



NATIONAL  
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Advancing the Family Support  
and Strengthening Field Project

**Strategic  
Recommendations**  
2016

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# Background

Through the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the *Advancing the Family Support and Strengthening Field Project* was implemented by the National Family Support Network (NFSN) to increase understanding and raise awareness of Family Support and Strengthening Programs and the Networks that support them, as well as to inform strategic directions for the Family Support and Strengthening field moving forward.

The first component of the Project was a national scan of the current impactful work of Family Support and Strengthening Networks with a particular focus on their workforce. This research was conducted by the OMNI Institute in Colorado with the support of the Family Resource Center Association and compiled into a data report.

Based on the data report, the NFSN then developed a series of draft Strategic Recommendations to focus attention on the need to support and strengthen families in every state and to explore pragmatic strategies for how to do so through supporting, strengthening, and establishing Family Support and Strengthening Networks.

The data report and the draft Strategic Recommendations were presented at the first National Family Support Network Forum in Washington, DC in May 2016. The Forum was co-sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy – Strengthening Families and the National Alliance of Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds and supported by both the Robert Wood Johnson and Hemera Foundations.

More than 100 key stakeholders from across the country, including the federal government, state governments, philanthropy, Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds, state Family Support and Strengthening Networks, and national nonprofit organizations and networks, reviewed and helped further develop the Strategic Recommendations.



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# Overview

Families represent the foundation of, and most fundamental unit within a society. When families are healthy and strong, communities thrive. And yet, the complex social, economic, and health issues faced by families today cannot be addressed by any one organization or program. To do so requires a broad, well-informed, coordinated community response. To address this need, local and statewide Family Support and Strengthening Networks comprised of two or more Family Strengthening organizations, such as Family Resource Centers<sup>1</sup>, have emerged across the United States.

Family Support and Strengthening Networks work within a collective impact framework<sup>2</sup> to ensure coordinated quality support for families. They connect, organize, and support programs working with families in a multi-generational, strengths-based, family-centered approach to enhance parenting skills, foster the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families, prevent child abuse and neglect, increase school readiness, connect families to resources, develop parent and community leadership, engage males and fathers, support healthy marital and couples relationships, and promote family economic success. These Networks enable practitioners, parents, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders to share information and resources, research, ideas, and experiences toward achieving a collective goal of family well-being.

Much like the individual agencies that make up these organizations, Family Support and Strengthening Networks have a variety of organizational structures and focus areas, and are at different developmental stages – emerging, evolving, and established. Having emerged organically from a desire to coordinate support for families with multiple stakeholders, they are funded in a variety of ways and some are wholly volunteer efforts.

Despite these differences, all Family Support and Strengthening Networks serve as the backbone entity to leverage and coordinate the collective impact of their members. Networks create opportunities for service providers to meet formally and informally, exchange information, make connections, develop relationships, build capacity, and address challenges that no one organization could on its own. Networks efficiently ensure that important information is disseminated quickly

1. Family Resource Centers are known by many different names across the country, including Family Centers, Family Success Centers, Family Support Centers, and Parent Child Centers. For more information on these centers, see the publication *Family Resource Centers: Vehicles for Change* at <http://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org>.

2. For more information on the collective impact framework, see <http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact>.

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# Overview *(Continued)*

and accurately to a large numbers of organizations, individual service providers, and families – such as how to navigate the Affordable Care Act or how to address lead poisoning in a community. Networks often develop formalized arrangements involving joint funding applications, memoranda of understanding coordinating service delivery, development of professional standards, co-location, and cross-training agreements. Through enhanced coordination, Networks promote the development and sustainability of a well-organized system of care for families.

Currently only one third of states have such Networks, which limits access to well-coordinated Family Support and Strengthening services for our nation’s families.

The National Family Support Network (NFSN) seeks to promote strategies to ensure that United States families succeed and thrive, supported by effective Networks of organizations that provide quality services to strengthen them. Working collaboratively with numerous stakeholders, the NFSN has identified actions for itself, federal, state and local governments, philanthropy, and Networks to:

- **Strengthen existing Family Support and Strengthening Networks**
- **Establish new Family Support and Strengthening Networks**
- **Strengthen Family Support and Strengthening workforce development**
- **Support the evaluation of Family Support efforts**
- **Connect and leverage Family Support and Strengthening Networks with other initiatives**



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# I. Strengthen Existing Family Support and Strengthening Networks

In the *Advancing the Family Support and Strengthening Field Project* research conducted by the OMNI Institute, strong Family Support and Strengthening Networks tended to have formal structures with dedicated staff and resources to support Network-level efforts. Yet financial issues were the most frequently mentioned challenge of current Networks. Financial concerns include issues such as an increase in demand for services in a climate of stagnant or decreasing funding for Centers; state deficits; lack of funding for the Family Support field; and insufficient resources to support Network-level coordination and administrative activities. Some Networks rely on a single funding source and some Networks do not have any administrative budget. Member organizations often volunteer their time to support Network-level efforts and Networks may struggle to keep members active and engaged in the context of limited resources.

One way that Family Support and Strengthening Networks can enhance their sustainability is by taking on a unique, essential, and ongoing role within the system of care in their areas as the pathway to quality practice for supporting and strengthening families. For example, Networks that develop the capacity to conduct certification trainings on the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support<sup>3</sup> have benefitted from increased visibility, funding, and ongoing opportunities to conduct trainings even beyond their existing membership.

## Bright Spot

In Wisconsin in 2015, the Supporting Families Together Association (SFTA) secured over \$400,000 through a Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Grant administered by the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families to offer Parent Cafés for families throughout the state. Parent Cafés guide parents to explore the Strengthening Families Protective Factors in a small group setting through a peer-to-peer learning process and individual self-reflection. Parents build enhanced social and emotional skills and learn how to proactively respond to challenging situations. Throughout this process, parents acquire the leadership skills necessary to engage, train and lead Parent Cafés within their own communities.

SFTA invested in Family Resource Centers to partner on the project, the first time that the Association had provided funding for its FRC members. In the past year, SFTA has trained teams of staff to implement the project successfully and has developed a network of 100 parents across the state. In addition, the project has enhanced the credibility and visibility of SFTA.

3. For more information on these nationally-adopted Standards, see: <http://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org>

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# I. Strengthen Existing Family Support and Strengthening Networks (Continued)

## Objective: Increase the capacity of existing Family Support and Strengthening Networks

### A. Systems Change Actions

- 1) Support efforts at the federal level to increase funding for child abuse prevention through child welfare finance reform.
- 2) Support efforts at the state and county levels to re-prioritize child welfare funding to provide additional support for child abuse prevention including exploring capacity building to help states and counties think about child welfare and child abuse prevention in an integrated way.
- 3) Explore potential opportunities with the components of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act that prioritize early childhood and specify funding that could be used to support early learning.
- 4) Examine funding guidelines and policies to ensure sufficient resources for effective administration of funded programs.
- 5) Identify gaps in the capacity of Family Support and Strengthening Networks related to current funding levels, and provide recommendations for them to be addressed.
- 6) Encourage funders to allocate resources to Family Support and Strengthening Networks to increase their capacity and promote their sustainability.



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# I. Strengthen Existing Family Support and Strengthening Networks *(Continued)*



## B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Advance policy discussions on ensuring adequate resources for Family Support and Strengthening Networks to support and strengthen families.
- 2) Survey NFSN Member Networks to inventory how they are currently funded and how monies are leveraged.
- 3) Provide training and information for NFSN Member Networks about how states have successfully secured and protected ongoing resources for efforts that support and strengthening families.
- 4) Connect NFSN Member Networks through convenings, webinars, and newsletters to facilitate peer sharing of policy initiatives and best and promising practices to enhance their effectiveness.
- 5) Develop the capacity of NFSN Member Networks to be able to conduct certification trainings on the Standards of Quality as a strategy to help ensure their long-term sustainability.



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## II. Establish New Networks

Only one third of states currently have Family Support and Strengthening Networks. Supporting the creation of new Networks will bring this valuable work to scale and ensure that more families have access to quality Family Support & Strengthening programs. These Networks will provide support for member organizations working with families to do so most effectively and leverage their collective efforts to be most impactful in their areas.

### Bright Spot

In Arizona in 2010, the First Things First Central Phoenix Council administering the tobacco-tax funded First Things First Initiative decided to bring together organizations serving families in the area to begin a dialog about how to connect and maximize the Family Support service system. As a result, the Maricopa Family Support Alliance was founded. The Alliance secured its first funding from the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, a local private foundation. That funding allowed the Alliance to hire contractual support to coordinate network activities and later in 2013 to develop capacity to provide certification trainings on the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support. The Standards provided a common language for diverse providers across the state and established a key role for the Alliance in promoting quality practice within the system of care. As a result, the Alliance has grown from 21 to 72 agencies over the past few years.

### Objective: Support the creation of new Networks

#### A. Systems Change Actions

- 1) Support efforts at the federal level to increase funding for child abuse prevention through child welfare finance reform.
- 2) Support efforts at the state and county levels to re-prioritize child welfare funding to provide additional support for child abuse prevention including exploring capacity building to help states and counties think about child welfare and child abuse prevention in an integrated way.
- 3) Explore potential opportunities with the components of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act that prioritize early childhood and specify funding that could be used to support early learning.
- 4) Identify gaps in states' coverage for Family Support and Strengthening services, and provide recommendations for them to be addressed through the establishment of Family Support and Strengthening Networks.

Supporting the creation of new Networks will bring this valuable work to scale and ensure that more families have access to quality Family Support & Strengthening programs.



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## II. Establish New Networks (Continued)

- 5) Encourage funders to allocate resources to seed and develop new Family Support and Strengthening Networks.

### B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Conduct outreach to key stakeholders in states without Networks, such as state departments, philanthropy, Children’s Trust Funds, and existing Family Support and Strengthening programs to promote the concept of developing Family Support and Strengthening Networks.
- 2) Develop and provide sample funding templates and documents to support the development of emerging Family Support and Strengthening Networks.
- 3) Provide mentoring from existing established Family Support and Strengthening Networks to support emerging Networks.
- 4) Connect emerging Family Support and Strengthening Networks to the NFSN and facilitate peer sharing of best and promising practice to enhance their effectiveness through convenings, webinars, and newsletters.
- 5) Leverage the interest of cities, counties, and states in working with the Standards of Quality as an opportunity to promote the establishment of a Family Support and Strengthening Network.



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# III. Strengthen Family Support and Strengthening Workforce Development

Professionals working in the Family Support and Strengthening field lack a unified identity, such as teachers or social workers have, because there is great variability in their roles, education, and training. In many programs, staff members are hired from the community served, sharing the same cultural background and speaking the same languages as the families with whom they are working. Employing staff members from the community builds trust with families who identify with and feel comfortable with them. At the same time, these staff members do not necessarily have degrees in social work or a related field and yet are working directly with highly-challenged families. These staff members need to be particularly supported to ensure that they are well-prepared to work with families effectively and avoid burnout.

There is a natural role for Family Support and Strengthening Networks to play in developing and/or providing consistent approaches to the training and support of the workforce. Some Networks have focused on these efforts and others currently lack the capacity to do so.

## Bright Spot

Working off of Wisconsin's Core Competencies in the Field of Family Support developed by the Wisconsin's Children's Trust Fund, Massachusetts Family Center Network (MFCN) created a comprehensive series of trainings to ensure that all management and direct service staff at Family Centers/Family Resource Centers shared a baseline understanding of them. MFCN developed and provided a core 3-day training on these competencies and an additional 19 training topics: Child Abuse and Neglect, Motivational Interviewing, Strengthening Families 101, Parent Cafés, Abusive Head Trauma Prevention, Engaging Fathers, Co-Parenting, Facilitation Skills, Handling Difficult Moments in Groups and with Parents, Supervision, Mental Health, Substance Abuse, Child Development, Culture in Parenting, Domestic Violence, Vicarious Trauma and Self Care, Logic Models, Self Assessment, and Nurturing and Attachment. The trainings also provided opportunities for programs to connect with each other and network for ongoing peer support.



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# III. Strengthen Family Support and Strengthening Workforce Development (Continued)

## Objective 1: Advance national implementation of the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support in order to promote quality work with families

### A. Systems Change Action

- 1) Encourage policy makers to endorse the Standards of Quality for application in their areas of influence.
- 2) Encourage funders to integrate the Standards of Quality into requests for proposals, program monitoring, and quality assurance.
- 3) Fund Family Support and Strengthening Networks to build their capacity to utilize the Standards of Quality for quality assurance, training, technical assistance, and capacity building for their members.
- 4) Support programs to utilize the Standards of Quality as a tool for planning, providing, and evaluating quality services.

### B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Promote the implementation of the Standards of Quality with key stakeholders such as the federal government, state governments, policy makers, philanthropy, Networks, and programs through meetings, presentations, webinars, and conferences.
- 2) Train representatives of NFSN Member Networks to become certified trainers on the Standards of Quality.
- 3) Host and facilitate an ongoing peer sharing and learning community for Networks implementing the Standards, providing opportunities for them to discuss successes and challenges with the process, provide mutual support, and brainstorm strategies to address potential barriers.
- 4) Encourage NFSN Member Networks to develop their own implementation plans and timelines for the Standards of Quality appropriate for their particular states.
- 5) Encourage NFSN Member Networks to include expectations about implementing the Standards of Quality as part of their membership criteria.



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# III. Strengthen Family Support and Strengthening Workforce Development (Continued)

## Objective 2: Support Networks to develop comprehensive training and technical assistance programs to ensure an effective workforce

### A. Systems Change Action

Fund Family Support and Strengthening Networks to build their capacity to develop and coordinate comprehensive training and technical assistance programs.



### B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Develop a vision for comprehensive workforce development for Family Support and Strengthening Networks.
- 2) Support NFSN Member Network's development of core competencies for Family Support workforce professional development.
- 3) Connect NFSN Member Networks through convenings, webinars, and newsletters to facilitate peer sharing of best and promising practices to enhance their effectiveness.
- 4) Support NFSN Member Networks to leverage external quality training and technical assistance efforts.



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## IV. Support the Evaluation of Family Support Efforts



The *Advancing the Family Support and Strengthening Field Project* research highlighted that Family Support and Strengthening Networks vary widely on evaluation capacity and infrastructure. Many rely on reporting outputs of services provided or program-specific outcomes. Others have developed robust data systems to track activities and outcomes across members, and some have commissioned advanced evaluation studies.

Although robust, rigorous evaluations are lacking, existing studies find that Family Support programs are associated with one or more of the following outcomes: a positive return on investment, increased parenting skills and knowledge, reduced subsequent teen pregnancies and improved teen parent educational outcomes, increased access to health care, and family movement towards greater self-sufficiency.

There is great opportunity for systematic study, both within and across Family Support and Strengthening Networks, to identify optimal Network structures, training and supports for the workforce, and service-delivery models that will lead to intended positive outcomes for children and families.

### Bright Spots

The Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers (ANFRC) contracted with Community Services Analysis LLC to determine the total Net Social Return on Investment (ROI) for the services of its members. For fiscal year 2014, it was determined that the ROI was 493% – for every \$1 invested in the ANFRC members, the State of Alabama received \$4.93 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits. The total funding investment for services made by city, state, and federal government agencies, and from contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals totaled \$11,686,445. The net value resulting from activities of ANFRC members during the year totaled \$57,597,000. ANFRC has used this data to call attention to the value of Family Support and Strengthening work, utilizing the same ROI language as other fields do to demonstrate efficacy.

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## IV. Support the Evaluation of Family Support Efforts *(Continued)*

In Colorado, the Family Resource Center Association (FRCA) modified the Colorado Family Support Assessment to create version 2.0 that enables families and Family Support staff to determine where families are on a continuum from in crisis to thriving. It measures 14 areas of self-sufficiency, such as transportation, food security, and childcare, which are tracked using Efforts to Outcomes. This tool underwent rigorous testing by an external research institute to determine its objectivity and reliability. As such, the use of this tool by FRCA's members ensures that the data gathered about families across the state is consistent. FRCA's manuscript entitled *Reliability of the Colorado Family Support Assessment: A Self-Sufficiency Matrix for Families* was accepted and published in the journal *Research on Social Work Practice*.

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### **Objective: Enhance the evaluation of Family Support efforts**

#### A. Systems Change Action

- 1) Fund Family Support and Strengthening Networks to build their capacity to develop effective data collection and evaluation systems and processes.
- 2) Commission and fund additional studies that examine the strategic practices that make Family Support and Strengthening programs effective, the Social Return on Investment of Family Support and Strengthening Networks, and what are the most effective practices that lead to a strong and stable workforce.

#### B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Develop a vision for comprehensive Family Support and Strengthening evaluation.
- 2) Develop clearly defined terminology that will facilitate evaluation efforts across Family Support and Strengthening Networks.
- 3) Promote the use of the Standards of Quality tools for evaluation and create a NFSN Evaluation Committee to focus on further developing and refining assessment efforts.
- 4) Connect NFSN Member Networks through convenings, webinars, and newsletters to facilitate peer sharing of best and promising practices on evaluation to enhance their effectiveness.



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## V. Connect and Leverage Family Support and Strengthening Networks with Other Initiatives

**F**amily Support and Strengthening Networks have natural connections with many current initiatives promoted by the federal government, state governments, local governments, the education field, philanthropy, and other stakeholders, such as family engagement, early care and education, school readiness, home visiting, child abuse and neglect prevention, health and well-being, reducing early chronic absenteeism, male and father engagement, 2-generation strategies, healthy marital and couples relationships, and family economic success. These Networks are poised to be effective partners with, and platforms for, these efforts.



### Bright Spot

Over the past 30 years, the Maryland Family Network (MFN) has been successful at leveraging funding from various initiatives and programs promoted by the federal and state government. MFN was one of 3 recipients of the original federal Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) awards in 1993, and it continues to receive funding today. Fifteen of MFN's centers are Early Head Start (EHS) models and MFN is Maryland's largest EHS grantee. With the influx of federal funding for home visiting, MFN became the facilitator of the state's Home Visiting Consortium and the Parents As Teachers state lead. MFN is also the lead agency for Strengthening Families in Maryland. The initial Family Support Center prevention/intervention program design has been so effective and responsive to the needs of parents of very young children over the years that MFN has been able to flex and embrace new logic models, new information, research, and reframes of basic principles and practices. As a result, it has garnered increased funding.

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# V. Connect and Leverage Family Support and Strengthening Networks with Other Initiatives

(Continued)

## Objective: Increase and highlight connections of Family Support and Strengthening Networks with other initiatives

### A. Systems Change Action

Include Family Support and Strengthening Networks in policy papers, statements, initiatives, and funding opportunities related to areas where they can effect impact.

### B. NFSN Internal Actions

- 1) Raise the visibility of the value of Family Support and Strengthening Networks as potential partners in key initiatives.
- 2) Connect NFSN Member Networks to initiatives and opportunities related to areas where they can effect impact.



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Founded in 2011, the National Family Support Network (NFSN) is a membership-based organization comprised of state networks that focus on strengthening and supporting families.

Its mission is to promote positive outcomes for all children, families, and communities by leveraging the collective impact of state networks and championing quality family support and strengthening practices and policies.

[www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org](http://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org)