



Reflections on citizen–state child welfare partnerships: Listening to citizen review panel volunteers and agency liaisons

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Previous research pertaining to the citizen review panel (CRP) initiative indicates that discrepancies exist between panel member and state agency liaison perceptions of CRP effectiveness in fulfilling the CAPTA CRP mandate. This study explores the impressions of both CRP members and liaisons involving barriers to effective CRP–state child welfare partnerships and recommendations to improve the relationship, provided through narrative survey responses from CRP liaisons from 30 states and D.C. and panel members from 32 states and D.C. Thematic categories which emerged from analyses of these responses are discussed, and a conceptual model and substantive-level theory of the CRP–child protective services (CPS) relationship developed from the results are presented.

Results: The complex nature of CRP–CPS relationships emerged as the central theme among CRP members' and liaisons' responses. Liaisons and CRP members identified a need for CRP members to become more educated globally on child welfare despite the relatively high level of education and experience of much of the sample. Difficulties encountered by panel members in the effort to partner surfaced in themes of mistrust and skepticism about the worth of citizen participation in child protection. Negative agency attitudes, lack of role clarity, and lack of commitment to authentic partnership were cited as negative influences upon the relationship by both liaisons and CRP members. The most important preferred outcome of the partnership was that citizen volunteers would become more knowledgeable partners who could meaningfully contribute to child welfare efforts. A second desired outcome important to CRP members was to form a shared vision with CPS.

Conclusions: Findings imply that when key components of mutual respect, legitimacy, CPS knowledge, shared vision, authenticity, citizen engagement, honest communication, and a serious, deliberative process are in any way impeded, the partnership is vulnerable to breakdown, and intended outcomes may be compromised.

Implications: Important relational difficulties that have formed barriers between volunteers and CPS agencies have been identified, and results suggest specific issues to target for improvement. These findings can prompt a more informed discourse about the challenges and opportunities presented when attempting to engage citizens in child welfare practice and policy-making, and can lead to new research paths. Suggestions for such efforts are offered.

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1. Introduction

The concept of citizen engagement in public agencies has been studied from a variety of perspectives. It has been generally agreed upon that citizen engagement, or participation, is helpful to public bureaucracies, but only if a process is intentionally set in place whereby citizens are given the information they need to make informed judgments about the agencies they are evaluating (see, for example, King, Felty, & Susel, 1998; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Schacter, 1995). A large body of literature has formed examining

the idea of citizen participation in the creation of public policy. Police review boards, environmental citizen advisory boards, and other citizen groups have been evaluated as to their impact on public policy in these areas (Barton, 1970; Creighton, 1999; Koontz, 1999; Lynn & Kartez, 1995).

Prior to the 1970s, the field of public administration especially was criticized for producing a system that was hierarchical and unresponsive to the demands of citizen groups (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; King et al., 1998; Timney, 1998). Because of this criticism, directives arose for public administrators to make citizens an integral part of the policy process, often in the form of a federal mandate (Stivers, 1990). This call to action has historically been viewed as a response to the social upheaval of the 1960s as well as a result of recognition by policy makers that citizen input can be useful.

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Scholars have also identified benefits of increased citizen participation in the public sector, including a sense of citizen ownership of the governmental processes which affect them, a heightened sense of community among citizens who volunteer, and mitigation of negative citizen perceptions of public administrators (Box, 1998; Creighton, 1999; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Schacter, 1995; Stivers, 1990; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Participation has been seen as a way to “level the playing field” between the government and its citizens, as well as a means to hold public agencies accountable in the formation and implementation of public policy (Box, 1998; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Schacter, 1995; Timney, 1998). Especially in the public administration literature, several important components of successful citizen–state partnerships emerge: fairness of the process, two-way information flow (which leads to trust-building), competence of the participants, and adequate resources to support citizen involvement.

1.1. Citizen review panels

The notion that citizen review panels (CRPs) for child protective services (CPS) could improve child welfare systems and practices was formed from this context of citizen engagement and system accountability. Debates continue about whether or not external child welfare review systems are needed at all (Blome & Steib, 2007; Jordan & Franklin, 1994). The argument against such citizen participation is that it is no more than a “feel good” exercise carried out by citizens, when what is actually needed is a complete overhaul of the child welfare system in the United States (Waldfoegel, 1998). However, considerable discussion surrounding the issue eventually led to a consensus that CRPs could serve as a useful catalyst for improvement and accountability within state welfare agencies (see Jones, 2004a for a detailed discussion).

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) is arguably the most sweeping piece of child welfare legislation ever enacted. From its original passage in 1974, CAPTA encouraged states to implement a consistent way by which to identify and address child maltreatment, created the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), and shaped uniform definitions of child abuse and neglect (Waldfoegel, 1998). In 1996, CAPTA was amended to establish CRPs through Public Law 104-235. Among other provisions, Public Law 104-235 called for the implementation of at least three citizen review panels in each state by July 1999 (Administration for Children and Families, 1998). According to the law, CRPs were to be comprised of a representative sample of the community, meet at least once every 3 months, and submit an annual report to the federal government outlining their activities and recommendations (Administration for Children and Families). There was also a directive that CPS agencies be cooperative in providing needed information and technical assistance to the panels (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998). In summary, the legislation provided the panels with a broad mandate:

1. To insure that the state was in compliance with the state CAPTA plan.
2. To assure that the state was coordinating with the Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs.
3. To assess the CPS agency in its compliance with the review of child fatalities.
4. To evaluate any other piece of the CPS system which the panel deemed important.

CAPTA was reauthorized in 2003, and Congress added additional tasks for the panels and state agencies, including a directive for the panels to create a means for public comment, for panels to study the practices as of the state agency in addition to policy and procedures, and for state agencies to respond in writing to the recommendations of the panels within 6 months.

A few studies have been completed with regard to CRPs. The first multi-state study of citizen review panels in the Midwest and South studied the relationship of communication, group cohesion, and paid staff support to the panels to CRP members' perceived effectiveness to impact child welfare outcomes (Jones, 2004a,b). Impediments to effectiveness were also examined, and the results indicated that lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and ineffectual communication contributed to panel members' decreased perceptions of effectiveness. However, findings from the study were limited to only CRP members' perceptions of their own effectiveness and to the variables of interest in the study, as no other stakeholders were surveyed. Additionally, this study was completed less than 5 years after states were required to have their panels in place, which may have been too soon to evaluate perceived effectiveness of the relatively new CRP initiative.

Other studies have examined CRP panel members' attitudes toward CPS personnel and the inherent tension between their oversight role and the oft-stated need to serve as advocates for the agency (Bryan, Jones, Allen, & Collins-Camargo, 2007; Jones, Litzelfelner, & Ford, 2003). Citizen review panel members have consistently reported that they feel “shut out” of the policy-making process, consulted only after policies are implemented. Another common complaint is that panel members are given little feedback regarding their recommendations, even though this is a specific directive of the CAPTA CRP amendment. The feedback that is received is often construed as merely paying “lip service” to the recommendations of the panels without thoughtful consideration of how their recommendations could be implemented (Bryan et al., 2007).

This sense of disconnection from authentic dialogue and low investment in the process has also been identified by child welfare agency personnel. Research has revealed disagreement within child protective services agencies on the fundamental question about whether or not citizen review is even important or desired in the policy making process (Jones et al., 2003; Jordan & Franklin, 1994). Child welfare administrators in a one-state study have reported concerns about the recommendations of the citizen review panels, complaining that they lack well-grounded reasoning and specificity. One supervisor noted that, “What may make sense to them is totally impossible for the agency to do” (Bryan et al., 2007, p. 1294). However, these researchers also note that, despite voicing a struggle with communication between the child welfare agency and citizens, both agreed that citizens can provide useful support and advocacy for the agency. Citizens can be viewed as “professional advisors” within their area of expertise and this knowledge has been identified as helpful in preventing the agency from becoming myopic and short-sighted.

As a companion piece to the current study, Bryan, Jones and Lawson (2010) completed a national study of citizen review panels in which they surveyed CRP members in 32 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) and program liaisons in 30 states and D.C. From their findings, a model was developed which explained 53% of the variance in CRP members' perceptions of their effectiveness in making a positive impact upon child welfare practices and policies. Significant variables in the model included information flow between the panels, group cohesion and self-governance. These findings support previous research on the importance of developing a means, such as training, by which panels can receive needed information (i.e., child safety data, statistics on adoption) in order to complete their tasks (Jones, 2004a,b; Jones & Roysse, 2008). However, the researchers found little relation between the panel members' self-ratings and those of their CPS agency liaisons, raising additional questions about critical differences in perceptions. Given that these liaisons play a critical role in the relationship between the CRPs and the public agency, and are typically the conduit for information shared with the panels, further exploration of this apparent disconnect seemed important.

Citizen review panels were conceptualized by Congress as a way for citizens to impact public policy with regard to child protective

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