



Civic engagement or token participation? Perceived impact of the citizen review panel initiative

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Abstract

State child welfare systems in recent years have been increasingly compelled to include citizen stakeholders in public policy evaluation. A key mechanism for increased citizen involvement has been the development of citizen review panels (CRPs) in the area of child protective services. Citizen review panels are groups of citizen volunteers who are federally mandated through the CAPTA Amendments of 1996 to evaluate state child welfare agencies. Despite the age of the mandate, very few researchers have examined the impact of the initiative upon child welfare services. This article describes the process of and results from a statewide evaluative study of the federal citizen review panel (CRP) initiative to improve child protective services in a rural southern state. The study employed multiple methods to capture a variety of stakeholder views, including the use of panel member surveys and focus groups, content analysis of CRP annual reports and state responses, and semi-structured state stakeholder interviews. Results from these efforts were analyzed and synthesized to identify prevalent, convergent and divergent themes of state agency and panel perspectives. Findings from the study are discussed as well as recommendations for improvement in the functioning of the panels.

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1. Introduction

State child welfare systems in recent years have been increasingly compelled to include citizen stakeholders in public policy evaluation (Myers, 2006; Schorr, 2000; Waldfogel, 2000). A key

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mechanism for increased citizen involvement has been the development of citizen review panels (CRPs) in the area of child protective services. Created through a 1996 amendment (Public Law 104–235) to the federal Child Abuse and Treatment Act (CAPTA), citizen review panels are directed to evaluate state child welfare agencies and make recommendations for improvement in child protective services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).

The panels are composed of volunteer members, often including many with expertise in the prevention of child abuse and neglect (Jones, 2004b). Though the federal legislation gave states considerable leeway in how panels were to be implemented and what activities would define their purpose, it is clear that the law intended for them to serve an oversight function in promoting more responsive public child welfare systems (United States Congress, 1996). Among other provisions, Public Law 104–235 called for the implementation of at least three citizen review panels in each state by July 1999 (Jones, Litzelfelner, & Ford, 2003). According to the law, a citizen review panel is to be representative of the community, meet at least once every three months, and submit an annual report to the federal government outlining their activities and recommendations (Jones et al., 2003). There was also a directive that child protection agencies be cooperative in providing needed information and technical assistance to the panels (Jones et al., 2003). In summary, the legislation provided the panels with a broad mandate: to ensure that the state was in compliance with the state CAPTA plan; to assure that the state was coordinating with the Title IV-E foster care and adoption programs; to assess the CPS agency in its compliance with the review of child fatalities; and to evaluate any other piece of the CPS system which the panels deemed important.

1.1. Prior studies and related research

Despite the broad mandate given to states regarding citizen review panels and the potential resultant ramifications, only a sparse literature regarding citizen review panel involvement in child protective services has developed. There have been only two published studies on citizen review panels to date, and these were somewhat limited in their methodology. Additionally, one of the studies involved multiple states with disparate types of panels (e.g., states which used existing panels, such as child fatality review boards, to fulfill the function of their CRPs, and states that had created a “hybrid” of panels by adding new members to existing panels), thus challenging the validity of any cross-group comparisons.

In a small study of citizen review panel members’ and child protective service workers’ opinions regarding their respective roles, Jones et al. (2003) found a significant difference between these two groups when asked whether or not the child protection system was in need of change. CRP panel members indicated that there was a need for change, but child protection workers did not share this view. The findings from this study also suggested that citizen review panel members should spend a considerable amount of time becoming familiar with the child welfare system before attempting to evaluate it.

Researchers have also studied citizen review panel members’ perceptions of effectiveness (Jones, 2004a,b). The findings from these studies suggest that the perceived effectiveness of panels in influencing policy is related to increased communication between the panels and the child welfare agency, an awareness of roles and limitations, legitimate collaboration, and realistic goals. Factors found to impede effectiveness included a lack of trust, time constraints, unclear roles, and weak communication.

Other related studies have focused on the functioning of various citizen boards. These panels have been utilized in efforts to initiate citizen involvement in areas including but not limited to community mental health (Morrison, Holdridge, & Smith, 1978), AIDS research (Cox, Rouff,

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