressed uncertainty about the level of cooperation between state headquarters and the panels. Though content analyses of the panels' and the agency's written reports revealed examples of effective communication, several panel recommendations were made without adequate justification and context, and some of the agency responses failed to mention any potential actions they might take to address the recommendations. This problematic communication may be negatively influencing the panels' and the agency's perceptions of each other and of the role the panels can fulfill in improving child welfare practice and policy.

- 4.) What do agency officials perceive the role of the panels to be in developing and enacting child protection policies?

Findings from regional and headquarters officials interviews indicated that the agency views the citizens review panel members' primary roles as those of "objective third party," agency advocate, staff support, and expert community partner. Most regional administrators and liaisons viewed the evaluative role the CRPs carry out as important, and helped to offset the agency's "tunnel vision" about policies and practices. State headquarters personnel particularly valued their ability to serve as a neutral group who could view the child welfare system "with fresh eyes." Informants perceived this to be a strength that facilitates quality assurance which helps services and practices to evolve. Interviewees frequently described panel members, the roles they fulfill, and their activities positively, emphasizing the support and advocacy they provide to the agency. Some did recall, however, past difficulties and misunderstandings encountered when working with CRP members, specifically when members misinterpret the boundaries of their role or bring personal agendas into their CRP efforts, noting that this negatively affects the working relationship with the agency. Like others, headquarters personnel identified the most beneficial work of the CRPs as occurring at the local level, by acknowledging the work of front line staff and advocating on their behalf.

- 5.) What can the panels do to further assist the agency in developing and implementing effective child protection policies?

Regional and agency headquarter personnel interview findings suggested that the agency does not view the role of CRPs to primarily serve the purpose of developing and implementing policies (see question #4), but rather as expert community partners who can provide an objective viewpoint and necessary critique. It should be noted, however, that the mandate's language indicates that panels should examine and evaluate existing state and agency policy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998); in so doing, it would be expected that recommendations they offer would impact the shaping of policy. Again, the broad language of the mandate may operate as the source of much miscommunication, role confusion and misinterpretation of CRP responsibility. Agency interviewees indicated that CRPs could help front line workers the most by advocating for human and technological resources. One agency headquarters interviewee suggested that systemic issues in which the CRPs are interested need to be investigated in a broader manner, including other involved elements of child welfare, such as the family courts, public health, and community-based agencies who work with children and families, and that this extended scope would ultimately benefit the agency's efforts. Agency headquarters personnel also wanted to see solutions offered more frequently to the problems CRPs identify in their reports. Additionally, they recommended that CRP members take on the

role of intermediary between different parties and providers, explore public relations endeavors, and educate legislators about agency work, in the hopes of securing more workers and funding for initiatives.

Analysis and synthesis of evaluation findings from all sources resulted in the following recommendations:

- Work to create and pass state-level legislation which would clarify the purpose, role, and duties of citizen review panels, in order to identify the scope of their efforts and in what ways the citizen review panels, the agency, and other partners responsible for child welfare within the state are accountable to each other as a result of the federal mandate.
- Improve the level of specificity within the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the agency and panels by including a feasible protocol for ongoing exchanges of information which will facilitate the ability of all parties to follow through with action plans and to keep all informed about the result of recommendations throughout the change process.
- Improve communication between all levels of the agency and the panels through first, adequate preparation and orientation of appointed liaisons who will serve in a consistent manner as an intermediary between the agency and the panels. Secondly, propose this issue as an open topic of discussion among involved parties to identify mutually acceptable ways in which ongoing, constructive communication can be achieved.
- The agency, the CRP program coordinator, and the panels should consider developing a unified, strategic plan to recruit panel members from a broader base of applicants to assure adequate representation of each region's citizenry on the panels.
- The citizen review panels and the agency should work to identify areas together in which panel members may lack knowledge or training regarding child welfare issues, policies or practice, and the agency should offer ways in which panel members can be educated in these areas at no cost to the members, in order to improve the quality of recommendations offered by all panels every year. The CRP program coordinator in partnership with regional agency staff and CRP chairpersons can help to identify areas of need.
- The state agency should seek to improve the quality of responses offered to each recommendation presented in the panels' annual reports, addressing all items offered with at the least, a reasoned explanation as to why recommendations are not feasible or timely when appropriate. Action plans, prospective timelines, and updates as they become known should be offered to the panels in response to recommendations which the agency expects to act upon. The recommendation for a follow-up protocol as agreed upon within the MOU as listed above should support this process.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Citizen review panels were conceptualized by the U.S. Congress as a way for citizens to take an active role in evaluating the effectiveness of state child welfare agencies and, ultimately, improving these systems. As previously discussed, research has shown that citizen panels are most effective when they are given the information they need to function and when panels set out clear goals and objectives for their work (Callahan, 1999; Zander, 1993). The results from this study suggest that, although the state's citizen review panels are valued by the state child welfare system, the extent to which panels fully participate with the state in effecting change is inhibited and limited by several problematic factors.

The flow of information to and from the panels is crucial in assisting the panels with their evaluation of the system. However, this communication appears to be stymied at times by lack of consistency and a general perception by panel members that they are sometimes viewed as token participants.

An additional challenge to true collaboration between a public agency and a citizen panel is the perceptions of each entity's role (Callahan, 1999; Jones, 2004a; Jones, 2004b; Peelle et al., 1996). This study's findings support the extant research in this area by indicating that a divide exists between the state agency and the citizen review panels in terms of their perceived roles. Although there is a general sense of appreciation shown toward the work of the panels, it is clear that senior agency leadership does not instinctively include their work in the development of policy, for example. Continued dialogue in this area is needed to refine the Memorandum of Understanding and other informal discussions should occur to clarify whether CRPs should take more of a "watchdog" or "agency advocate" role; it is feasible that the panels could envision themselves as both, but this would need to be elucidated more clearly.

The most tangible work product of any citizen review panel is the annual report. This report is mandated by Congress (Administration for Children and Families, 1998) and is to contain a discussion of the panels' activities throughout the year as well as their recommendations for improvement in child protective services. Although there is wide variability nationally with regard to CRP annual reports (Jones, 2004b), this state's panels have consistently generated reports which give information about their activities for the year and detailed recommendations. These reports are the public record of their work and represent a crucial aspect of a functioning citizen board (Callahan, 1999). This study suggests, however, that there is room for improvement both in the rationale given by panels as to how they reached their conclusions, and in the responses offered by the agency.

A final challenge in creating an effective, responsive citizen review board is the ongoing need for diversity of panel membership and training of volunteers. Previous research has shown that citizen review panel membership is overwhelmingly female and Caucasian, and that most panel members are social workers (Jones, 2004b). The same holds true in the state under study. Congress mandates that CRPs should be "representative of their community" (Administration for Children and Families, 1998); however, the findings from the current study would suggest that there are large portions of the community (e.g., foster parents, the faith community, minorities) which are being underrepresented on the panels. A concerted effort in recruiting and training these stakeholders should be a priority of any CRP program coordinator or agency leading this initiative. Finally, training should be not be viewed as a one-time orientation, but rather as an ongoing process of educating panel members about important and contemporary issues impacting child welfare systems.

This mechanism's potential to facilitate citizen participation in child welfare may prove to be an important contribution, but this will remain unknown without further study. Despite the low response rate to the CRP survey, findings which surfaced from it were validated through the use of multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives. Also, though the present study's findings are limited to the state in which it was conducted, it is believed that the mixed-method design undertaken may offer a framework to those seeking to understand and improve the functioning of CRPs in other locations. It is hoped that the findings from this evaluation may motivate other researchers to investigate the CRP policy initiative and its effects.

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