

**WINTER 2006 SPOTLIGHT:****REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AND CHILD WELFARE: COLLABORATION FOR CHILD PROTECTION**

*An East African family was referred to CPS following the birth of their fifth child due to concerns about hygiene in the home. With the help of an interpreter from a refugee resettlement agency, CPS worked with the family on household cleaning products and access to other local resources. This relationship with CPS and other child welfare workers ultimately led the refugee mother to end an abusive relationship and move with her children into subsidized housing. "CPS was extremely helpful to fund the assistance that the family required to understand how they could successfully function within the U.S. system." [1]*

This example, from the new BRYCS Child Welfare Toolkit, *Refugees and the U.S. Child Welfare System: Background Information for Service Providers*, highlights the type of positive collaboration that can occur when refugee service providers and public child welfare agencies work together to serve newcomer families. Increasingly, public child welfare agencies are recognizing their need to collaborate with agencies serving refugees and immigrants so that services to families from diverse backgrounds occur in a language and culture they understand. Similarly, refugee and immigrant service agencies are recognizing their need to better understand child welfare laws and services, and the resources each discipline can offer the other. BRYCS continues to support and encourage this type of innovative collaboration through publications such as our *Cross Service Training Guide*, and the *Child Welfare Toolkit* mentioned above.

A recent child welfare study by the General Accounting Office (GAO) found that 29 states (58% of respondents) identified growing cultural diversity as an emerging issue likely to affect children and families served by the child welfare system over the next five years. [2]

*Child welfare officials we interviewed also said that the growing cultural diversity of the families who come in contact with the child welfare system has prompted the need for states to reevaluate how they investigate allegations of maltreatment and the basis on which they make decisions that could result in the removal of children from their homes. Child welfare officials in several states reported that the current protocols for investigating and removing children from their homes do not necessarily reflect the cultural norms of some immigrant and other minority families. These differences include limitations in family functioning that may be caused by poverty, the environment, or culture as opposed to those that may be due to unhealthy family conditions or behaviors. In response to growing cultural diversity, several states we visited stated that they are revising their protocols to account for religious and language differences among families who come in contact with the child welfare system. [3]*

Despite recognition by more than half of responding states of the growing significance of cultural diversity, only 3 states (6%) report implementing diversity or cultural initiatives to improve services to children and families. [4]

Nonetheless, several communities have quietly begun to address newcomer needs in the child welfare system, creating a roadmap for more culturally sensitive services where little existed before.

In **St. Louis, Missouri**, a city of about 350,000 people, Frances Johnson of the Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division, and Lara Fallon of the International Institute of St. Louis, have worked together over the last several years to develop a service collaboration now described as "New Americans and Child Protection: Collaborative efforts to keep new American children safe in their home and in their community."<sup>[5]</sup> This collaboration was influenced by an influx of Bosnian refugees to St. Louis and resulted in a variety of case-level and community-level service efforts, including:

- joint child abuse hotline responses;
- cross-service trainings and job shadowing;
- a joint "Child Protection and Refugee Workgroup;"
- child protection documents translated into 8 languages; and
- Scout troops for New American children.

Most important, notes Frances Johnson, is remembering that while this service collaboration benefits both agencies, it ultimately benefits newcomer families. [Click here for the full interview with Frances Johnson.](#)

**New York City**, with more than 8 million people, poses a more vexing challenge in both the number of people and the number of cultures, but committed advocates and child welfare personnel have made significant progress over the past several years. Ilze Earner, Assistant Professor of Social Work at Hunter College, notes that the momentum in New York for improved child welfare services to newcomers has come primarily from immigrant advocacy groups, rather than refugee service providers. [Click here for the full interview with Ilze Earner.](#) While St. Louis exemplifies more of a ground-up model with direct casework improvements, New York City demonstrates more of a top-down systems level approach to change, with grassroots instigation. Providential changes in New York's child welfare system—moving from a citywide model to a community-based model—and the passage of a local language access law created a receptive environment for the Immigrant Advisory Task Force to recommend changes to the NYC child welfare system. The Task Force has achieved initial goals of:

- developing a standing immigrant advisory committee to the Administration for Children's Services (ACS);
- developing a caseworker handbook and training curriculum on immigration and language issues; and
- improving language access and data collection.

Whether addressing change from the case level up or from a systems level down, both St. Louis and New York City started with the simple yet often difficult task of getting staff from the disciplines of child welfare and newcomer services to sit down and talk to each other. While approaching newcomer issues slightly differently, both St. Louis and New York City continue working to improve language access, casework collaboration, cross-cultural staffing and training, and data collection.

These programs are at the forefront of innovative approaches to serving newcomer families. BRYCS recommends that refugee and immigrant serving agencies play a central role in this process <sup>[6]</sup> by providing reimbursable services to public child welfare and other mainstream agencies, including:

- interpretation and translation;
- cultural expertise on family and community relationships;
- cultural competency training;
- culturally-appropriate alternative services, such as parenting support and education, anger management, adjustment services, and in some cases health or mental health services and supports, etc.;
- assisting with referrals to federally-funded refugee foster care programs, where appropriate.

In addition to being a resource, refugee and immigrant service providers likewise need information and education about child welfare services and systems. BRYCS' new publication, *Refugees and the U.S. Child Welfare System: Background Information for Service Providers*, addresses this need directly by:

- providing an overview of the U.S. child welfare system;
- addressing how to help refugee clients referred to CPS;
- providing tips on building bridges with the child welfare system; and
- including tools for trainers, common identifiers of abuse and abusers, a child welfare flow chart, and a child welfare worksheet for refugee serving agencies to gather critical information from local child welfare providers.

The recent GAO report on challenges faced by state child welfare agencies noted “collaboration and coordination of services” to child welfare clients as one of the top 5 important challenges identified by states. [7] In the words of Frances Johnson, “Start small, but as you progress, you will find that you can do more and more.” A task that at first seemed overwhelming has progressed incrementally and now appears monumental in its achievements. As St. Louis and New York City are demonstrating, collaboration and coordination on services to newcomers can make a tremendous difference in the lives of the children and families they serve.

The [featured search](#) lists the most up-to-date and useful resources related to this topic available for free download.

**FOOTNOTES:**

- 1 - Information provided by Mary Flores, Director Refugee Services, St. Vincent Catholic Charities, Lansing, MI. From: BRYCS (September 2006). *Refugees and the U.S. Child Welfare System: Background Information for Service Providers*, p. 12, <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1775>.
- 2 - U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) (October 2006). *Improving Social Service Program, Training, and Technical Assistance Information Would Help Address Longstanding Service-Level and Workforce Challenges*, chart p. 19.
- 3 - Retrieved in October 2006 from <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1784>.
- 4 - Ibid, p. 20.
- 5 - Ibid, chart p. 22.
- 6 - The brochure on this St. Louis collaboration, *New Americans and Child Protection*, is available for free download from BRYCS at <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1785>.
- 7 - Ibid note 2, cover page.