

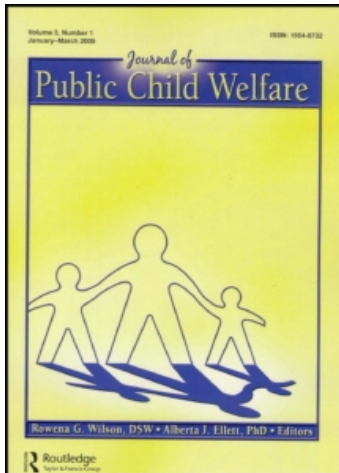
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### What Do We Know About Strategies for Involving Citizens in Public Child Welfare: A Review of Recent Literature and Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

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# **What Do We Know About Strategies for Involving Citizens in Public Child Welfare: A Review of Recent Literature and Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

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*Citizens are increasingly being called upon to participate in public child welfare programs. This participation—through such federally mandated programs as Foster Care Review Boards, Court Appointed Special Advocates, and Citizen Review Panels—can potentially promote authentic community involvement or leave angry agencies and panel members in its wake. These disparate outcomes are dependent upon numerous factors both within the child welfare agency and the broader civic domain. This article reviews the current literature on citizen participation in public child welfare with special emphasis on the programs mentioned above. Additionally, strategies are offered for using citizens to support positive change within public child welfare agencies.*

**KEYWORDS** *citizen participation, citizen involvement, foster care review boards, court appointed special advocates, citizen review panel*

Noted author Sherry Arnstein once said that “the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach—no one is against it because it is good for you” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 245). For the past 30 years, state child welfare agencies

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have been forced to partake in the “spinach” of citizen involvement. The inclusion of citizens within the public policy making arena has taken place within the larger context of a shifting attitude toward citizen participation in all forms of bureaucracies.

Since at least the 1980s, the federal government has steadily devolved the delivery of social services to the state level. This initiative has come about because of a realization that social problems are interconnected, and that a collaborative community response is needed to ameliorate the impact of such social ills as welfare dependency, homelessness, and child abuse/neglect (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998; Tracy, 2001; Waldfogel, 1998). Through devolution, individual states must take more responsibility for implementing and monitoring their social service system, not just through the work of public agencies, but also through the engagement of advocates and community partners. As funding for services becomes tighter, there is a perceived benefit of engaging the broader community in advocacy for necessary allocation, and for identification of alternative funding strategies.

As Blome and Steib (2008) have noted, child welfare agency personnel currently spend an inordinate amount of time responding to the various requests for data, reports, cases, and other material requested of them by external reviewers. The authors argue that this results in public child welfare agencies, which are less focused on providing quality services and more on risk management. Our goal is not to challenge their assertion, but to further discuss the extant literature on citizen participation in public child welfare and to propose practical strategies whereby citizens can assist child welfare agencies in the crucial work of protecting and serving families and children.

This article reviews three forms of mandated citizen involvement in the state public child welfare system: 1) Foster Care Review Boards, 2) Court Appointed Special Advocates, and 3) Citizen Review Panels, including a review of the limited research found in the professional literature and their role in the child welfare system. A discussion follows with lessons learned for involving citizens and using them to promote positive outcomes for children and families drawn from the literature and practice experience. Each presents opportunities for future research on their contributions to the achievement of these outcomes.

## FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARDS

In an effort to redirect fiscal incentives away from out-of-home placements and toward preventative services to keep families in need together (Byrnes, 2002), Congress enacted the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272). The Act called for, among other things, a service plan for each child in care which would describe appropriate services and how the agency plans to provide them, the incorporation of a system of

review into foster care programs and a court or administrative review of foster care cases at least every 6 months (Public Law 96-272). Individual states were given discretion to choose administrative, judicial or citizen review systems (or a combination of these systems) in creating Foster Care Review Boards (FCRBs) so long as foster care cases were being reviewed at least at 6-month intervals, with one such review per year being held in court (Public Law 96-272). Most commonly, FCRBs are composed of volunteer citizens from the community who review the case files of children in foster care, and report to the court as to the progress being made to the achievement of permanency for the child, working to provide some level of external accountability for the child welfare system in a given state.

A thorough search of the Social Work Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts databases turned up only a handful of relevant studies regarding the utilization of recommendations from state FCRBs; therefore more research is certainly warranted in this area. One such study conducted by Byrnes (2002) examined how FCRB recommendations were being utilized by Juvenile Court judges and the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) case managers in Utah. The study also included a survey of the case workers on their perceptions of FCRB.

After examining 131 cases, Byrnes (2002) found that 71% of the case plans contained at least one recommendation beyond basic placement decisions and permanency goals from the FCRB, 43.5% had at least two additional recommendations and 26% had at least three. Within the utilization domain for DCFS, when controlling for specific permanency, custody and placement decisions, 75.9% of the cases had permanency goals that matched those recommended by the FCRB and 63.4% included custody and placement decisions that matched what was stated in the FCRB review (Byrnes, 2002).

The findings regarding Juvenile Court utilization were notably lower, with only 35% of the cases having clear correlations between court decisions regarding permanency goals and FCRB review findings. While 12.9% of the recommendations made by the FCRB were related specifically to custody and/or guardianship, only half of these recommendations were clearly followed by the court (Byrnes, 2002).

The survey, which was mailed to 175 DCFS case workers, measured several domains, including worker satisfaction with the FCRB, how likely they were to follow FCRB recommendations, whether or not they considered the recommendations to be helpful in managing their cases and how well the FCRB process furthered the process of health, safety and well-being of children in care.

Data from the satisfaction domain indicated that most of the workers responding were less than somewhat satisfied with the process and felt that there was room for improvement in FCRB reviews (Byrnes, 2002). Furthermore, respondents indicated that they were not likely to utilize FCRB recommendations, with 60.7% stating that they *never*, *almost never* or *some-*

times followed FCRB recommendations (Byrnes, 2002). When asked how helpful they felt FCRB recommendations were in managing their cases, 57.8% indicated that they were either *not very helpful* or *not helpful at all* (Byrnes, 2002). Lastly, Byrnes (2002) found that a majority of workers believed the FCRB process did not serve to further the health, safety and well-being of foster children. The findings of this research study seem to indicate that while child welfare agency's case plan recommendations were consistent with those of the FCRB, actual integration of them into their decisions and daily practices by workers as well as the Juvenile Court was infrequent.

As part of a larger Court Improvement Program Reassessment study aimed at enhancing Kentucky's dependency, neglect and abuse court system, Collins-Camargo and colleagues (2005) conducted a survey of FCRB members in the state to gather information on their perceptions of the review process and how recommendations were being utilized by the courts. A review of responses to open-ended questions highlighted several significant concerns about the review process, including issues of communication between the board and the court, a desire for feedback from the court and a perceived need to integrate the review process more fully into the court system itself. Most board members also reported that the court *almost never* responds specifically to FCRB recommendations. Such concerns led some FCRB members to question the significance and worth of their review. More positively, close to half of the respondents indicated that the court *almost always* moves to correct problems when the board reports that the state's child welfare agency has failed to take needed actions on behalf of a child or family (Collins-Camargo et al., 2005). These seemingly contradictory findings suggest ambivalent beliefs regarding the Court's use of their recommendations by many reviewers.

The study also included a survey of judges, the results of which demonstrate that their perceptions of the relationship between the court and FCRB were vastly different from those of board members themselves. Although approximately 50% of the judges responded that they *almost never* attend volunteer FCRB trainings, 89.4% of them expressed the sense that their relationship with the FCRB was either *good* or *excellent*. In addition, three quarters of the judges who responded reported that they do review FCRB findings and recommendations regarding cases (Collins-Camargo et al., 2005).

Some states have expanded their FCRB program beyond case file review to include interviews or *testimony* before the Board by family members, the child welfare agency staff and others (Gregory, 2004). Arizona, Oregon, and Utah have published reports focused on stakeholder perceptions of the impact of these Interested Party Review forms of FCRB. When stakeholders, such as FCRB volunteers, judges, case managers, and foster parents, were asked to rate the Arizona program's performance, all stakeholders were positive with the exception of case managers, who were almost always negative (Freeman & Hood, 1999). In Utah, stakeholders were asked to rate

the effectiveness of FCRB reviews in assuring and verifying that the needs of each foster child are being met and that families are receiving appropriate services. Judges, legal representatives, and DCFS workers collectively rated periodic court reviews and permanency hearings as more effective than FCRB reviews. While the combined group did not rate the FCCRB reviews as *very effective*, one quarter of judges among the combined group rated the FCCRB reviews as *very effective*. Similarly, the Oregon survey study found that almost 90% of judges agreed that the FCRB is effective in monitoring agency efforts in providing appropriate services and plans for children and youth in substitute care; on the other hand, only 40% of DHS employees agreed (Gregory, 2004).

Utah's and Oregon's evaluation reports indicated that most judges perceived the FCRB reports as valuable in making court decisions. When foster care caseworkers and supervisors in Utah were asked to rate the frequency of using the foster care review information in making case management decisions, the majority responded *rarely* or *occasionally*. Oregon's staff were asked to rate how seriously they consider FCRB recommendations, and 63% of them responded *very seriously*, or *seriously*. Judges were asked the same question and 81% of judges responded *very seriously*, or *seriously* (Gregory, 2004).

Another study examined perceptions of Kentucky's Interested Party Review Program, using qualitative interviews with judges and child welfare staff. Similar to other reported studies, 80% judges, 50% supervisors and 25% workers gave local IPR board an "A" in performance. In addition, 87.5% supervisors and 56.2% workers felt positive about participating in IPR. This study included limited comparative analysis of administrative data for a matched sample of 132 IPR and 301 non-IPR cases in which the children had left foster care. A statistically significant difference was found in months in foster care between children receiving IPR and those not receiving IPR, favoring those receiving the review process. Length of time to achieve permanency was the only outcome variable examined in this study (Collins-Camargo, Rhee, & Bryan, 2007).

The limited research on FCRBs has focused primarily on perceptions and process rather than outcome variables, and indicates a need for closer examination by states of the case review and recommendation utilization process. Byrnes' (2002) study strongly suggests that input and recommendations from the FCRB were either not useful or underutilized. Additionally, much work needs to be done to improve case workers' perceptions of the citizen review process, as the findings were inconsistent across studies in this regard. It would be useful for research to attempt to tease out how those programs viewed positively were different than those perceived as less positive. Only one limited study was found that compared outcomes for cases receiving Interested Party Review as a form of FCRB with those that did not. The finding that IPR cases had a significantly shorter time in foster care

is notable (Collins-Camargo et al., 2007), however, and further comparative research is needed.

The current research base on the efficacy and usefulness of FCRB recommendations is extremely limited despite the fact that this process is federally mandated. Relevant literature primarily reflect the way FCRBs, courts and child welfare systems work together in specific states, and generally did not examine the relationship between FCRB recommendations and the achievement of outcomes for the children being served. It is important to be mindful of the fact that the mandate in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-272), which requires states to review foster care cases is very broad, and interpretation and implementation of the mandate is left largely to each state. Therefore, the FCRBs may function differently from state to state and have varying levels of effectiveness, utilization and need for reform. Future research needs to assess the relative relationship between varying approaches to the foster care review process and outcomes for children and families.

## COURT-APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES

Since the implementation of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) of 1974, representation has been mandated for children involved with the child welfare system because of abuse and neglect (Public Law 93-247). Although CAPTA was not specific regarding this mandate and left it to individual states to decide who qualified as a *guardian ad litem* (GALs) and what duties were to be performed (Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997), this role was often filled by court appointed public or private attorneys.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) movement began in 1977 when a Seattle judge, concerned about making decisions without necessary information, requested that community volunteers speak in court on the behalf of abused and neglected children. The appointed attorney GALs, in general, lacked the time and training necessary to complete the depth of investigation required in child abuse and neglect cases, whereas it was reasoned that volunteers, with proper training, could conduct thorough investigations and make recommendations to the court that were in the best interests of children (National CASA Association, 2002).

Today, the concept has been widely accepted by judges and policy makers, and 948 CASA programs currently exist nationwide, utilizing over 50,000 volunteers (National Court Appointed Special Advocates, n.d.). In terms of judicial impressions of the impact CASA, one study of a state's juvenile court system found that over 88% of judges presiding over counties with CASA programs believed the volunteers almost always have a positive impact on the health, safety and timely permanency of children for whom they advocate (Collins-Camargo et al., 2005).

Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) assert that a vital component to the work of CASAs lies in the fact that they are volunteers, independent of the court and child welfare systems, and do not rely on either of those entities for their livelihood. This enables them to advocate for controversial positions without fear of repercussion. Low caseloads, in stark contrast to overloaded case workers and court appointed attorneys, allow CASAs to dedicate more time and effort to collaborating with the child and professionals so that informed recommendations and decision can be made regarding the child's welfare (Litzelfelner & Petr, 1997).

Although the impetus for the CASA movement is clear, what has research found regarding the effectiveness of CASA involvement in child abuse and neglect cases? Search of Social Work Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts identified three studies with varying findings. In a study of the effect of CASAs on positive outcomes (outcomes defined as case closure rates, the length of time the children remained under court jurisdiction and the number of children adopted) for 211 children placed in out-of-home-care, Litzelfelner (2000) found that the involvement of a CASA in a case was not necessarily associated with achievement of permanency outcomes for children when compared with cases in which no CASA was assigned. For example, among cases resulting in adoption, a higher percentage of children were from the comparison group (15.1%), as opposed to the CASA group (7.8%). Similarly, each child's placement at the end of the study was examined and the number of children in each placement category (home, relative home, adoptive home and independent living, family foster home, emergency shelter or group home, residential treatment) was not statistically different in CASA cases versus the comparison group (Litzelfelner, 2000).

There were, however, favorable correlations between CASA involvement, and placement stability and the number of services provided to the children, leading to the conclusion that the presence of a CASA may have some level of influence on process variables rather than permanency outcomes (Litzelfelner, 2000). Because CASA volunteers do not actually make referrals for services in most jurisdictions, and these tasks are carried out by a child's worker, any increase in services provided is the result of a combined effort. Both placement stability and service provision are certainly related to other factors as well, such as service availability and eligibility. The mechanism of the association between these variables and the involvement of CASA cannot be understood from this study.

In contrast to Litzelfelner's findings, Calkins and Millar (1999) examined the effects of the CASA involvement on 189 court cases in Clark County, Nevada and found a more favorable relationship with permanency achievement. Data showed that 64.7% of cases with CASA involvement achieved permanency, as compared to 53.3% of cases with no CASA involvement. Of the cases in which permanency was achieved, those with CASA involvement were able to reunify children with biological parents at a slightly higher rate

than those without. Calkins & Millar (1999) also found that children who receive CASA services experienced fewer placements, consistent with the prior study, and their length of time in care was eight months shorter than children in the comparison group. As the authors point out, these differences approached but did not achieve statistical significance.

An experimental design was used by Abramson (1991) to assess the impact of CASA on recidivism of families served by the Fresno Amicus Program in California. The Amicus Program recruits and trains minority and bilingual volunteers to assist in permanency planning for abused and neglected minority children. In this design, all families in the sample had attorney representation while the experimental group comprised Amicus families who were also assigned a CASA volunteer.

Abramson (1991) defined recidivism as the number of new child protection services (CPS) referrals on the families after their cases had been dismissed. Six of the 16 Amicus Program families whose cases had been dismissed in court received new referrals to CPS, as compared to eight of the 19 families in the comparison group (Abramson, 1991). It is also worth noting that seven of the eight new referrals on comparison group families resulted in new petitions being filed in court, while the same could be said for only three of the six new referrals on Amicus Program families (Abramson, 1991). Although this study found that families served by a CASA volunteer were slightly less likely to return to court after their case had been dismissed, the finding only approached statistical significance. While it could be stated that this approach shows potential for achieving outcomes for families and children involved in the child welfare system, further research is certainly warranted before a positive impact of CASA programs can be concluded.

Based on the review of empirical literature pertaining to CASA programs, several conclusions can be drawn. First, it can be argued there is little indication from the studies mentioned to support the positive influence of CASA volunteers on permanency outcomes. Litzelfelner (2000) found this to be true in her study, in that children assigned a CASA were less likely to be achieve permanency, although limitations, such as a small sample size, must be taken into consideration. Calkins and Millar (1999) did find slightly higher rates of permanency achievement in CASA cases, however, the numbers did not reach statistical significance. Secondly, the limited literature is consistent in showing that CASAs may be associated with fewer placements experienced by children in foster care, a greater number of services provided to those children, and lower recidivism rates, although the actual impact of CASA programs on these outcomes cannot be understood.

## CITIZEN REVIEW PANELS

Citizen Review Panels (CRP) for child protective services were enacted as part of a 1996 amendment to the federal Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment

Act (CAPTA). As part of P.L. 104-235, states receiving CAPTA funds were to implement at least three Citizen Review Panels by July of 1999. States were given broad leeway when establishing the Panels and numerous states opted to use existing Panels such as Child Fatality Review Boards and Foster Care Review Boards to fulfill the CAPTA requirements (see [www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp](http://www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp)—a site that serves as a “National Citizen Review Panel Virtual Community”). Through P.L. 104-235, CRPs are required to assess state and local child welfare agency’s compliance with the state CAPTA plan, coordination with Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs, review of child fatalities and near fatalities, and other criteria that the Panel considers important (Administration for Children and Families, 1998; Kot et al., 1998).

In 2003, CAPTA was reauthorized once more, and Panels were directed to take on the additional tasks of evaluating the practices of child protective services workers in addition to the protocols and policy, and to engage in “public outreach” (Administration for Children and Families, 2003). Additionally, state child welfare agencies were required to respond in writing to the recommendations of the Panels within 6 months.

Although the Citizen Review Panel mandate has been in effect for over a decade, a search of Social Work Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts databases demonstrates that there has been little research as to the Panels’ effectiveness in promoting positive outcomes for children. There have been several smaller studies published, but no large-scale research evaluating CRP effectiveness has been completed.

A multi-state study of Citizen Review Panels in the Midwest and South found that the perceived effectiveness of Panel members is raised through attention given to clear communication between the Panel and the agency, an awareness of each entity’s roles and limitations, focusing on collaboration, and setting realistic goals for the Panel (Jones, 2004). Impediments to effectiveness were also examined, and the results indicated that lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and ineffectual communication contribute to Panel members having decreased perceptions of effectiveness.

Other studies have examined CRP Panel members’ attitudes toward child protective services (CPS) and the inherent tension between their oversight role and the oft-stated need to serve as advocates for the agency (Jones, Litzelfelner & Ford, 2003; Bryan, Jones, Allen & Collins-Camargo, 2007). Citizen Review Panel members have consistently reported that they feel ‘shut out’ of the policy-making process, consulted only after policies are implemented. Another common complaint is that Panel members are given little feedback regarding their recommendations, even though this is a specific directive of federal law requiring CRPs. The feedback that is received is often construed as merely paying “lip service” to the recommendations of the Panels without thoughtful consideration of how their recommendations could be implemented (Bryan et al., 2007).

This sense of disconnection from authentic dialogue and change appears also to be present within child welfare agency personnel. Research has

shown that there is disagreement within child protective services on the fundamental question about whether or not citizen review is even important or desired in the policy making process (Jones et al., 2003; Jordan & Franklin, 1994). Child welfare administrators have reported concerns about the recommendations of the Citizen Review Panels, complaining that they lack well-grounded reasoning and specificity. One supervisor noted that, "What may make sense to them is totally impossible for the agency to do" (Bryan et al., 2007, p. 1294). However, Bryan and colleagues (2007) also note that, despite voicing a struggle with communication between the child welfare agency and citizens, both agreed that citizens can provide useful support and advocacy for the agency. Citizens can be viewed as "professional advisors" within their area of expertise and this knowledge can be levied in order to prevent the agency from becoming myopic and short-sighted.

Citizen Review Panels were conceptualized by Congress as a means for citizens to impact public policy with regards to child protective services. The limited research in this area has shown that this directive has proven to be challenging both from a logistical as well as a conceptual standpoint. Some of these challenges may be developmental in nature, and suggest that in order to be successful, attention needs to be paid to the sanction afforded the program and the communication and understanding among parties. Overall, study of CRPs has focused on relationship between panels and the child welfare agency, and perceived impact of the program on organizational and systemic changes, without researching the actual impact of this more macro level form of citizen involvement.

It is clear that more research is needed to examine the utilization of citizen volunteerism in child welfare systems and its effects on case planning and permanency for children in care, as well as the broader outcomes sought by the overall child welfare system. While the importance of this participation by community volunteers should not be discounted, the current literature is insufficient to inform the field on the extent of actual impact of these programs, whether on outcomes for specific children and families for FCRB and CASA programs, or child welfare programs and practice for CRP. The existing literature does suggest across all three programs that much can be done to improve the collaboration between citizens and the child welfare system.

## PROMISING PRACTICES FOR INVOLVING CITIZENS IN PUBLIC CHILD WELFARE

To this point, three methods for involving citizens in public child welfare have been described. Clearly, citizen participation is far from a panacea. Research has been extremely limited to date, despite the widespread use of citizens in review and advocacy on both the case and systemic levels. However, the literature does suggest that attention to the implementation of

these programs is needed in pursuit of improvement of the child welfare system, and that these programs should be evaluated to ascertain and perhaps enhance their actual impact. As noted in the introduction, devolution of social programs, increased call for accountability in the child welfare system, and funding limitations suggest that the support and advocacy of citizens could be important to the effectiveness of the overall system.

States could benefit from the lessons learned so far regarding citizens' involvement. Research both within and outside the child welfare literature has shown a few consistent themes regarding the necessary ingredients to fostering authentic citizen participation (Burby, 2003; Jones, 2004; Knott, 1999; Peelle, Schweitzer, Munro, Carnes, & Wolfe, 1996). Promising practices can be drawn from this literature whereby citizens can partner with child welfare agencies in an attempt to improve outcomes for families and children. These should be viewed only as general process-related guidelines, and all are in need of evaluation as to their application in the child welfare arena. However, given the widespread use of citizen review in the child welfare system, and the enhanced requirement for community involvement in the Child and Family Services Review process, the field should consider application of these guidelines gleaned from the professional literature on how to improve program implementation and at least the potential for positive impact.

### Thorough Training for Citizens New to the Public Child Welfare System

Large bureaucracies can seem exceedingly complex to outsiders who have not been accustomed to working within such a framework (Burby, 2003). This is especially true for citizens who join external review panels because of their passion to promote the safety of children and families, but who do not have the requisite knowledge to truly comprehend the changing dynamics of the system.

Studies regarding FCRB and CRP programs suggest that judges and child welfare staff see this is an important aspect of program implementation in order for them to value the citizen recommendations (Collins-Camargo et al., 2005; Bryan et al., 2007). Thus, it is important that citizens be given an in-depth orientation to the public child welfare agency. At a minimum, this training might include how the agency is arranged in terms of state and local administration, how policies are developed and implemented, and an overview of federally mandated expectations (i.e., the Child and Family Services Reviews). In Kentucky, for example, Citizen Review Panel members are encouraged to spend a day shadowing a frontline worker. This has led not only to a richer understanding of the child welfare agency itself, but also to increased empathy for the caseworkers as they navigate mental health, law enforcement and other systems that can often seem in conflict.

Administrators are encouraged to view training as a crucial ingredient for successful citizen participation and one that should be part of an ongoing strategy to use citizen input to promote positive change. By providing thorough and ongoing training, some of the concerns expressed by child welfare agency personnel regarding the expertise and grounding of the panel (Bryan et al., 2007) may be dispelled.

### Attention to the Practical and Logistical Needs of Citizen Participation

The demands being placed upon external reviewers of the child welfare system have increasingly grown within the past two decades (Blome & Steib, 2008). Citizens are being asked to evaluate large public child welfare agencies at both the macro policy level (i.e., Citizen Review Panels) and the micro practice level (i.e., Foster Care Review Boards). These directives are coming at a time when agencies are faced with dwindling resources and the difficulties inherent in a system accustomed to political change. Additionally, federal audits such as the Child and Family Services Reviews are increasingly becoming more interested in the perspectives and input from external stakeholders.

Logistical support for citizen groups may be needed to enable program success, including resources to convene them regularly, money for lodging and travel, and a dedicated staff member to assist them with such tasks as writing mandated reports. While the studies reviewed in this article did not focus on such support, there was evidence of a need for increased role clarity, communication and collaboration between the citizen program and the child welfare agency based on the perceptions of volunteers and public agency staff (Jones, 2004; Bryan et al., 2007). Of course, dwindling resources is a legitimate concern for public child welfare agencies; however, funds spent wisely at the beginning of a citizen participation initiative can prevent a backlash of frustration and discouragement which can ultimately lead to wasting of everyone's time and energy (Bryan, et al., 2007).

### Trust-Building as a Priority between Citizens and Child Welfare Systems

Public child welfare systems have been historically been "closed" systems, allowing for very little input from outside groups, especially citizen groups (Knott, 1999, Waldfogel, 2000). This attitude has been fuelled partially by the enormous mandate placed on agencies to serve and protect vulnerable children in our society and also by confidentiality standards imposed by state statutes. These forces have combined at times to create an atmosphere of distrust among child welfare administrators and citizens. The reality of this dynamic should not be discounted by administrators as it impacts their ability

to garner public support for their programs and the system that depends in many ways on the community. One way to counter mistrust and lack of understanding may be the careful implementation of citizen involvement programs that can provide external advocacy (Bryan et al., 2007). Research has shown that the beginning of any successful citizen participation initiative has been marked with a series of activities meant to strengthen trust and build good will among the participants (Peelle et al., 1996). In child welfare, this can include tours of the agency, meetings with frontline workers and supervisors, and the open sharing of information regarding the agency's performance on the federal Child and Family Services Review, in which stakeholder involvement is now required. These sorts of activities can help instill trust in citizens that agency staff members are generally working to help families while dealing with a number of complex factors impeding their success, and an appreciation for these external factors' influence on outcomes.

Extrapolating from studies suggesting child welfare staff's concerns that FCRB and CRP volunteers may not have the background to provide valuable recommendations (Calkins & Millar, 1999; Jones et al., 2003; Bryan et al., 2007), administrators should be cautioned to not inundate citizens with mounds of data, but rather share existing data in a way which supports the core mission of the citizen group and enables them to advocate for the system in a meaningful way. For example, Citizen Review Panels are charged with evaluating the process of how child fatalities are reviewed in their states (Kot et al., 1998). The process of child fatality review and the data from these reviews should be readily available to Panels as they perform their mandated duties.

### Detailed Mechanism for Ongoing Dialogue and Feedback

By its very nature, external review has the potential to be contentious (Burby, 2003; Jennings, McDonald, & Henderson, 1996). Public child welfare administrators have reported that they feel an uneasy distrust of Citizen Review Panels, in particular (Bryan et al., 2007), and much of this distrust is manifested through a lack of communication. Thus, establishment of a process for ongoing communication with the citizens who are working with the agency seems warranted.

Along the same vein, the literature suggests citizen volunteers desire feedback in terms of the impact they are having on the system, or the families being served (Jones, 2004; Jones et al., 2003; Collins-Camargo et al., 2005). They are devoting a lot of their time to a process that is both complex and intense, and it is reasonable for them to question whether the court or the agency are using the recommendations they are making or if children are better served as a result of their efforts. In this sense, newer CAPTA requirements for child welfare agencies provide a written response to citizen review panels lays the foundation for improving the communication process.

Citizens who do not work within large child welfare agencies can easily become overwhelmed with the complexity and political realities of such a bureaucracy. They may not recognize the tremendous impact of organizational and systemic factors impacting service delivery. Instead of reading about large projects or initiatives in the paper, programs need frequent, pragmatic updates from child welfare systems and honest dialogue regarding factors contributing to the agency's work to improve service delivery and outcomes. This could be accomplished through a dedicated liaison to the group who shares needed data and information. Previous work in this area has shown that it is crucial that such a person be given the authority to speak freely with the citizen groups without fear of reprisal from the agency, especially with regard to reports or data which may be put the agency in an unflattering light (Kot et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2003). The advocacy the external body can provide to obtain policy changes to support the work of the agency could help turn these data around.

From the point of view of child welfare agency staff, it is clear from the literature reviewed across all three types of programs that many question the value of citizen reviews, although the reality is that these programs exist and citizen volunteers are, in fact, making recommendations regarding the services being provided to families and the systems in which these staff are working. Child welfare systems and the families they serve are very complex, and there is a reason why states have professional qualifications for the staff working in them. If judges, workers, and child welfare administrators do not believe that the recommendations being made are helpful or grounded, then it is in their best interest that the programs are provided with feedback on how the work of the citizen review program could be improved. If research findings suggest that programs such as CASA may not be associated with improved permanency outcomes (Litzelfelner, 2000; Calkins & Millar, 1999) perhaps dialogue is in order to begin to explore why this may be the case, as well as what the relationship actually is between CASA and placement stability, which is a worthy process outcome for the children in care. Similarly, dialogue could ensue regarding why cases receiving Interested Party Review may have shorter lengths of stay in foster care. Given that the level of research for federally mandated citizen-review programs is limited, it seems appropriate for agencies and citizen programs to begin to discuss how the effectiveness of these programs can be evaluated.

### Screening and Selecting the Right Citizens to Participate

The lessons learned presented here have been mostly directed toward the child welfare or other public agency, which is generally responsible for organizing and coordinating citizen participation within a state. However, much of the process of healthy citizen input relies on recruiting citizens who can be fair and unbiased in their deliberations (Kot et al., 1998). Citizens

themselves must leave behind personal agendas or other prejudices and remain focused on the ultimate goal of public child welfare: safe and stable homes for all children.

The literature reviewed here certainly suggests that the knowledge and characteristics of citizen volunteers is of concern to judges and child welfare staff (Byrnes, 2002; Collins-Camargo et al., 2005; Bryan et al., 2007). At this point it is not possible to assess from the literature how the screening and selection of volunteers might be related to the successful functioning of programs and even the achievement of positive client outcomes; however, they seem to be conceptually sound and may be a prerequisite for the field to really research the efficacy of citizen review programs.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

One conclusion that may be drawn from this overview of citizen-driven programs is that federal and state legislation can only set the stage—*laws cannot guarantee meaningful engagement and integration into the child welfare system*. Permissive or compelling statutory authority and infrastructure are important, however, in providing the foundation for these systems. While public child welfare systems are relatively new in the broad course of history (Trattner, 1994) the nature of the work can become insular, and agencies with a legislated mandate to serve children and families that are held accountable for those services can benefit from citizen participation programs that have been established.

As is highlighted in recent studies of citizen review panels (Bryan et al., 2007; Collins-Camargo et al., 2007), while some child welfare administrative staff question the value of such systematic review and the expertise of the volunteers involved, others recognize that citizen participation is in the best interest of the child welfare system. Micro level programs such as foster care review boards provide another source of information to judges needing to make complex and important decisions regarding children in care. Citizen involvement is also relevant on the policy level, as organizations such as CASA, FCRB, and CRPs can advocate for systemic change and the infusion of funding as needed in a way that is not viewed as self-serving like that of the public agency's recommendation.

However, citizen participation that seems superficial or is poorly implemented may only damage the situation—if programs are not involving volunteers in a meaningful and integrated way, the citizens are not likely to gain the level of expertise and the commitment necessary to engage in informed and effective advocacy with the potential to benefit the overall system. Community volunteers certainly sense when their involvement is not making a difference (Bryan et al., 2007; Collins-Camargo et al., 2005), and this may lead to attrition and the loss of experienced individuals.

It is important to recognize that leadership sets the tone in terms of how citizen participation initiatives will be viewed. A proactive approach by administrators demonstrating investment in the program and an understanding of how such review and advocacy may benefit the overall system is related to how the frontline will likely perceive the role of the community volunteer in their work. Similarly, when judges openly value and use the information gained from CASA and FCRB programs, a clear message is sent. With such leadership, staff entering the system will learn from the beginning that citizen participation is an integrated and valued component of the overall child welfare process. In turn, attention to the effectiveness of citizen involvement may improve the pay off from this investment.

Child welfare systems and their staff would do well to respect the time that is being donated to the very same cause they work for, and find ways to integrate the work of citizen volunteers as a genuine contribution to common outcomes. On the other hand, citizen review programs whose recommendations are ungrounded in the complexities and realities of child welfare work, and are critical without being constructive will not be useful to the judges and child welfare workers making decisions regarding the complicated circumstances of the families they serve. It stands to reason that the best interests of the children would not be served by the investment of time and resources into citizen review programs that are ineffective.

These programs exist and have now been in effect for decades through statutory authorization. They are unlikely to go away. The onus is on the research community to study both the processes that promote healthy collaboration between the public agencies and the citizen review programs, and the impact of these programs on desired child level and systemic outcomes.

The research summarized here offers a few lessons learned that might be used by practitioners and administrators in developing citizen participation initiatives. The literature points to how to establish the necessary infrastructure and communication strategies. It should not be forgotten that citizens themselves provide critical insight into the planning, implementation and evaluation of these programs for improvement over time.

This review of literature has demonstrated that across types of citizen-driven programs there are tremendous gaps and variance in the evidence base. Both process and outcome research regarding all citizen participation initiatives can be completed to determine if the system's investment in them is justified. It is important to measure how these programs are implemented, perceptions of volunteers and other stakeholders, and impact on the system itself as a result of the program. As Blome and Steib (2008) rightly point out, external reviewers should be prepared to defend their need to exist based upon sound, research-based evidence that the group's activities are contributing to the overall goals of child well-being and safety. Our discussion reveals that there is much work to do in this area.

Once studies are completed, sharing findings with the meaningful inclusion of citizens themselves, might lead to more effective program develop-

ment and improvement processes. These systems have been in place, and in some cases statutorily mandated, for a long time without an understanding of their impact, efficiency and effectiveness. It is time to build the evidence base in regards to citizen participation.

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