

# **Family Engagement and Empowerment in Ohio: Strengths and Opportunities in the Field**

Prepared for:  
Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council

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# Table of Contents

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| Section                        | Page # |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| Executive Summary              | 4      |
| Overview of the Project        | 8      |
| Overview of Methodology        | 10     |
| Core Strengths                 | 12     |
| Ohio's Dreams                  | 14     |
| Research Themes                | 16     |
| Guiding Principles             | 22     |
| Strategies and Recommendations | 23     |
| Summary Chart                  | 31     |
| Conclusion                     | 36     |
| List of Appendices             | 37     |

# Executive Summary

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This report analyzes the results of a five-month, qualitative study of the state of family engagement and empowerment efforts in the State of Ohio. The purpose of the research was:

- 1) To identify the existing family engagement and empowerment resources in order to more fully understand what exists that is working well,
- 2) To determine ways of strengthening and coordinating these existing resources, and
- 3) To propose the design elements for a state-wide Family Engagement and Empowerment initiative. This work was driven by the question: How can we orchestrate and continue to build family engagement and empowerment state-wide and across service systems?

Key informant interviews with 20 state level advocates and 29 family members and local advocates were conducted. Twenty focus groups representing each of the five OFCF Regions were held and 71 additional family members completed an Internet survey.

In analyzing the interviews, several themes emerged as areas of concern and promise for strengthening family engagement and empowerment opportunities in Ohio. They are:

1. There are inconsistencies in access to information about resources and linkages to service.
2. There are opportunities to develop more meaningful roles for family members.
3. Key informants see ways to improve relationships and communications between providers, systems and families.
4. There are opportunities to increase understanding and respect between families and providers—this includes building awareness of the realities of family life and the limitations of bureaucratic actions.
5. Although there are many family engagement opportunities in the state, there have been fewer efforts aimed at institutionalizing family involvement and input.
6. As well as increasing family engagement and empowerment opportunities, key informants also spoke of a desire to increase the availability of support services.
7. Families desire a broader advocacy focus.

The themes were then presented at several community forums to generate a range of feasible short-term actions and long-range strategies to address each of these themes.

It has become clear through our research that there is a tremendous amount of support for the idea of creating mechanisms to empower and engage families across systems in Ohio. And the idea of institutionalizing, coordinating and building upon family engagement and empowerment opportunities is supported by families and family advocates alike. Indeed,

this support cuts clear across the responses of families involved in all the systems that serve them.

A series of strategies has been developed to increase family engagement and empowerment in Ohio. These strategies have been designed to help the state work toward three significant goals:

- To promote and maintain the enthusiasm and momentum by continuing the conversation that this research process has catalyzed;
- To focus the vision, by building a sustainable implementation and design structure for a Center or Network to support family engagement and empowerment across systems; and
- To increase the impact and effectiveness of existing family involvement opportunities through increased coordination, which would reduce duplication of effort and increase efficiencies.

The strategies have been organized into categories to assist in the development of an implementation plan. Some of the strategies could be acted upon quickly and could be implemented with existing resources or with small amounts of dedicated funding. Other strategies would take more time and would require additional resources or the pooling of existing funds spent on family involvement efforts, identification of new funds, and/or reallocation of existing resources. Some strategies are very broad and would involve multiple state Departments, and some are specific to a Department, program, or program enhancement. A Summary Chart displays a snapshot of specific strategies to institutionalize and enhance family involvement and is cross-listed with the major themes identified in the research. It is designed to complement the complete description of these strategies.

### ***Conclusion***

The following three recommendations emerged from this project.

**Recommendation 1:** Proceed with efforts to increase the engagement and empowerment of families in Ohio through the development of a mechanism such as a Center or Network.

**Recommendation 2:** Increase coordination among existing and new family involvement efforts -- to reduce duplication and increase the impact of existing and future efforts.

**Recommendation 3:** Proceed with the following strategies identified as immediate next steps to build on the momentum. The description of these strategies can be the basis for a Scope of Work for Ohio to contract with individuals and/or organizations to implement the next phase of the development of a Center or Network for Family Engagement and Empowerment.

## *Next Steps*

The following strategies are both low cost and important to sustaining and building on the excitement and enthusiasm generated by this project.

- **Regular Listening Sessions**—Families want to be heard. We therefore recommend implementing a schedule of regular listening sessions at the local and or regional level (every six months). Although this strategy would demand some funding, through this research process a cadre of parents and family advocates have been trained who have the skills needed to conduct these “listening sessions.” Implementing this strategy would not only give these advocates and family members another significant role, but would also provide an opportunity for the many families throughout the state who have a desire to tell their stories. To fold this into the Ohio Families and Children First infrastructure would create opportunities for increased dialogue between families and state-level entities, build community-level support, and build the skills of families and family advocates with minimal additional investment on the part of the state.
- **Structure to Respond to Listening Session Input**—By formalizing a structure of sharing the input from the listening sessions and giving feedback to families, the Cabinet could make tremendous progress toward helping create accountability and increase effective two-way communication between professionals and families. This strategy would demand an agreement among Cabinet members to create a mechanism for reviewing listening session information in a timely way and incorporating feedback into future actions. If actions could not accommodate parent requests, there would also need to be explanations provided. Additionally, regular updates on the feasibility of requests would need to be conducted in order to ensure that ideas that require long term focus such as funding or system changes stay on the radar screen.
- **Conduct Annual Family Engagement Cross Systems Congress**—In order to continue the dialogue and build upon the conversations and momentum that has been initiated, we recommend bringing together the highest level state system representatives, family members and advocates from each region and service system on an annual basis. These meetings could do much to highlight successes, refocus family engagement and empowerment initiatives across systems and build communication and support. Using strengths based methods of collaboration would lead to high engagement and offer constructive opportunities for families and professionals to arrive at solutions together.
- **Create Cross Systems Learning Opportunities**— At the Community Forum held on September 3, 2008 participants suggested increasing the understanding of the value of family engagement by developing and conducting a training for both family members and professionals on the positive outcomes resulting from family engagement and empowerment. The development and implementation of this training would strengthen the relationship between agencies and families and

build trust and understanding. Additionally, as noted by key informants, this training could help to build a pool of individuals who could act as a Speaker's Bureau and talk about the value of family engagement throughout the state.

- **Create Cross-Systems Family Leadership Opportunities** —There are opportunities to formalize parent input through the creation of a Cross-Systems Family Leadership Council. This council could serve to focus efforts on cross systems sharing of resources and materials, bring family strengths, assets and needs to the state-level dialogue, and also serve as a leadership training ground for both family members and advocates. Similarly, participants at the Community Forum on September 3, 2008 recommended that an Advisory Committee of Families and Professional be formed and meet quarterly, or as needed, to network and give and seek advice, with families determining the agenda.
- **Develop Work Groups**—Much work is already being done by individual systems in the family engagement and empowerment arena. This means that there are tremendous opportunities to create cross systems work groups. The small groups that were formed at the September 3, 2008 meeting discussed nine specific strategies, some or all of these could be continued through ongoing work groups.
- **Increase Awareness of and Utilization of Existing Resources** —There are several resources that have already been created that could be disseminated across systems. Examples include a document that explains children's rights in Ohio located at <http://olrs.ohio.gov/Other/ChildrensRights.pdf>; a self assessment tool developed by the Family Support Council that helps agencies and families identify what existing practices are family friendly and identify changes to increase family involvement; and a guide to service coordination for families.

# Overview of Project

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This report analyzes the results of a five-month, qualitative study of the state of family engagement and empowerment efforts in the State of Ohio. The purpose of the research was:

- 1) To identify the existing family engagement and empowerment resources in order to more fully understand what exists that is working well,
- 2) To determine ways of strengthening and coordinating these existing resources, and
- 3) To propose the design elements for a state-wide Family Engagement and Empowerment initiative. This work was driven by the question: How can we orchestrate and continue to build family engagement and empowerment state-wide and across service systems?

## Defining Family Engagement

Although Family Engagement and Empowerment sounds like a well-defined area, it is one of those topics where there is great variety of perception and definition—what one person thinks of when we say, “Family Engagement and Empowerment” may be drastically different from what someone else has in mind.

During the course of our research, it became clear that most people mean a particular set of supports and activities when they use the term Family Engagement and Empowerment. Most of the family engagement and empowerment opportunities identified in the research were family focused, in that they are designed to train, educate or support families. Some were systems focused, in that they provided family input into care plans and service delivery systems. Fewer were policy focused, in that they lobbied for policy change, created a wider set of eligible services or proposed increases in funding.

**Family Focused Engagement**—The vast majority of the engagement opportunities discussed in the research focus on the individual family. Family members receive training on how to access or work with the service system, such as learning how to participate in an IEP process, or how to identify symptoms of depression or other mental health conditions. Parents are also educated on the disease processes or what to expect when a child is diagnosed; they receive training on their rights within the school system, how to partner for better educational outcomes and how to support each other. Other opportunities provide a safe haven for families with special needs children to socialize comfortably, free of stigma or embarrassing moments, while providing peer-to-peer support between families who have had similar struggles. There are also hotlines for general support and resource materials for more specific concerns. Training is available on how to access services, how to advocate or how to effectively participate in service delivery. Much of this is focused on how to work with schools and use the IEP process

to make sure a child is getting the service and educational assistance he/she is entitled to and is necessary to optimize developmental outcomes.

**Systems Focused Engagement**—The next most frequently identified family engagement opportunities are systems focused. These provide case level assistance in service coordination and treatment planning. Family representatives are involved in case reviews and in examining the support service options at the local level. These family engagement opportunities work with families to provide case level advocacy and system navigation support, but also provide input on service systems development. They advocate for more support services, like transportation or respite care. Many of these opportunities seem to come for the mental health transformation work or systems of care development.

Concern for preventing out of home placements is driving a new set of family engagement opportunities. Making sure that families have the supports they need to keep children in the home and provide a stable environment has helped promote the development of the Parent Advocacy Connection, and broaden the types of services and issues being addressed, such as jobs and other income supports.

Another opportunity can be found in working with the corrections system—they look to engage community-based and faith-based supports for prisoner re-entry services. It is interesting to note that family members of prisoners and of juvenile offenders are some of the least represented in family engagement opportunities.

**State-level, Policy-focused Engagement**—The final area of family engagement opportunities mentioned are those that work at the state-level and are policy-focused. These opportunities are perceived to be the least available. In this case, we are referring to a specific set of policy-focused activities, which includes the actual lobbying of state legislators, conducting rallies at the state house, meeting with legislators, testifying before hearings, working on funding issues and standard setting. A small set of family members representing a few of the service sectors have been groomed to make the policy case and it is the hope of several organizations to build a loud and powerful advocacy network across the state so that they can get policy maker's attention. Several national advocacy organizations have active chapters in Ohio, including Children's Defense Fund, Voices for Children, NAMI to name a few. These chapters are active in cultivating a pool of effective family voice activists.

# Overview of Methodology

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Wholonomy Consulting utilized strengths based approaches in the research and development of strategies and recommendations. Strength based approaches to change assist individuals and organizations in the process of identifying what they are doing successfully so that they can focus their resources, energy and expertise on processes that are creating meaningful results. While many approaches designed to create change in our communities focus on needs and deficits, strengths based approaches examines where we are finding success and looks at mechanisms for leveraging these successes to create change—people and systems build on their strengths to design a compelling future to move towards.

Several methodologies were used to gather information on the state of family engagement and empowerment opportunities in Ohio. Using multiple methodologies enabled us to create a broad and deep picture of the status of family engagement, as well as gather perspectives on where the state could head as it expands on this work and builds on its existing strengths in family engagement and empowerment.

We used this more complex approach because relying on any single data source—whether that is quantitative or qualitative—would have only provided a limited perspective on issues faced by families as they engage with the systems that support them. Our hope was to present a more multi-faceted picture of the issue. We therefore used a community consultation plan that included the following:

- Presentations at the 5 OFCF Regional Network meetings held in April, 2008 (@ 110 participants);
- Key informant interviews with 20 state level advocates and 29 family members;
- Twenty focus groups representing each of the five OFCF Regions; and
- An Internet survey completed by 71 additional family members.

A series of themes were identified from the data collected that are outlined in the themes section of this report. These themes were presented to participants at the September 3, 2008 Community Forum (@ 60 participants), and the OFCF Regional Network meetings in September, 2008 (@ 100 participants). During these forums, participants reviewed the research themes and developed strategies to increase family engagement and empowerment. Participants at the September 3rd Community Forum included individuals from state agencies that provide services to families and children, family members, and family advocates.

The strategies and recommendations that are presented are a combination of suggestions by participants in this research project, analysis of the data, and review of existing data sources such as findings from focus groups with families that were done with families

involved with the substance abuse treatment system and the Department of Youth Services.

The family and community members who conducted interviews and focus groups, attended a one-day training on conducting strength based interviews and focus groups. These interviews and focus groups followed an Appreciative Inquiry approach, which uses strengths-based questions to build a case for creating positive change. The family and community members assisted in the design and wording of the questions used in the interviews and focus groups.

Research was conducted to explore ways that other states support families across systems. Several initiatives were identified that could assist in this effort, and they are described in Appendix D.

In addition, a web search was done to develop a Resource Matrix of state level organizations which offer family involvement resources and opportunities. This Matrix is Appendix E.

# Core Strengths

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As mentioned in the methodology section, the process utilized by Wholonomy Consulting aimed to explore the strengths that already exist in family engagement and empowerment throughout the state—and use these as the building blocks for future work. It was therefore important to ask parents throughout the state what they saw to be the strengths. Through the focus groups and Appreciative Inquiry Interviews, the following themes emerged:

## Individual Strengths:

- **Persistent and Effective Problem-solvers**—Family members spoke of developing good problem-solving skills over time. One described herself as, “. . . resourceful, not afraid to ask for services outside the provider’s norm. Thinking outside the box. No, ‘We’ve always done it this way.’ Good problem solving skills. Unwillingness to give up.”
- **A Willingness to Share**—Families spoke again and again of both their own personal willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with other parents and the generosity of other families in sharing with them.
- **Individuals who Don’t Stop Until They Have the Answer**—Experienced family members and advocates see one of their strengths as resiliency: “I don’t stop until I have an answer. I enjoy being involved, being an advocate.”
- **Giving back by Volunteering and Supporting Other Parents**—Many of those interviewed or who participated in the focus groups feel a great need to share their experience and to give back to their communities, “I am an intelligent and hardworking person. I want the best for my family. I give back to my community in volunteer work.”

## Strengths in the Systems:

- **Existing Collaborations**—Although the nature and extent of these collaborations varies from region to region, parents feel that there are some great collaborations working to help families.
- **A Wide Range of Available and Existing Family Involvement and Empowerment Materials**—As was found through stakeholder interviews, families are aware of many resources to support them. However, again, issues around access were mentioned, “Our County has lots of stuff but not under the Family First Council’s umbrella, so it’s hard for families to know what’s out there. Every program is on its own.”
- **Experienced and Effective Family Advocates**—This theme emerged again and again with parents speaking of the value of a networked and passionate family advocate community: “The family advocate has much experience with volunteering, as well as experience in working with various community agencies and helping different populations.”

- **A Supply of Family-centered and Family-driven Organizations**—“[There are a] wide range of agencies represented . . . They are all on the same page, working together to help the kids.”
- **Early Interventions**—According to key informants, Ohio has greatly improved in its early intervention strategies.
- **Ohio is Invested in Family Engagement and Empowerment**—Many participating family members are aware that Ohio is in a unique position in regard to family engagement and empowerment options: “Ohio believes in family engagement and empowerment and is attempting to achieve it. This project is proof of that. Ohio is trying to understand, but still has a ways to go to accomplish it.”
- **Families Receive Support from a Variety of Sources**—From agencies that serve families to churches and other community organizations, participants often spoke of ways that they feel supported by their communities.

# Ohio's Dreams

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*“Support, not just a patchwork of funding, not just an agency, but a network that would inform families and give them opportunities to have a voice, to inform the agencies that serve. More paid family members hired by agencies. We as families need to be linked together all the time...”*

*“Every service agency would have families on boards and special committees on family issues.”*

*“Catalog our assets—that is the things that we have learned that work”*

Throughout the interviews, focus groups and key informant interviews and in the Community Forums, participants were invited to engage in the process of creating a vision for the future of family engagement and empowerment in the state. It is by engaging participants in this process that we begin to create a shared vision of the future. This vision was especially important during the Community Forum on September 3rd, when participants came together to initiate strategies that would take the best of family empowerment and engagement strategies from the past and track a course that would bring them into the shared vision of the future.

## **Participant's Dreams:**

- **Access to Resources**—*“There is an easily accessible, well-known treasure-trove of resources and information for all families—‘the whole community.’”* This theme was central to most participants' dreams, and people see a vital part of this work as building community knowledge of services.
- **Strong and Vital Partnerships**—Participants envision unlimited partnerships with small neighborhood groups, diverse family groups and fully cooperative state agencies that are all engaged in the work of growing family engagement and empowerment.
- **Respectful Relationships and True Partnerships**—Mutual respect in encounters with service agencies was a frequent theme, along with relationships where there are true partnerships between those served and those providing service. Participants hope to see families being recognized as the primary resource and ultimate decision-maker for their children.
- **Adequate Funding**—People hope that there is the funding needed to create and maintain change.
- **A Comprehensive Think-Tank**—there was a call for a comprehensive think-tank with creative people who will listen to a variety of families and parents, “really listen to realities” and make recommendations about state priorities. This effort would move from being “specialized support groups” to a “united advocacy voice for all families.”

- **Streamlining of Access to Services**—Efforts to create this were a recurring theme and participants saw different strategies for achieving this, such as no-wrong-door policies, holistic wrap-around services and one-stop shopping. In the words of one participant, *“We need one application to be completed for all possible services. This would be completed by all the parents and the agencies and organizations would call you if the services they offer match your needs.”*
- **Better Communication**—This is a crucial component of many of the themes that emerged in relationship to the dream.
- **Customer Service Model**—Many participants hope to see a shift in the service culture towards a customer service model. This shift was perceived to be an important catalyst that could lead to many other changes.
- **Shifting the Focus from What’s Available to What a Family Needs**—A theme that emerged in various forms is the desire to have support mechanisms driven by best practices, rather than other, lesser concerns. In the word of one participant, *“It’s been proven time and time again that families can succeed when they are given respect and needed support with a tailored plan specific to their family’s strengths and needs.”*

# Research Themes

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In analyzing the interview and focus group data, several themes emerged as areas of concern and promise for strengthening family engagement and empowerment opportunities in Ohio. They are:

1. Access to information about resources and better linkage to service
2. More meaningful roles for family members
3. Improved relationships and communications between providers, systems and families
4. Increased understanding about the realities of family life and limitations of bureaucratic actions
5. Institutionalizing family involvement and input
6. Increasing availability of support services
7. Broaden advocacy focus

## **1. Access to Information about Resources and Better Linkage to Service**

*“Sometimes it feels like agencies keep services a secret—we find out about things by accident.”*

*“Families need places they can access information about services privately because of the stigma...”*

*“My wish it to find a way to make the community (all citizens) aware of the services available for them.”*

*“You cannot empower a parent until you give them the information.”*

Throughout the community consultation activities (stakeholder interviews, focus groups and Appreciative Inquiry interviews) family members and advocates were able to identify a wide range of available opportunities for family engagement and empowerment, but there was a general consensus that knowledge of these opportunities is difficult to come by. Most of the family members that participate in these opportunities find out through “word of mouth.” Linkage to engagement opportunities was described as “random,” while some systems, like MRDD, have included family engagement opportunities in all of their early screening efforts. The implementation of the Parent Advocacy Connection has increased the number of families with peer assistance in navigating service systems. Despite these and other improvements, most families felt that finding services was not systematic and many communities lacked any well-known, consistent method for providing information and connecting families to engagement and empowerment opportunities.

In addition to a lack of easily accessible service information, many families reported that caseworkers, or other intake units, inconsistently do referrals to family engagement options. It was not uncommon to hear that “the service you get depends on your worker.” Some families find supports by searching websites or looking in the local paper. More than one respondent mentioned that “(families) accidentally find out about us” despite reported brochures and speeches. As one woman mentioned, “People know me. I have learned a lot and I don’t want other parents to have to experience the same thing.” These local champions are often called to connect with families and help them navigate the system. The lack of knowledge about available services makes the utilization of those services almost impossible.

The education system seems well developed in its opportunities to link with families. Between the education requirements for special needs children and the parent and school partnerships necessary for implementing No Child Left Behind, an array of education related parent outreach is underway in the State of Ohio. The state is in the second year of implementation of a federally funded Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) that includes a well developed Parent Leadership Institute.

Despite the challenges, many report a robust group of families who are working to support each other and inform the system so that it provides more and better care for their children and themselves. There does not seem to be a lack of interest, just a need to make the opportunities more transparent and the connections seamless.

## **2. More Meaningful Roles for Family Members**

*“Solicit the parents, train them and work with them. Parents should be able to give back . . .”*

Finding and maintaining an authentic and meaningful role for family representatives was mentioned as a significant challenge. There seems to be a range of local, regional and state family advisory opportunities within existing systems, but family members do not always feel welcomed or utilized in these positions. Family representatives report attending meetings where they do not understand why they are there. They often do not understand their role or responsibilities when serving on these boards and at times report being “silenced” by procedures that can seem alien. Professionals seem to speak in letters, referred to as an alphabet soup by several; parents often feel unengaged and not fully aware of the impact of some archaic bureaucratic or legislative elements. The “meetings are overwhelming...I always leave with a headache...” or “I don’t know why I am there...” was mentioned in the interviews. One respondent mentioned that you should never have just one family representative on advisory boards so that family members have an ally. There is tremendous opportunity within this existing family advisory infrastructure to cultivate relationships and improve the quality of input to all the service systems.

### **3. Improved Relationships and Communications between Providers, Systems and Families**

*“Providers have the power...they do not want to listen...they tell families what to do...”*

*“I wish that everyone was treated equally. Sometimes the people who are trying to help act like they’re better than the person getting the help.”*

At the core of many of these perceptions is a profound sense that service providers and other professionals do not “respect” families nor “understand the true value of family engagement and empowerment.” Some respondents felt that professionals still blame the family for their struggles or generally do not “respect” them. Several of the existing family engagement efforts have required extended periods of “relationship building” with service systems in order to “get our foot in the door.” Other respondents felt that lack of awareness or lack of knowledge on how to reach out to families created barriers to genuine family engagement. Some feel that underlying this lack of “respect” is a stigma or prejudice against families requiring any type of social services. There was considerable concern that a broad definition of what constitutes a family and the diversity of Ohio’s families was not understood or appreciated. Helping people see that all families have strengths, that they do offer a valuable perspective on care issues, that working in partnership could improve outcomes and increase efficiency was mentioned as a first step for finding better ways to work together. It was noted that families in the child welfare system, who have lost custody of their children are the most vulnerable, and the least engaged and empowered.

### **4. Increased Understanding about the Realities of Family Life and Limitations of Bureaucratic Actions**

*“There are too many silos of people not working together that need to be improved in the community and state-wide. There needs to be more linkages to the community and leveraging of community resources. ”*

*“**Collaboration** will be key to bringing families in...”*

*“...focus on services not funding streams, find ways to wrap families into treatment....”*

*“We have services and programs and try to figure out how families can fit in, not the other way around. Start with what families need. Family services are from family perspective; family engagement is from the agency perspective....Don’t see families as a community, not a sector of the community.”*

Because family engagement has in some cases not been fully realized, there are many opportunities for misunderstanding and miscommunication. There are opportunities for

both families and providers to better understand the needs and limitations of each other. Many families are overwhelmed with day-to-day living so they cannot always participate in available advisory meetings. Meetings are not always scheduled at “family friendly” times or locations, and when reimbursement is provided it is often too late to be helpful in offsetting the immediate costs of attendance. It was also noted that not all organizations or individuals want to “play nice together.” In some cases, historical experiences with rogue parents or incompetent service professionals are coloring the potential for genuine family engagement.

Families want services that are based upon what they really need, not on what’s available. There are frustrations with caseworkers who “did not return calls,” had “full voice mail” or repetitive administrative procedures that don’t send a family friendly message. The rules of accountability in state systems are sometimes onerous and not an easy fit with the realities of day-to-day life with a special needs child. Documentation requirements, eligibility changes and disconnected locations of services can create tremendous stress for families that need the care.

Many respondents felt that better collaboration could go a long way in addressing these concerns. Familiar charges of silo funding, turf battles and protective personalities were discussed as barriers to the development of a networked family engagement effort. Helping people see how valuable collaboration can be in stretching resources, improving responsiveness and promoting change was identified as a key needed strategy.

*“We need one central space and build decision-making processes for wider input and to help set priorities for the state.”*

*“Need a network of multiple groups and broader conversation...”*

The absence of a state level team that meets to talk about family involvement was noted. Many respondents desire a comprehensive conversation about involving families across the continuum. The absence of this conversation is often interpreted as a lack of interest or not valuing families and their involvement in services. Here again, providers and other professionals are not always viewed as valuing or respecting family input.

Many suggested creating opportunities for connections. Creating a coalition that can meet to find mutual concerns. Each system should be very intentional about who is missing, and plan to connect with them. The idea of “one stop shopping” for family members was frequently identified as a way to help family members know what resources are available and promote more collaboration between systems.

It seems clear from the community consultation that increasing and improving family engagement opportunities in Ohio must begin by creating more connections between the existing efforts. There was a pretty strong sentiment that we should build from what we have. Connections need to be built and routine opportunities to share knowledge and resources need to be established. Finding ways to address the perception of prejudice and stigma toward families involved in services will need to be acknowledged and

addressed from the beginning. Specific suggestions, such as centralized intake, training options, small pilot projects, funding incentives, could all be considered within a genuinely connected, trusting network of family advocates.

## **5. Institutionalizing Family Involvement and Input**

*“ . . . involving families depends on the personality of the worker . . . ”*

*“... (Families) are the last thing on every bodies mind...”*

Although there are many examples of family involvement initiatives throughout the state, there are few systems where family engagement has been institutionalized. Families report that they feel their involvement is often dependent upon the caseworker that they are assigned to or some other random reason. Another challenge to family engagement is the funding structure of many of the services. Medicaid will not reimburse for family engagement activities, and many services are funded by Medicaid. Local match, using levy dollars, drives the availability of support services provided in each county. The willingness and ability of citizens to support this match impacts service availability. Family engagement is generally not a priority for these funds. A lack of resources is often a barrier to ensuring families are fully involved in the design and delivery of care.

## **6. Increasing Availability of Support Services**

*“...transportation services are critical and very limited....”*

*“....respite care is really needed...families do not have a lot of opportunities to get... (They) do not trust to leave their child with just any care giver...”*

Limitations in local resources are often at the core of this concern, the need for more concrete services. Specific services like transportation and respite care are in short supply. Many respondents mentioned that home rule in Ohio gives power to the localities so that each of the 88 counties is different in the range of services and supports available to families, and in the types of family engagement opportunities available in that community. Counties pass levies to support much of the social and education sectors. If a levy is not passed by the public, that county will have few support services and assistance options for residents. Crossing county lines for service is generally not an option.

## **7. Broaden Advocacy Focus**

Many respondents mentioned the desire for family engagement to take on broader issues around strengthening families. Concerns for economic security, adequate and affordable

housing, health insurance coverage and others were seen as critical to strengthening families. These broader concerns necessitate that policy concerns and macro issues receive attention from existing and emerging family advocates. Strategies to address these issues may require more political action than routinely found in family engagement and empowerment opportunities.

# Guiding Principles

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Throughout the course of our research parents, advocates and professionals kept returning to a set of “best practices”, what we have chose to call guiding principles that should inform all work aimed at empowering and engaging families. Although the list that follows is not exhaustive, and will hopefully be built upon as OFCF continues its work, the following were most frequently listed by family members:

- **Family Friendly Meetings**—Keep meetings that families are invited to family friendly—no jargon, have more than one or two family members attending, and make sure meetings occur at a time that parents can make.
- **Reimbursement**—Pay family members for time and expenses in real time. Families have to spend money on gas to travel to meetings and pay for babysitters the day they go to meetings, and the delay in receiving reimbursement was cited repeatedly as a financial hardship.
- **Outreach to Diverse Audiences**—Be inclusive, recognizing that outreach efforts to families without the Internet takes more effort and resources but that it is still critical. Families in rural areas face transportation and other issues that are very different from those in urban areas.
- **Family Friendly**—Make systems family friendly and easy to navigate so more money can be spent on services rather than on ways to help people navigate the systems.
- **Cultural Competency**—There is great diversity among the families served by the state. Cultural competency among service providers, government agencies, and organizations working with families is critical to success in supporting families.

# Strategies and Recommendations

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*“Parents shouldn’t just be at the table; they need to be in the kitchen cooking, and planning the menu and the grocery list.”* Participant in the Community Forum held on September 3, 2008.

It has become clear through our research that there is a tremendous amount of support for the idea of creating mechanisms to empower and engage families across systems in Ohio. And the idea of institutionalizing, coordinating and building upon family engagement and empowerment opportunities is supported by families and family advocates alike. Indeed, this support cuts clear across the responses of families involved in all the systems that serve them.

Although Ohio clearly has a way to go toward creating a sustainable and integrated cross systems family engagement model, much work has already been done. One of the goals of our research was therefore to look at ways of building on Ohio’s existing strengths in family engagement and empowerment—creating dialogue around ways of connecting existing resources and bolstering those activities that are already successful.

As such, a series of recommendations has been developed to increase family engagement and empowerment in Ohio. These are all recommendations that could be implemented through the establishment of a Network or Center. What follows is a description of specific activities and strategies that would work toward the following three significant goals:

- To promote and maintain the enthusiasm and momentum by continuing the conversation that this research process has catalyzed;
- To focus the vision, by building a sustainable implementation and design structure for a Center or Network to support family engagement and empowerment across systems; and
- To increase the impact and effectiveness of existing family involvement opportunities through increased coordination, which would reduce duplication of effort and increase efficiencies.

The strategies have been organized into categories to assist in the development of implementation plans. Some of the strategies could be acted upon quickly and could be implemented with existing resources or with small amounts of dedicated funding. Other strategies would take more time and would require additional resources or the pooling of existing funds spent on family involvement efforts, identification of new funds, and/or reallocation of existing resources. Some strategies are very broad and would involve multiple state Departments, and some are specific to a Department or to a specific program or program enhancement.

Every strategy that was discussed in the Community Forum on September 3, 2008 and during the 5 Regional OFCF Network meetings has been included in this report. Although some of the ideas and strategies suggested are already being developed or implemented, we chose to present everything in order to fully reflect the discussions of participants. The strategies are presented in the following categories:

- **Category A**—Immediate Next Steps to Build on the Momentum,
- **Category B**—Broad Strategies that pertain to the Institutionalization and Sustainability of Family Involvement, and
- **Category C**—Strategies Specific to a Department, Issue, Program, or Program Element

A Summary Chart that provides a snapshot of the strategies cross-listed with the major themes identified in the research is located on Page 31.

### **Category A—Immediate Next Steps to Build on the Momentum**

- **Regular Listening Sessions**—Families want to be heard. We therefore recommend implementing a schedule of regular listening sessions at the local and or regional level (every six months). Although this strategy would demand some funding, through this research process a cadre of parents and family advocates have been trained who have the skills needed to conduct these “listening sessions.” Implementing this strategy would not only give these advocates and family members another significant role, but would also provide an opportunity for the many families throughout the state who have a desire to tell their stories. To fold this into the Ohio Families and Children First infrastructure would create opportunities for increased dialogue between families and state-level entities, build community-level support, and build the skills of families and family advocates with minimal additional investment on the part of the state.
- **Structure to Respond to Listening Session Input**—By formalizing a structure of sharing the input from the listening sessions and giving feedback to families, the Cabinet could make tremendous progress toward helping create accountability and increase effective two-way communication between professionals and families. This strategy would demand an agreement among Cabinet members to create a mechanism for reviewing listening session information in a timely way and incorporating feedback into future actions. If actions could not accommodate parent requests, there would also need to be explanations provided. Additionally, regular updates on the feasibility of requests would need to be conducted in order to ensure that ideas that require long term focus such as funding or system changes stay on the radar screen.
- **Conduct Annual Family Engagement Cross Systems Congress**—In order to continue the dialogue and build upon the conversations and momentum that has been initiated, we recommend bringing together the highest level state system representatives, family members and advocates from each region and service

system on an annual basis. These meetings could do much to highlight successes, refocus family engagement and empowerment initiatives across systems and build communication and support. Using strengths based methods of collaboration would lead to high engagement and offer constructive opportunities for families and professionals to arrive at solutions together.

- **Create Cross Systems Learning Opportunities**— At the Community Forum held on September 3, 2008 participants suggested increasing the understanding of the value of family engagement by developing and conducting a training for both family members and professionals on the positive outcomes resulting from family engagement and empowerment. The development and implementation of this training would strengthen the relationship between agencies and families and build trust and understanding. Additionally, as noted by key informants, this training could help to build a pool of individuals who could act as a Speaker's Bureau and talk about the value of family engagement throughout the state.
- **Create Cross-Systems Family Leadership Opportunities** —There are opportunities to formalize parent input through the creation of a Cross-Systems Family Leadership Council. This council could serve to focus efforts on cross systems sharing of resources and materials, bring family strengths, assets and needs to the state-level dialogue, and also serve as a leadership training ground for both family members and advocates. Similarly, participants at the Community Forum on September 3, 2008 recommended that an Advisory Committee of Families and Professional be formed and meet quarterly, or as needed, to network and give and seek advice, with families determining the agenda.
- **Develop Work Groups**—Much work is already being done by individual systems in the family engagement and empowerment arena. This means that there are tremendous opportunities to create cross systems work groups. The small groups that were formed at the September 3, 2008 meeting discussed nine specific strategies, some or all of these could be continued through ongoing work groups.
- **Increase Awareness of and Utilization of Existing Resources** —There are several resources that have already been created that could be disseminated across systems. Examples include a document that explains children's rights in Ohio located at <http://olrs.ohio.gov/Other/ChildrensRights.pdf>; a self assessment tool developed by the Family Support Council that helps agencies and families identify what existing practices are family friendly and identify changes to increase family involvement; and a guide to service coordination for families.

## **Category B—Strategies that pertain to Institutionalization and Sustainability of Family Involvement**

- **Explore New Funding Mechanisms**—There is recognition that funding is necessary to increase family engagement and empowerment and that there is the possibility of increasing the impact of the funding currently being spent by different government agencies through the pooling of funding. With a goal of developing long range and sustainable funding to support families and increase engagement and empowerment, opportunities exist to explore new funding mechanisms through private/public partnerships in funding and policy.
- **Encourage and Incentivize Family Communications**—Family members have much to offer and are willing to share their expertise and resources. However, at the moment there are few incentives that work to foster and encourage this goodwill. There are ways of encouraging and incentivizing family communications. This could mean helping establish parent blogs, creating a statewide family list serve, or encouraging existing family advocates to expand their reach through technology. It should be noted also that although technology presents many opportunities, there are still those families who do not have a computer or easy access to a computer.
- **Consistently Adopt Best Practices of Family Involvement** – While some programs and Departments are using best practices when involving diverse families, it isn't consistent across all counties and agencies. It was noted in the Community Forums that families may need education before they join and fully participate in “councils;” and often professionals outnumber them. Ways to increase family engagement include: developing trust; making meetings “family friendly” by using language that everyone can understand; including more than one or two family members at each meeting; handing out gas cards or grocery cards at meetings; providing stipends with a quick turnaround; providing parents with “training” information; having family’s mentor or train others; and providing an orientation of what is expected at board or council meetings. In the long term, Forum participants would like to see the percentage of family members serving on boards rise to between 20-50%.
- **Institutionalize Family Engagement at the Highest Level of State Government**—Many state agencies involve families in some advisory capacity. However, there are no requirements that assure families have ongoing input at the highest level of state government. Participants at the Community Forums suggested creating a mechanism or structure that would assure that the highest level of government agency employees are involving families in meaningful ways in decision making across systems. One group of parents suggested the idea of creating a Parent Ombudsman position in the Governor’s office.

- **Access to Resources**—There was much discussion about expanding existing infrastructure to create user-friendly service lineages (no wrong door) and to level the services provided across the regions. Strategies for building on existing resources suggested at the Community Forum include expanding 211 into all counties, building on the Network of Care websites—looking especially closely at Stark County’s, which is enhanced and updated regularly, and developing a video on existing resources and navigating the systems, which could then be distributed widely.
- **A Website of Websites Links**—There are currently many different websites available to parents, and no definitive web source of family engagement and empowerment opportunities. As a result, there is an opportunity to create this definitive website, a website that could be connected to the others with the goal of helping families access information more easily.
- **Economic Development**—Needs for family engagement and empowerment do not exist in a vacuum, and families require supports in other areas. A stronger economy with more jobs will lead to stronger families. Agencies that have family economic security as their goal need to be included in conversations regarding family engagement and empowerment.
- **System Integration and Financing Options**—There are multiple service systems that families need to navigate. Developing a single point of entry, which would allow families to access any and all services through one entry point, would eliminate the duplication and redundancy experienced now. It should be noted that this strategy goes beyond referral, to the ability to access services through a single point of entry. The strategy also highlights a need to explore financing options for families of children accessing services from multiple systems. Too often there is a lack of coordination between systems, which results in multiple specialists, case workers etc. In these cases, the amount of money being spent through different funding sources could be better allocated with more family control.
- **Pilot Mini-grants to Promote Innovation**—Small amounts of money can make a big difference. The OFCF could help to create dynamic learning opportunities in family engagement and empowerment in the state by offering one-time mini-grant opportunities to increase capacity and test promising ideas. These ideas could be tested on a small scale, supporting community-level family empowerment initiatives and ultimately developed into a toolkit of best practices and strategies.

## **Category C—Strategies Specific to a Department, Issue, Program, or Program Element**

- **Examine the Functions and Possible Functionality of Existing Communications Tools**—There are communication tools (including the website of OFCF) that could be used to further the goal of increasing family engagement and empowerment opportunities in the state. Thought would need to be given to what resources would be most useful, but possibilities might include a training calendar, an exploration of one-stop-shopping, and a system advocacy list serve.
- **Parent and Family Consumer Rating System**—We rank on Amazon.com, and increasingly rank other services in our lives. We live in a consumer-driven culture, yet there are few opportunities for ranking our public services or systems. Opportunities exist to implement a pilot program to introduce a consumer-driven family ranking system. This would allow family input into services and would help shift the focus to families as consumers.
- **Train Parents to Advocate to the Legislature**—Few current parent engagement and empowerment opportunities train parents to advocate in order to impact policy. In the Community Forums, participants noted a need to offer more opportunities to train parents on the entire legislative process. Similarly, those who work in the legislative process need to know what they can gain from listening to and being inspired by families and caregivers. Strategies suggested at the Community Forum that might further this work focused mainly on improving training opportunities, both through CD/online/guided training opportunities and in-person training sessions. Training topics suggested included: how a bill becomes a law, understanding networking, grassroots letter writing, who to target with what issues, public speaking, mentor programs, and learning the state and local boards and groups that can help with specific issues.
- **Engaging Families from Early Intervention to Adult Transition**—There are opportunities to assist families as they transition from Help Me Grow to school, and from school to work. Participants would like to see professionals empowered to ask a family, “What do you need?” No family is a cookie cutout. The overall outcome would be improved outcomes for families. Partnering with professional organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatricians, the Family Practice State Organization, and the Nurse Practitioner organization could enable training on family resources, and special needs populations to be delivered on a large scale.
- **Children in DYS**—Several family support ideas were offered in this area. They include: getting parents involved at the onset, connecting parents for networking or car pool opportunities in order to provide more support, inviting parents to monthly team meetings, allowing parents to write to other kids as well as their own, creating sensitivity to families who have children in an institution at the state

level, having family mentors/coach rather than youth mentor and creating community based Advisory Boards (Citizen Circles) to get volunteers. Several specific strategies offered include:

- Having parole officers educate and orient parents at court when the child is first committed.
  - Having a Step down program for youth being released.
  - Creating Family coaches/family support. A Center could train the coaches, as well as providing the curriculum and a pool of family coaches.
  - Conducting focus groups with parents of youth in DYS to find out what they need.
  - Conducting training for family support persons.
  - Educating families about the system.
  - Developing resources for families in the home community.
  - Looking at offering parenting training for youth, so that they are better prepared to be parents.
  - Developing a website for parents to log in to find out how their children are doing.
- 
- **Self-Esteem**—There are opportunities to develop programs for both parents and kids to increase self-esteem, utilize family mapping, and educate families about “what’s in” with your kids.
  - **Support for Kinship and Foster Families**—Kinship and foster families can feel isolated. Participants see a need to start support groups for kinship and foster families that will extend emotional support to families and enhance networking.
  - **More Community Events at Schools**—The events currently offered in schools are often connected to honors, awards or athletics and are not inclusive of children with special needs. There is a need to build strong relationships with all families and schools could work toward this by hosting positive events at the schools that are inclusive of all families.
  - **Coaching/Mentoring Parents/Parent Advocacy**—There are opportunities to: coordinate and enhance resources on service systems, train on disabilities, develop parent mentoring, build on existing efforts, and increase effectiveness of parent advocates through training and professional development for service providers. Additionally, participants see potential in creating mechanisms that allow collaborations with colleges to create opportunities for students who will be future professionals to have real life experiences with families while they are in college.
  - **Develop Preschool Playgroups**—Participants spoke of a need for preschool options that provide a combination of services for special needs and non-special needs children.

- **Stigma Reduction**—Stigma continues to be an issue and participants spoke of a need to explore ways of reducing the stigma associated with seeking help and support. Stigma currently keeps people from asking for help for fear of being labeled. It is generally believed that when stigma is reduced, there will be more community grassroots involvement, an increase in corporate and community funding and more support.

## Summary Chart

There was overwhelming support from the families and family advocates involved in this research project to create some type of mechanism to support families across systems in Ohio. The idea of institutionalizing family engagement and empowerment in the state through the creation of a Network or Center was supported by families and family advocates involved in all the systems that serve families in the state, and was seen as an opportunity to coordinate and build on existing family involvement resources.

The following chart provides a snapshot of specific strategies to institutionalize and enhance family involvement and is cross-listed with the major themes identified in the research. It is designed to complement the complete description of these strategies.

### Summary Chart of Strategies for Increasing Family Engagement and Empowerment in Ohio

| Category A: Immediate Next Steps to Build on the Momentum                   |                                      |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|------------------------|
| Recommended Strategy  | Access to information about services | More meaningful roles for family members | Improved relationships/ communications | Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals | Institutionalizing family involvement and input | Increasing availability of support services | Broaden advocacy focus |
| Regular Listening Sessions  |                                      | *  | *                                      | *   |   |   |                        |
| Structure to Respond to Listening Session Input                             |                                      | *  | *                                      |   |   |   |                        |
| Conduct Annual Family Engagement Cross Systems Congress                     |                                      | *  | *                                      |   |   |   |                        |
| Create Cross System Learning Opportunities – the Value of Family Engagement |                                      |  |  |   |   |   | *                      |
| Create Cross-Systems Family Leadership Opportunities (themes                |                                      |  |  |   |   | *   | *                      |
| Develop Work Groups   | *                                    | *  | *                                      | *   | *   | *   | *                      |

| <b>Category B: Broad Strategies Related to Institutionalization and Sustainability of Family Involvement</b> |                                      |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|------------------------|
| Recommended Strategy   | Access to information about services | More meaningful roles for family members | Improved relationships/ communications | Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals | Institutionalizing family involvement and input | Increasing availability of support services | Broaden advocacy focus |
| Funding – Pooled and new funding   | *                                    | *  | *                                      | *   | *   | *   | *                      |
| Encourage and Incentivize Family Communications  |                                      |  |  |   | *   |   |                        |
| Consistently Adopt Best Practices  | *                                    | *  | *                                      | *   | *   | *   | *                      |
| Institutionalize Family Engagement   |                                      |  |  |   | *   |   |                        |
| Access   | *                                    |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
| Mini-grants  | *                                    | *  | *                                      | *   | *   | *   | *                      |
| Website of Websites  |                                      |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
| Economic Development   | *                                    | *  | *                                      | *   | *   | *   | *                      |
| System Integration and Financing Alternatives  | *                                    | *  |  |   |   |   |                        |

| <b>Category C: Strategies Specific to a Department, Issue, Program, or Program Element</b> |                                      |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|---|------------------------|
| Recommended Strategy   | Access to information about services | More meaningful roles for family members | Improved relationships/ communications | Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals | Institutionalizing family involvement and input | Increasing availability of support services | Broaden advocacy focus |
| Build on Existing Communication Tools  | *                                    |  |  |   |   |   | *                      |
| Parent and Family Consumer Rating System   | *                                    |  |  |   |   |   |                        |
| Train Parents to Advocate to the Legislature   |                                      |  |  |   |   |   | *                      |
| Engaging Families from Early Intervention to Adult Transition                              | *                                    |  |  |   |   |   | *                      |
| Children in DYS  |                                      |  |  |   | *   |   |                        |
| Self –esteem building  |                                      | *  | *                                      |   |   |   | *                      |
| Support for Kinship and Foster Families  | *                                    | *  |  |   |   | *   |                        |
| More Community   |                                      |  | *                                      | *   | *   |   |                        |

|   |   |   |   |  |  |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|--|--|---|---|
| Events at School                                  |   |   |   |  |  |   |   |
| Coaching/Mentoring<br>Parents, Parent<br>Advocacy | * | * | * |  |  |   |   |
| Develop Preschool<br>Playgroups                   |   |   |   |  |  | * |   |
| Stigma Reduction                                  | * |   |   |  |  |   | * |

# Conclusion

The following three recommendations are strongly supported by the families, family advocates, and professionals who have participated in this project:

**Recommendation 1:** Proceed with efforts to increase the engagement and empowerment of families in Ohio through the development of a mechanism such as a Center or Network.

**Recommendation 2:** Increase coordination among existing and new family involvement efforts -- to reduce duplication and increase the impact of existing and future efforts.

**Recommendation 3:** Proceed with the strategies identified in Category A – Immediate Next Steps to Build on the Momentum - which are low cost and important to sustaining and building on the excitement and enthusiasm generated by this project.

## Comments from Participants at the September 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting

*“The high point for me, being able to witness 14 years of talk finally begin to be a reality.”*

*“I was empowered by attending the September 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting.”*

*“I was really listened to by the state employees who were at the September 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, they wrote down what I said. One of them told me, “We wish we could clone you.” I can’t believe someone wants to clone me.”*

*“I have never seen people so engaged ever.”*

Wishes for families in Ohio....

*“Families receive resources they need to be stable, State resources are connected to those families in need, and More families become engaged so that they can become empowered.”*

*That it happens! When it does, its advertised and utilized, and that it helps Ohioans statewide in accessing the care they need.*

*Strategically align resources, proved venues to access resources, and develop a common voice/vision for the entire state.*

*Cross system/connections across systems, broad family input on an on-going basis*

*That it happens, that it is funded, that I am part of it*

# Appendices

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**Appendix A** Focus Group Protocol and Key Informant Appreciative Interview Questions for Families and Family Advocates

**Appendix B** Demographics

**Appendix C** State-level Key Informant Questions and List of Organizations that Participated

**Appendix D** Resources in Other States

**Appendix E** Resource Matrix