



Child Safety Forward

A National Initiative to Reduce Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities and Injuries
Through a Collaborative, Community-Based Approach

Evaluation Brief: Sustained Communications Strategy

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Evaluation+

During the planning year, [Child Safety Forward](#) took a developmental evaluation approach that included building a theory of change that would lead to a strengthened child and family well-being system. This approach elevated learning from the technical assistance team as well as through the demonstration sites' qualitative and quantitative data-informed implementation plans.¹ Based on this learning, the refined version of the theory of change included greater intentionality around three core conditions we believe are necessary to having this impact:

- Elevate families into relationships of equal power within systems
- Build intentional strategy to systematically assess and address racism
- Sustain communications strategy

This is one of three briefs that takes a deeper look at each of these conditions through the lens of Child Safety Forward learning during the first year of implementation. It is designed to highlight how Child Safety Forward is defining this condition, the strategies and approaches it believes will advance this condition, and the intermediate outcomes from those strategies. While not mutually exclusive, the purpose of this brief is to define what Child Safety Forward means by a *sustained communications strategy* and, based on early learning during the first year of Child Safety Forward, create a roadmap for this strategy. These roadmaps will be further refined through the implementation study conducted at the end of the second year of implementation.

Learning Approach

The learning around developing and deploying a sustained communication strategy was informed through an interview with the core communications technical assistance team member, review of novel resources generated around communication and framing that were shared with demonstration sites during implementation, and the design thinking convening in October 2021 that focused on this strategy. Additionally, it includes learning from relevant observations and notes from biweekly strategy meetings and monthly technical assistance team meetings, review of demonstration site implementation plans, and outreach to sites to share their learning about sustained communication.

Defining Sustained Communication Strategy

Two of the core constraints of our current child and family well-being system is that people hired to work and to lead from inside the system feel powerless when confronted with how to solve childhood adversity, and caregivers are hesitant to access supportive structures due to stigma and bias. A sustained communications strategy would unite child protection agencies, community, partners, neighbors, and families around a narrative that child adversity is public, preventable, and solvable.

For a public health strategy to be successful, collaboratives need to attend to both the internal and external communication needs. If the collaboratives cannot engage the public around the initiative and what it is trying to accomplish, it is hard to sustain the narrative that child adversity is public, preventable, and solvable. In Child Safety Forward, we also learned early in the planning year that the infrastructure of our formal child- and family-serving systems bears many controls and barriers that make it challenging to proactively shift the dominating narrative on child abuse prevalence or launch

¹ The five demonstration sites are: Cook County Health in Illinois; Indiana Department of Health; Michigan Department of Health and Human Services; St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Connecticut; and Sacramento County, California's Child Abuse Prevention Council.

successful communications campaigns. Public system leaders tend to engage media only under adversarial conditions in response to tragedies and not proactively with a focus on prevention and solutions.

A sustained communication strategy needs to focus on changing the internal policies and practices within child- and family-serving systems to be able to tell the story and build awareness and power in communities, neighborhoods, and families.

Early Learning to Inform a Framework

The technical assistance model for Child Safety Forward included communications support to help demonstration sites disseminate and promote their work. Social Current, as the technical assistance lead for the initiative, is the primary driver of the communication strategy at the national level and works to support demonstration sites locally. Through the work done in the planning year and first year of implementation, the demonstration sites and technical assistance team identified the following insight:

- Project teams did not include dedicated communications resources or, in some cases, even access to the individuals needed to disseminate communications. Within their agencies, many are prohibited from engaging with media in any way, including posting to social media channels. Absent a communications point person, more work needs to go into helping agency staff understand child and family well-being and why it matters to the public. A proactive strategy for communicating messaging around solutions and access to resources is essential to a public health approach to child welfare.
- People tasked with implementing collaborative strategy are not trained to recognize opportunities for communication. Confidence and skill to drive a communication process is a muscle that needs to be developed at all levels of initiative work because the story and the relationship to the story sit there. A primary recommendation for a sustained communication strategy is that government sites must include a public information officer (PIO) on the team, otherwise access to media engagement is limited.
- There are not consistent feedback loops or data readily available that support the telling of stories of resilience and successful prevention efforts.
- Project teams that have avoided media contact due to the adversarial nature of prior communication must embrace efforts to proactively communicate with media and educate them about the impact of their reporting on child abuse and neglect and maltreatment fatalities.
- The narrative around child abuse and neglect will not change without addressing power differentials and biases that exist between systems and the community. There needs to be transparency around data and shared language and meaning making.
- Collaboratives need a deeper understanding of framing science to engage and garner support for preventive strategy that focuses on protective factors.
- Collaboratives need a deeper understanding of the different ways to engage media and public communications, particularly those that enable communicators to control the message.

Outside of safe sleep campaigns, none of the Child Safety Forward plans included well-defined strategies around sustained communication and media engagement; some included nonspecific plans

for dissemination. Promising approaches to communications in Child Safety Forward implementation plans included:

- Addressing communication between partners as ways to create shared understanding and improve referral relationships
- Working with people with lived experience to inform the development of resources and shape public awareness campaigns on safe sleep
- Creating opportunities for caregivers and community to engage with system partners
- Raising awareness about child maltreatment and best practices in child safety and safe sleep
- Creating opportunities for more cross-systems communication and understanding community perceptions about systems
- Using communications channels, such as op-eds and blogs, that enable system leaders to control the message and avoid filtering it through media biases

Sustained Communications Strategy

Child protection agencies, community partners, neighbors and families (“child and family well-being system”) are united around a narrative that child abuse and neglect is preventable and solvable.

Intermediate Outcomes

Child- and Family-Serving Systems	Communities, Neighbors and Families
1. Media are consistently telling the stories that emphasize prevention over prevalence	1. Public is promoting and advocating for upstream approaches to address child and family well-being
2. Stories of resilience and effective solutions are widely disseminated and celebrated through a child and family well-being system	2. Families and communities are sharing their stories of resilience
3. Child and family serving systems have strong, easy-to-navigate infrastructure to support transparent internal and external communication	3. Families and communities are leading the design and development of communication campaigns that promote protective factors
4. Individuals working within child and family systems are tightly networked for communications	4. Communities, neighbors and families have the power and access to communication channels
5. All individuals working in child- and family-serving systems have the knowledge and confidence to develop an effective case for change that is asset based and justice oriented and designed to reach the right audience	5. Public understands the importance of protective factors in shaping child and family well-being

Sustained Communication Strategy

1. Provide communications and media trainings that include familiarity with multiple communication channels, their purpose and audience
2. Develop a communications community of practice involving thought leaders, partners and staff, community and parents/caregivers
3. Designate and compensate a communication point person for each initiative or campaign who can access channels of authority
4. Build relationships with local and national media
5. Intentionally develop, prototype, and test communication strategies with different audiences throughout the initiative or campaign to refine narrative and framing (lower-risk strategies)
6. Institute rigorous and transparent evaluation, data gathering & analysis to inform solutions that are asset based and justice-oriented with community, neighbors and families

Current Conventions

- People who make up a child and family well-being system feel powerless when confronted with how to solve child abuse and neglect; “child abuse is inevitable”
- Caregivers are hesitant to access supportive structures due to stigma and bias
- The dominating narrative in the media is on child abuse prevalence not prevention
- Systems experience with communications around child welfare is adversarial