CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA

NATIONAL BLUEPRINT

FOR EXCELLENCE IN CHILD WELFARE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Raising the Bar for Children, Families, and Communities

National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare

Executive Summary

The Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) National Blueprint is intended to be a catalyst for change: to broaden the thinking of communities, individuals, and groups, including public and private organizations within and outside of the child welfare system, and help them understand how their roles and responsibilities fit in the overall strategy to improve outcomes for children and youth. The CWLA National Blueprint also serves as the basis for updating and creating CWLA program-specific Standards of Excellence, which play a unique and pivotal role in moving child welfare practice forward.

As a coalition of private and public entities and individuals dedicated to ensuring the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and their families, CWLA advocates for policies, best practices, and collaborative strategies that advance positive outcomes for children and youth. In recent years, actualizing our mission has become increasingly complex. The reality is that many children in this country experience challenges because of issues with immigration, education, housing, and health care or because they live in communities where there is violence and poverty. Unless the community has what it needs and takes ownership for ensuring the well-being of all of its children and families, neither children and families who are vulnerable nor children and families in general will flourish. The National Blueprint returns CWLA to its historic roots of advocating for a multisystem, community-based approach to protecting children and supporting families. This approach is grounded in practice improvement work that is specific to the child welfare system and inclusive of its advocacy efforts on behalf of all children and families.

Through the National Blueprint, CWLA articulates the foundation and framework for achieving the vision *that all children will grow up safely, in loving families and supportive communities, with everything they need to flourish—and with connections to their culture, ethnicity, race, and language.* As each community, organization, family, and individual is unique, the obstacles to implementation will only be identified as these entities work together to achieve the goals of the National Blueprint. This will require them to set priorities and make compromises along the way. The change might not be easy, and will take time.

The National Blueprint was developed by an advisory committee of more than 30 professionals representing child welfare agencies and organizations at federal, state, county, and community levels, and with experience as policymakers, researchers, academicians, clinicians, workers, supervisors, parents (birth, foster and adoptive), advocates, foster care alumni, and members of the legal system. The Committee met twice for two-day, face-to-face meetings, during which members developed the parameters for the Vision, Principles, and Standards. Subgroups continued the Committee's work through a series of teleconferences.

To help all children and youth flourish, society must provide services, supports, and resources so that families can ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of their children with equal emphasis on all three. One cannot take precedence over another. Communities must be able to invest in the supports and services required to ensure that all children, youth, and families will have optimal opportunities to succeed. To facilitate community leadership and decisionmaking, current child welfare, education, social services, and health care systems will be required to transform their thinking and retool their mechanisms for allocating funds. Reform is required at the federal, tribal, state, and local levels, as is greater participation and investment from the foundation and corporate sectors.

The National Blueprint may be used by policymakers, community and organizational leaders, teachers, child advocates, licensing specialists, accrediting bodies, researchers, academics, and government entities. To establish common ground for meaningful discussions, often-used terms are defined within the National Blueprint.

The National Blueprint includes a Vision and Values statement and eight core Principles with accompanying Standards. The following section provides an overview of the content of this document.

Vision, Values, and Principles

Vision

All children will grow up safely, in loving families and supportive communities, with everything they need to flourish—and with connections to their culture, ethnicity, race, and language.

Values

We value children, youth, families, and communities. We believe in integrity, fairness, social justice, dignity, and honesty. We value these actions, qualities, and characteristics: respect, innovation, service, inclusiveness, collaboration, trust, flexibility, competence, and humility.

Core Principles

The following core principles guide the thinking, decisionmaking, and behavior of individuals, organizations, communities, and government entities committed to the promotion and enhancement of children's safety, permanency, and well-being.

Rights of Children

Principle

It is the responsibility of all members of society to work toward the shared goal of advancing the fundamental rights and needs of children.

Standards

Survival and Development

- Children should have access to food, clean and safe water, shelter, and clothing required for survival and healthy development.
- Children should have nurturing and loving families.
- Children should have connections with their family and communities.
- Children should have access to information about their family history and background information.
- Children should be able to preserve their racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity.
- Children should be able to have their own gender identity and sexual orientation.
- Children should have access to formal education.
- Children should have access to quality health care.
- Children should be able to live in a safe physical environment that is free of pollutants and toxins.
- Children should have access to leisure, cultural, and recreational activities; and to healthy social relationships.

Protection

- Children must be protected from abuse, neglect, maltreatment, exploitation, and abduction.
- Children should be protected from discrimination on the basis of race, color, age, disability, gender, familial status, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, genetic information, language, religion, national, ethnic or social origin, political beliefs, or citizenship.
- Children must be protected under the law.
- Children must be protected from torture or other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Children should be protected from corporal punishment.
- Children must have decisions made in their best interests.
- Children should be protected from interference with their privacy.

Participation

- Children should be involved in all aspects of decisionmaking regarding plans for them.
- Children should be able to express themselves freely.

Shared Responsibility and Leadership

Principle

Families, individuals, organizations, and communities share responsibility for assuring the safety and well-being of children and youth. To help children and youth flourish, leaders at every level and in all realms ensure that individuals, families, organizations, and systems collaborate, communicate, create and nurture meaningful partnerships.

Standards

Communities

- Community members (such as elders, leaders, and representatives) should have participatory roles at all levels and in all aspects of work with children, youth, and families.
- Community members should be present on governing boards, executive/management positions, advisory boards, task forces, committees, and focus groups, and should have an equal voice and decisionmaking power.

Leadership

- Leaders are responsible for building the capacity of their entities and communities to respond to the needs of children, youth, and families.
- Leaders are responsible for creating environments that build and support the hardiness and resilience among employees, volunteers, and communities.

Collaboration

- Each community, entity, individual and system should recognize that collaborative and cooperative relationships are essential to creating and sustaining the supports and services needed by children, youth, and families.

- There should be effective and meaningful partnership between the public and private sectors. To provide seamless integration of supports and services, systems should be designed to build on the individual and collective strengths of all partners.

Governance and Capacity

- Each entity, regardless of size, should have a governance structure that emphasizes sound policy and procedure, transparency and accountability, and information sharing.

Engagement/ Participation

Principle

Children, youth, and families are engaged and empowered to promote family success and build community capacity. Service providers and organizations acknowledge, appreciate, and validate the voices and experiences of those whose lives they touch, so that responsive, community-based resources and services are developed, nurtured, and sustained.

Standards

Positive Engagement Strategies

- Every entity should use strengths-based and family-focused approaches in their work.
- Every entity should work to ensure that families feel physically and psychologically safe. This can be done by asking families what is needed for their psychological safety.

Trauma-Informed Engagement

- Entities should use trauma-informed approaches, asking what has happened to individuals and families instead of asking what is wrong with them.

Youth and Family Involvement

- Each entity should fully engage youth and families in all aspects of the work, including program design and development, policy and procedure development, hiring, staff orientation and training, practice guidelines, evaluation, and quality improvement processes.

Experience as a Service Recipient

- People with experience as service recipients or family members of service recipients should serve as mentors; help to educate those working with children, youth, and families; and serve on governing and/or advisory boards.

Developing Trust, Building Relationships

- Everyone should recognize that having a trusting relationship is preliminary to engagement.

Youth Engagement

- Youth should be included in the process of designing and creating programs; developing, reviewing, and revising policies and procedures; and advancing quality improvement processes and program evaluation. Youth should be involved in all aspects of their own planning and decisionmaking.

Parental and Extended Family Engagement

- Parents and extended family members should be included in all aspects of planning and decisionmaking about them and their children.

Fathers

- All efforts should be made to include fathers throughout their children's involvement with supports and services.

Mothers

- All efforts should be made to include mothers throughout their children's involvement with supports and services.

Culturally Appropriate Engagement and Response

- Each entity should use culturally appropriate strategies to engage and respond to children, youth, and families.

Commitment of Workforce and Leadership

- The leadership and workforce of each entity and community should be committed to the active engagement of children, youth, and families in responding to the needs within communities.

Supports and Services

Principle

Families, individuals, communities, organizations, and systems protect children from abuse and neglect, and provide an array of supports and services that help children, youth, and their families to accomplish developmental tasks, develop protective factors, and strengthen coping strategies.

Standards

Community Voice in Policy and Program Development

- Community members should voice their opinions concerning development of policies and programs that meet the needs of the community, and the families and individuals that live and work in it.

Safe and Healthy Communities

- Every geographic community should strive to create and sustain a safe physical environment, and a culture that promotes making healthy lifestyle choices.

Meeting Basic Needs

- Entities and communities should collaborate to ensure that families have access to and eligibility for supports and services that address basic needs, including food, clothing, housing, employment, financial resources, mental health and substance abuse services, education, health care, and transportation.

- When necessary, families should be provided assistance to develop skills and/or assistance in meeting their children's basic needs, so that children can be safe in their homes.

Social Connections

- Children, youth, and families should have ample opportunities for safe, positive social connections within their own communities.

Food and Nutrition

- Every child, youth, and family should have sufficient food and nutrition.

Access to Health Care

- Children, youth, and families should have access to health care in their communities, and their health care needs should be met.
- Strategies should be in place to ensure comprehensive health care assessments for all children. Every child should have access to health services to address physical, dental, behavioral, mental, emotional, and/or developmental health needs.
- Each child and youth should have a comprehensive, accessible, central health record that contains all pertinent information about the child or youth and preserves confidentiality.

Normalizing Need for Support

- Each entity and community should develop plans for helping to reduce stigma and normalize the need for supports and services for the children, youth, and families it serves.

Caregiving Children and Youth

- Children and youth who have caregiving responsibilities within their families or households should be provided with appropriate assistance and support.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

- Each entity should take responsibility for ensuring that all parties providing supports and services are educated about the effects of trauma and the resulting symptoms of traumatic stress, as well as effective strategies for dealing with it.

Collaboration

- Entities and communities should endeavor to provide a holistic, comprehensive, and integrated experience for children, youth, and families seeking support and receiving services.

Assessment and Service Planning

- Each entity should have clearly articulated policies and procedures for assessment and service planning.

Gender-Appropriate Services

- Each entity should ensure that its supports and services are gender-appropriate and take gender differences into consideration.

Legal System

- Courts and other members of the legal system should become a part of the collaborative process to ensure that actions taken are in the best interests of children, protect their rights, and take every possible measure to help them flourish.

Social Media and Technology

- Each entity should have policies and procedures that govern the use of technology and social media by staff, volunteers, and people receiving supports and services.
- Parents, youth, employees, and volunteers within each entity should be educated concerning the risks of technology, internet, and social media use by children and youth, and informed of appropriate safety protocols. Children, youth, and families and everyone who works with them should have access to written recommendations and guidelines for safe usage.
- Each entity should have mechanisms for storing and protecting electronic data that are reviewed and updated to ensure continued efficacy.

Quality Improvement

Principle

Supports and services are designed and implemented based on evidence and knowledge; data collection is focused on measuring outcomes and achieving success; continuous quality improvement is emphasized and supported; and innovative practices and programs are encouraged.

Standards

Components of Quality Improvement Programs

Each entity should have a quality improvement program that has the following components:

- Clearly articulated vision, values, and mission that define the purpose and direction of the entity and set the parameters for its accomplishments;
- Plans for achieving the entity's purpose and direction;
- Structure and mechanisms for gathering quantitative and qualitative information about work processes, quality, and outcomes;
- Effective and ongoing processes for examining information, sharing information with people who need it, evaluating information, and making decisions based upon it;
- Processes for making change;
- Processes for evaluating effects of change; and
- Multiple opportunities and mechanisms for reporting results, including regular reporting on key measures and special reporting on emerging or urgent issues.

Positive Culture and Climate

- Within each entity, everyone should be responsible for creating and sustaining a culture and climate in which accountability, communication, responsiveness, and commitment to improvement are valued and rewarded.

Transparency

- To assure accountability, build trust in the community, and contribute to collaborative relationships, each entity's quality improvement process should be transparent to children, youth, and families; to other stakeholders; and to the general public.
- Qualitative and quantitative data gathered by organizations and public entities should be available for review by stakeholders.

Soliciting and Considering Feedback

- Each entity should have mechanisms for soliciting and considering feedback—from children, youth, families, partners and collaborators, other stakeholders, and community members—that are appropriate to its size and the scope of its mission.

Meaningful Data

- Each entity should collect meaningful data to support its ability to make decisions; improve proactively; and help children, youth, and families to achieve identified outcomes.

Evidence-Based Programs and Practices

- Entities should develop and implement only those programs and practices that are based upon the best available evidence.

Practice-Based Evidence

- Practitioners and researchers should work together effectively to improve knowledge of what works in helping children, youth, and families to flourish.

Measuring Outcomes

- Outcome measures should reflect both aspirations and achievable impact on supports and services for children, youth, and families.

Benchmarks

- Each entity should establish benchmarks for all program areas and systems functions.

Making Improvements

- When evidence indicates that performance is not meeting expectations, the entity should take action to make improvements that are informed by evidence.

Research

- Organizations should collaborate with universities and other entities conducting research. Universities and other researchers should disseminate research findings widely to contribute to research to practice applications.

Workforce

Principle

The workforce consists of competent skilled people with a variety of experiences and representing varied disciplines. They are committed to high-quality service delivery and are provided with the training, tools, resources, and support necessary to perform their roles effectively.

Standards

Leadership

- Entities at national, state, and local levels should have qualified and visionary leaders, who are equipped to transform the broader community response to the changing needs of children, youth, and families within their communities.
- Organizational leaders should have the skills, knowledge, and ability to facilitate good governance; help the organization focus on its mission; strive toward excellence; develop plans; and create and adhere to appropriate systems to help children, youth, and families.

Workforce Development

Orientation and training programs, and continuing education, whether at the academic or provider level, should be evidence-informed, competency-based, and should include, at minimum, the following topics:

- Children's rights
- Family and youth engagement strategies
- Familial rights and responsibilities
- The effects of trauma on children, youth, and families
- Child, youth, and adult development
- Communication and collaboration
- Community partnerships
- Appropriate boundaries, and prevention of sexual exploitation
- Cultural competence and cultural humility
- Policies and procedures
- Relevant law and regulation
- Topics relevant to the specific position
- Relevant evidence-informed programs and practices
- Self-care and stress management
- Effects of secondary traumatic stress

Experience as a Service Recipient

- Each entity should be committed to including people with experience as a service recipient among its employees, volunteers, board members, and advisory groups.

Professional Development

- Parents, youth, families, and communities should be part of the development of educational and training programs, and should be involved in the delivery of workforce orientation and training.
- Each employee and volunteer should have the education and experience appropriate for their position.

Performance Evaluation

- The performance of each employee and volunteer should be evaluated at least annually.

Positive Culture and Climate

- Each employer should cultivate a culture and climate within which accountability, trust, and communication are the norm among all staff, volunteers, and service recipients.

Workload

- There should be assurance that each person's workload is reasonable and allows the employee to perform the required duties. At a minimum, there should be adherence to workload criteria recommended by licensing authorities, the requirements of the specific evidence-based program, and/or accrediting bodies, whenever applicable.
- Each employer should develop and maintain a workforce of sufficient size to make possible the achievement of identified outcomes for the persons served.
- Each employer should have a system appropriate to its size and function for evaluating the effectiveness of its workforce and the efficacy of each person's workload.

Supervision

- Each employee and volunteer should have and report to a supervisor who has the skills, knowledge, and ability to provide guidance appropriate for the individual's needs, position, and responsibilities.

Continuous Learning

- Each employer should have a plan for furthering the professional growth and development of employees and volunteers, with an eye toward continuous learning and career advancement.
- Each person should have opportunities to engage in formal and informal learning—on the job; through continuing education, coaching or mentoring; and through collaboration with peers.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Burnout

- Each employer should have mechanisms for encouraging and supporting staff self-care, engaging in appropriate prevention and wellness activities, and learning stress-management strategies.
- Each employer should recognize the potential for its employees to be exposed to many different forms of trauma and to secondary traumatic stress. The employer should have plans for responding appropriately to crises and minimizing the effects of secondary traumatic stress.

Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

Principle

Individuals, families, communities, organizations, and systems work together to understand, and promote equality; cultural humility, and strong racial, cultural, and ethnic identity, while showing consideration for individual difference, and respecting the sovereign rights of tribes.

Standards

Nondiscrimination

- Each entity should have a nondiscrimination policy that conforms to applicable law and to the Rights of Children section of the CWLA National Blueprint.

Indigenous Nations

- In all relations with indigenous nations, each entity should adhere to the principles of self-determination, holistic approaches, elimination of structural risk, respect for culture and language, and nondiscrimination.

Indian Child Welfare

- Each entity should minimize cultural disruption and alienation for American Indian/Alaska Native children, youth, and families; use active efforts to prevent unnecessary removal from their families; and understand the Indian Child Welfare Act; and how it applies to their work with children, youth, and families.

Culturally Informed and Diverse

- All entities and their staff and volunteers should be culturally informed about the diverse individuals and groups in their respective communities and among their workforce.

Identity

- All entities, communities, and families should ensure that resources are available to help children, and youth understand their heritage, preserve their connections to culture and religion, learn and preserve their traditions, and have positive role models.

Individual and Systemic Bias

- Organizations and individuals should make commitments to becoming aware of and overcoming individual and systemic bias.

Disparity and Disproportionality

- Each entity should examine disparities in its service delivery, as well as the ways in which it contributes to racial, ethnic, and other disproportionalities that negatively impact children, youth, and families.

Youth and Families Identifying as LGBTQ

- Every entity should develop expertise in understanding the unique perspectives and needs of children, youth, and adults who identify as LGTBQ.

Immigrant Children and Families

- Entities and communities should develop and implement programs that are responsive to the unique needs of families who have immigrated to the United States.

Developmentally Informed

- Each entity should be well-informed about learning and developmental differences, cognitive limitations, physical and other disabilities, as well as normal growth and development.

Funding and Resources

Principle

Funding decisions in the private sector and at federal, state, local, and tribal levels are informed by the certainty that the well-being of children, families, and communities are interconnected and that sufficient and equitable funding is essential to the well-being of all of them.

Standards

Funding Priorities

- Funding decisions should be based upon the cost of effective services, the benefits such services are expected to bring, and the likely consequences (including costs) of deferring or failing to make investments in children, youth, and families. Where necessary, priority should be given to those that are most vulnerable.
- Every individual, organization, and community has the responsibility to explain the impact of funding decisions and advocate for priority funding for supports and services for children, youth, and families.
- Funders should collaborate with each other, with communities, and with providers to identify needs and shared priorities, promote sensible application and eligibility criteria, identify obstacles, and allocate funds and other resources wisely.

Funding Implementation of the National Blueprint

- Funders should promote and fund concepts and strategies that are consistent with the CWLA National Blueprint's vision, values, principles and standards.

- Funders should support evidence-based and evidence-informed programs and practices.
- Funding sources should provide financial assistance to build evidence of the efficacy of promising practices.
- Public entities and other funders should provide financial incentives to support organizations' efforts to employ and engage people with lived experience as a service recipient.

Funding Equity

- Funding for supports and services should be equitable.

Public-Private Collaboration

- Entities with contractual and funding relationships should work together to be jointly accountable; to ensure that funding for supports and services for children, youth, and families is adequate, equitable, and that there is the wisest possible use of public and private funds.

Diverse Funding Streams

- Organizations should seek diverse funding streams to produce income from contracts, grants, investments, corporate and foundational giving, and individual donations.

Accountability and Transparency

- Funders, contractors, donors, and the general public should have access to accurate accounting of funds for supports and services for children, youth, and families.

Social Enterprise

- Business, philanthropic, venture capital, and public and private nonprofit entities should work together to harness the power of social enterprise.

Next Steps/Future

The National Blueprint was approved by the CWLA Board of Directors prior to its release to the public.

CWLA will be developing readiness assessment and implementation tools to help with the implementation of the CWLA National Blueprint. To ensure the clarity needed for child welfare's role in achieving the vision, CWLA will continue with and update its program-specific Standards of Excellence within the context of the National Blueprint. We will use our programs, practice guidelines, publications, research, conferences, professional development, and consultation to provide further guidance. CWLA advocacy efforts will include nudging other systems, parents, and communities toward helping achieve the vision. Our children, youth, and families deserve no less.

For a copy of the complete CWLA National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare, please visit our website at www.cwla.org.

Mission Statement

Mission

CWLA leads and engages its network of public and private agencies and partners to advance policies, best practices and collaborative strategies that result in better outcomes for vulnerable children, youth, and families.

Vision

Our vision is that every child will grow up in a safe, loving, and stable family.

Focus

Our focus is children and youth who may have experienced abuse, neglect, family disruption, or a range of other factors that jeopardize their safety, permanence, or well-being. CWLA also focuses on the families, caregivers, and communities that care for and support these children.

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