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Family Resource Centers and Family Support and Strengthening Networks

By Andrew Russo

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) have grown organically to become the most typical kind of Family Support and Strengthening program in the country. There are now more than 3,000 FRCs in 30 states and the District of Columbia working with more than 2 million people annually. Yet because their efforts are largely under the radar, they are often described as “America’s best kept secret.”

With no dedicated federal funding—unlike Head Start, Home Visiting, or Afterschool programs—how could there be so many of them? Why are so many public and private funders at the state, city, county, and community levels choosing to invest in FRCs without a directive to do so?

Understanding the current lay of the land of FRCs nationally necessitates exploring how they work in partnership with families, with other kinds of social services providers, with state and county health and human services agencies, and with other FRCs.

Background on Family Resource Centers

The roots of FRCs can be traced back more than 100 years to the establishment of settlement houses in the late 1800s in major metropolitan areas.

These settlement houses provided the large number of immigrants entering the country at that time with support, job training, English classes, and social advocacy as a means to assist them in understanding, adapting to, and succeeding in American society.

The term “Family Resource Center” first emerged in the late 1970s to describe welcoming local programs designed to support parents with young children through a variety of resources and services. As the modern version of settlement houses, an FRC is a community- or school-based welcoming hub of support, services, and opportunities for families that reflects and is responsive to community needs, culture, and interests. These programs are designed for all families, not only low-income or highly challenged families, so the support they provide is not stigmatized, which make them more readily accessible.

The centers work with families in a multigenerational, strengths-based, and family-centered approach to enhance parenting skills; foster the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families; prevent child abuse and neglect; increase school readiness; connect families to resources; develop parent and community leadership; engage males and

fathers; support healthy marital and couples relationships; and promote family economic success.

Typical programs and activities, provided at no or low cost for participants, may include parenting classes utilizing evidence-based curricula; support groups; home visiting; life skills training; family activities; leadership development; links to community resources; family counseling; crisis intervention; and concrete supports such as food banks, clothing exchanges, and rental assistance. FRCs not only provide programs but build communities of peer support for families where caregivers develop social connections that reduce isolation and stress, which are highly correlated with child abuse.

FRC budgets vary across the country in relation to local costs of living, specific programming, and physical space. A typical community-based New Jersey Success Center has an annual budget of \$240,000 to \$300,000 with three to four full-time staff. A school-based FRC in Kentucky has an annual budget of \$33,000 to \$82,000 with one to two full-time staff with space and other resources provided in-kind.

FRCs are funded in a variety of ways, such as blending and braiding federal Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, Promoting Safe and Stable Families, Early Head Start, or Home Visiting dollars with state or local general funds, education funds, and revenues from taxes specifically earmarked for children's services. In addition to government funding, FRCs typically seek support from foundations, corporations, and in-kind donations.



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FRCs have a track record of cost-effective successful outcomes, including reducing child abuse and neglect, improving children's educational success, and increasing families' economic well-being. A Social Return on Investment Study in Alabama determined that for every \$1 invested in FRCs, the state received \$4.93 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits.¹ A 2018 evaluation report conducted for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (Pennsylvania) by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children determined that neighborhoods with Family Support Centers had significantly lower rates of child abuse and neglect investigations than similar neighborhoods without them (30.5 investigations per 1,000 children versus 41.5 per 1,000 children).²

FRCs exist in the reddest of red states and the bluest of blue states, serving both urban and rural families. Numerous locations have invested in FRCs being available for all families, including Kentucky, with 856 school-based Family Resource Centers; New Jersey, with 57 Family Success Centers across all of its 21 counties; Vermont, with 15 Parent Child Centers, one in each service area; Allegheny County, with 28 Family Support Centers; and San Francisco, with 25 Family Resource Centers.

Partnership with Families

FRCs do not see families as "clients," but as partners, reflecting the first principle of family support practice, that "Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect."³ This approach is essential for building supportive, trusting relationships with families. As such, supports are participant driven, with families determining their goals and level of involvement.

The FRCs partner with families to support them by taking an active role in the development of the center, including soliciting their input to shape and plan programs, developing their skills to co-facilitate activities, leveraging their help with outreach, and establishing Parent Advisory Committees that make key decisions. These activities develop families'

responsibility and leadership for strengthening and building their communities.

Partnering with Other Social Services Providers

The work of FRCs is inherently collaborative, because while no one program could directly provide all the supports that might enhance a family's healthy development, it is the responsibility of the staff to know where those resources are and to help families navigate them successfully. FRCs, therefore, build collaborative relationships with many other kinds of organizations to strengthen families and communities. Such organizations may provide specialized support for key issues families face such as housing, job skills training, or substance abuse. These organizational relationships may include sharing resources and information, developing formal partnership agreements for referrals, and establishing initiatives to address emerging community issues collectively.

FRCs are also physical spaces where various kinds of programs can be co-located to increase accessibility and leverage. For example, home visiting programs are often based out of FRCs, such as in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The FRCs provide a place for group activities with home visiting families, helping them to build social connections. In San Francisco and Wisconsin, FRCs are co-located with child care resource and referral services. This yields steady foot traffic as parents seek to access child care, as well as supporting parents on a child care wait list with a host of other resources to utilize in the meantime, such as playgroups and a toy-lending library. A FRC may also host community college English-as-a-Second Language classes, a WIC office, or a community food bank.

Partnering with Human Services Agencies

Numerous state and local human services agencies invest in and regularly partner with FRCs. One common method is to outstation agency workers at FRCs with regular hours to screen for benefits or enroll families in

government-administered programs. As FRCs are community-based and readily accessible, this reduces challenges that families might have with transportation or bringing young children to government offices not well set up for them. Another method is to train FRC staff about new benefits and programs so that they can assist families in gaining access to them.

FRCs regularly partner with child welfare agencies to support children and families along all points of the prevention continuum—primary, secondary, and tertiary. In addition to investing in FRCs to provide supports and services that reduce the likelihood of child

abuse and neglect in the first place, child welfare agencies in states such as Alabama, California, Colorado, and Georgia leverage the centers to provide an alternative response to families screened out of child welfare, to provide mandated parenting education for families with open cases, to participate in team decision-making, to host supervised parent-child visitations, and to provide wraparound support for families post reunification. Families' stigma is reduced both through the trusting relationships FRC staff build with them and the provision of these services in a welcoming, noninstitutional environment.

Family Support and Strengthening Networks

Not only have so many states, counties, and cities invested in FRCs, but they have also identified the value of networking them together to leverage their collective impact.

A Family Support and Strengthening Network, comprised of two or more FRCs working together to ensure coordinated quality support for families, may be volunteer coordinated—led by FRC Directors in voluntary leadership

positions, without paid Network staff, funder coordinated—facilitated by a public department or private foundation that both funds and convenes FRCs, or an independent nonprofit that functions as a membership association and typically has paid staff.

The most common Network functions are:

- Increasing connectedness, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration among members
- Providing training and technical assistance
- Working on advocacy, policy, and legislation
- Providing and maintaining a shared data-tracking system⁴

Networks create opportunities for service providers to meet formally and informally, exchange information, make connections, develop relationships, and address challenges that no one organization could on its own. Networks efficiently ensure that important information is disseminated quickly and accurately to a large number of organizations, individual service providers, and families. Networks often develop formalized arrangements involving joint funding applications

with memoranda of understanding to coordinate service delivery.

In 2011, eight state Family Support and Strengthening Networks came together to co-found the National Family Support Network (NFSN). The NFSN has grown to include 31 Member Networks, representing the geographical and demographic diversity of the nation. The mission of the NFSN is to promote positive outcomes for all children, families, and communities by leveraging the collective impact of state networks, championing quality family support, and strengthening practices and policies.

To learn more about FRCs, Family Support and Strengthening Networks, or the NFSN, please go to nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org. 

Reference Notes

1. Community Services Analysis LLC. (2014). Social Return on Investment Study.
2. Chapin Hall. (2018). Do Family Support Centers Reduce Maltreatment Investigations? Evidence from Allegheny County.
3. Family Support America. The Principles of Family Support Practice.
4. OMNI Institute. (2016). Advancing the Family Support & Strengthening Field Project Survey Results.

FRCs and Child Welfare Continuum

Across the county, Child Welfare jurisdictions partner with, leverage, and fund Family Resource Centers (FRCs) to provide support for families along all points of the prevention continuum.

Primary Prevention	Differential Response	Open Child Welfare Case	Post-Reunification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support families to build the Strengthening Families 5 Protective Factors • Provide parenting support, including parent education series utilizing evidence-based curricula • Provide access to resources • Provide child development activities • Support healthy marital and couples relationships • Promote family economic success • Provide parent leadership development opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide all of the services and supports in the Primary Prevention column for families who have been screened out of the child welfare system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide all of the services and supports in the Primary Prevention column for families who have been mandated to participate in them by the child welfare system • Coordinate support of individual families with their child welfare worker • Participate in child welfare team decision making • Host supervised visitations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide all of the services and supports in the Primary Prevention column for families who have been reunified



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