

# Tips for Using Citizens Review Panels to Improve Child Protective Services

by

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**Introduction:** “This whole Citizens Review Panel thing is nothing but a public relations ploy to make our child welfare agency look like they really care what citizens think!” This frustrated comment burned from the pages of a survey that I recently read as part of a research project into the effectiveness of citizens review panels.

Citizens Review Panels (CRP) for child protective services came about through a 1996 amendment to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. In order to continue receiving money through CAPTA, states were mandated to create three CRPs by July, 1999. The recent 2003 annual report from the state of Oregon sums it up nicely: “The mandate of the citizen review panels is to ‘evaluate the extent to which the agencies (state and local) are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.’ The panels must examine policies, procedures, and where appropriate, specific cases handled by the state and local agencies providing child protective services. The panels are also to evaluate the extent to which the agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities in accordance with the state’s CAPTA plan, child protection standards, and any other criteria that the members consider important to ensure the protection of children. This may include a review of how well the child protective service program is coordinated with foster care and adoption programs and a review of child fatalities and near fatalities.

The mission of the CAPTA Citizens Review Panels blends nicely with that of the Community Based Family Resource Services; both groups are concerned with addressing child maltreatment and family well-being through a community, grassroots effort. The CRPs and CBFRS’ can work hand in hand to promote the engagement of families and community partners in ameliorating the effects of child abuse and neglect.

The panel members are to be volunteers who are broadly representative of the community in which the panels are established and should include parent/consumer representatives and members who have expertise in the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. The panels are also mandated to ‘prepare and make available to the public, on an annual basis, a report containing a summary of the activities of the panel.’ The CAPTA panel report should include, at a minimum, a summary of the panel’s activities, the recommendations of the panel based upon its activities and findings, and information on the progress the state is making in implementing the recommendations of the panels.”

The purpose of this brief document is to provide state child welfare agencies with a “Do’s” and “Don’ts” list from someone who has been “in the trenches” as a CRP organizer, a doctoral candidate who has done extensive research in citizen participation, and the conference chair of two national Citizens Review Panel conferences. Please

circulate this paper and USE these tips as you work with Citizens Review Panels in your state.

## Tips for Using Citizens Review Panels to Improve Child Protective Services

### DO

**Be proactive, not reactive.** One of the hallmarks of effectiveness in the citizen participation literature is that citizens are involved at the beginning of policy-making decisions, not after these decisions have been made. To tell citizens “after the fact” about important policy decisions defeats the purpose of having a true community effort in dealing with child maltreatment. It is also discouraging to the citizen volunteers.

**Help define the agenda, but don’t dictate the agenda.** I have heard from numerous panel members across the nation who have become frustrated with the perception that their panel has “spun its wheels” over the past four years. Because the mandate for the panels is so enormous, citizens may have difficulty defining concrete goals and tasks. Working *together* with the panels to come with a strategic plan is the best approach.

**Provide staff support.** Citizens review panels are expected to evaluate very large child welfare systems. This means gathering reports, looking through policy manuals, talking to staff, etc. CRP’s simply cannot do their work without a dedicated staff person who assists them not only in obtaining this information, but in recruiting new members, arranging meets, preparing reports, and all of the other myriad of tasks that must be completed.

**Provide information and ongoing training.** It is critical that CRP members are well-trained. Research in this area consistently identifies training as a crucial variable to making citizen advisory boards effective. CRP members should be exposed to a variety of speakers, videos, case presentation from frontline workers, etc.

**Attend to human needs.** Remember that people like to be told “thank you” and they like to be fed at meetings. This may seem simple, but very small things like having lunch meetings for your volunteers or paying for them to attend conferences goes a long way in relationship building. Some states have annual recognition dinners or retreats for their volunteers.

**Give feedback.** This is perhaps the most important tip. Across the nation, citizens are devoting literally thousands of volunteer hours to try and improve child protective services. If their work is ignored (or dismissed) by state agencies, not only is the child welfare agency losing out on a chance to promote community involvement in protecting children, it is highly likely that the citizen volunteers will become disillusioned and angry. This is the worst outcome for the citizen review process and, ultimately, for children and families.

## **DON'T**

**Hide the truth.** With the Child and Family Services Review and other forms of review occurring, state child welfare systems are being scrutinized like never before. As painful as it is sometimes, the results of these reviews needs to be shared with the citizens. The caveat to this is that someone from the child welfare agency should assist the panel in understanding and using the information.

**Ignore the citizens review panels.** Incredibly, I've heard from some state CRP members who have are unsure where their annual reports go, who uses them, or even if they are read at all. State agencies need to be reminded that they are required by federal law to implement citizens review panels. By connecting with members from other state's CRPs, citizens review panel members across the country are becoming empowered.

**Overwhelm with information.** Just as it is important to give the CRPs access to information, it is also important to choose which information will be most helpful to them as they review your state's child protection system. Don't overwhelm CRP members with thick reports, loads of statistics or other confusing data, especially if it is not relevant to their work. It may be helpful to have a monthly briefing from you child welfare agency liaison, who can give an overview of things that are happening in the system.

**Use the CRP's only as a public relations tool.** Many states are doing a wonderful job in using citizens to strengthen child protective services. They are accomplishing this through careful planning, good communication, and an openness to change. However, states who wish only to "trot out" their citizens review panels as a model of community involvement, but who do not truly seek authentic citizen participation are engaging in a dangerous game.

**Forget the three C's: Commitment, Communication, and Cooperation.** These are the essential foundation of any good collaboration between a public agency and citizen volunteers. The political landscape, personalities, and hidden agendas all work against these principles, and each of these dangers must be dealt with in turn. Seeing the collective knowledge of citizens as an asset, not a threat, is the whole idea behind citizens review panels.

## Resources

**National Citizens Review Panel Web Site:** [www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp](http://www.uky.edu/socialwork/crp) This site contains Citizens review Panel reports from 22 states as well as numerous resources for Citizens Review Panel members and organizers to use. Visitors to the web site may also join the national Citizens Review Panel member listserv which allows members and coordinators to share information and strategies. A database of state panels and contacts is also on this site.

**Citizens Review Panel Guidelines and Protocols.** The most comprehensive published resource on Citizens Review Panels. Developed by Veronica Kot, Charles Bruner and Stephen Scott, this guide gives a history of the legislation leading to Citizens Review Panels walks the reader through the process of recruiting members, developing review protocols, and other training issues. The booklet can be found at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/pdf/CitizenReviewPanelsGuidelinesandProtocols.pdf>

**FRIENDS National Resource Center.** FRIENDS is the National Resource Center for the Community Based Family Resource and Support (CBFRS) program, under a cooperative agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. The CBFRS program was established by Title II of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act Amendments of 1996. The purpose of the CBFRS program is to support State efforts to create and support a statewide network of community-based, family-centered, prevention-focused family resource and support programs, in order to strengthen families and reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Web site: <http://www.friendsnrc.org>

## Selected References

**Callahan, K. (1999). The challenge of promoting and sustaining meaningful citizen participation. International Review of Public Administration. 2, (4), 23-31.**

*In this article, Kathe Callhan reviews the problems with citizen participation efforts in the past, but also gives specific guidance to agency officials who want to involve citizens. She gives the following tips for administrators: provide clear goals and expectations, communicate effectively and regularly, build trust by working with the citizens, value other forms of knowledge, provide education and training activities, reward citizens for their participation, reward public administrators and elected officials for their collaborative efforts.*

**Jennings, M.A., McDonald, T., & Henderson, R.A. (1996). Early citizen review: Does it make a difference? Social Work, 41, (2), 224-31.**

*This article reports the results of a study on the impact of external citizen review initiated 14 to 45 days after a child entered the court system. Comparisons were made between two study groups to determine the impact of early citizen review on services planned and provided, court delays, completeness of the written case plans, number of placements, time in placement, and achievement of permanent placement. Implications for policy and practice are discussed. Although there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups, the authors say that a consistent pattern favoring citizen review emerged.*

**Jones, B.L. (Under review). Variables impacting the effectiveness of citizens review panels for child protective services: a multi-state study.**

*This study reports the findings of a survey relative to variables that contributed to the effectiveness of Citizen Review Panels in a ten-state area in the Midwest and South. The findings suggest that the perceived effectiveness of panels in influencing policy is related to increased communication, an awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals. Factors that impede effectiveness include: lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication. Available from Blake Jones at [bljone00@uky.edu](mailto:bljone00@uky.edu)*

**Jones, B.L., Litzelfelner, P. & Ford, J.P. (2003). The value and role of citizens review panels in child welfare: perceptions of citizens review panel members and child protection workers. Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal. 27, (6), 699-704.**

*The only study that has been published so far on citizens review panels for child protective services. This research found that there is a significant need for increased communication among child welfare agencies and citizens review panels. This communication is crucial to building trust between the two entities. Ongoing education between the CRPs and child welfare agencies is also critical.*

**Litzfelner, P. (2001). The use of citizen review boards with juvenile offender cases: An evaluation of the effectiveness of a pilot program. Journal of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 52 (1).**

*Litzfelner evaluated the effect of citizen review in juvenile offender cases and found that the youth whose cases went through the citizen review process had statistically fewer placement changes during the course of the study than those whose cases were not reviewed by the citizen boards. In addition, the study found that more time elapsed between the date of the original offense and the re-offense for youth reviewed by the citizen review boards than for those not reviewed.*

**Thomas, J.C. (1995). Public participations in public decisions: new skills and strategies for public managers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.**

*The author offers a “decision making” tree for managers who want to involve citizens in policy making. He argues that a manager needs to ask questions such as “what type of information is needed” and “what resources are needed?” Though the book is written from the perspective of public administration, child welfare managers could benefit from its in-depth discussion of citizen participation.*

**Waldfoegel, J. (1998). The future of child protection: How to break the cycle of abuse and neglect. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.**

*An excellent and forward-thinking book about child protection in the United States. The author compares the U.S. model of dealing with child maltreatment and offers suggestions such as a differential response mechanism. She calls for CPS to join with citizens and other community-based stakeholders to create a more responsive system.*



