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INTRODUCTION

Family child care is the most widely used form of early care in the United States today, yet it has been far less researched and studied than center care. A necessary step in investigating this important part of the early care and education sector is the examination of the systems and networks that serve family child care providers. This brief identifies and differentiates several models of Family Child Care Systems that exist in Massachusetts and explores best practices as defined by national standards.



FAMILY CHILD CARE SYSTEMS: ELEMENTS, BENEFITS, AND SHORTCOMINGS

Definition

A *Family Child Care System* is a formalized network consisting of a sponsoring agency and family child care providers with whom it contracts or establishes employment relationships. A system offers providers access to resources such as centralized enrollment and billing, and training on topics such as child development, microbusiness development and management, and peer support. Systems increase parental choice by providing centralized access to multiple care arrangements, and by coordinating substitute care when a provider becomes unavailable. For communities, systems can be a mechanism for expanding child care capacity, and for creating small business opportunities. Systems can increase the quality of care and significantly reduce isolation by bringing providers together to share information and best practices.

Family Child Care Systems come in many designs and sizes. They differ by type of sponsoring agency, target population, geographic region served, and specific services offered by the system.

Core Elements of Family Child Care Systems

Although much variation exists among Family Child Care Systems, several elements are common to all. The system forms a *contractual or employment relationship* with the provider, specifying each party's roles and responsibilities. The system provides *centralized administrative functions*, including referrals, enrollment, and billing and reimbursement services. System staff *regularly monitor* homes for adherence to health and safety regulations and other program expectations. These visits can be a means for providing mentoring and technical assistance. The system *creates opportunities for peer support and networking* between family child care providers. These core elements give rise to benefits for providers, children, and communities that pervade all types of system design, although they also have some shortcomings.

Benefits of Family Child Care Systems

The core elements of Family Child Care Systems benefit participating providers by allowing them access to:

- Administrative functions, including referrals, enrollment, billing, collection of parent fees, and reimbursement;
- Services only provided through state contracts (in Massachusetts, this would include subsidized child care slots, transportation, and the child and adult food program);
- Regular reimbursements even when the contract holder has not yet reimbursed the system;
- Enhanced purchasing power through the system's "economies of scale";
- Professional development through trainings organized by the system;
- Support for pursuing higher education, in the form of college scholarships and career counseling; and
- Collegial support.

Parents also derive benefits from Family Child Care Systems, including:

- Mediation of parent-provider relationships by system staff;
- Substitute care when a provider is unavailable;
- Referrals for health and developmental screenings;
- Participation in parent support groups or parent trainings; and
- Screening of multiple providers and care options to fill their specific needs.

For children, benefits may include:

- Frequent monitoring of compliance with health and safety regulations;
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum, used in conjunction with assessment tools; and
- Consistent and stable adult nurturers, with careful substitution when needed.

Finally, communities receive such benefits as:

- Increased quality of early care and education;
- Support for providers' professional development;
- Expanded access to early care and education, as systems cultivate new providers; and
- Support for and creation of microenterprises in the community.

Shortcomings of Family Child Care Systems

For providers, the disadvantages of contracting with a system include:

- A habit of dependency on the system to facilitate recruitment of families, marketing of services, and other business responsibilities; and
- Loss of independence, potentially provoking interpersonal issues with system staff.

For parents, disadvantages are:

- Fewer parent-provider interactions, especially if the parent uses the system's transportation services; and
- The potential for increased fees, if administrative and quality support costs necessitate them.



FAMILY CHILD CARE SYSTEMS: DESIGN

Family Child Care Systems can have many different sizes and organizational structures, depending on the type of sponsoring agency, target population, and geographic region served. The discussion that follows focuses on examples of system types, and their respective strengths and shortcomings.

Standalone and Sponsored Systems

A system's sponsorship, or its self-sufficiency, is a key distinguishing factor. A system can employ its own staff and be a "stand-alone," or it can be hosted by an agency with a human services orientation such as a community action program or an early care and education agency.

Standalone Systems

- **Definition:**

A standalone system consists exclusively of family child care providers and the staff hired to run the system, and is self-sustaining. In Massachusetts, systems such as these serve from 30 to 250 providers.

- **Strengths of a Standalone System:**

For the provider, standalone systems place the provider's needs foremost, because the focus is exclusively on family child care, and revenue generated by the system can be reinvested in the provider's and program's needs.

For the parent, standalone systems allow the investment of additional time and resources in fostering the parent-provider relationship. Such relationships, in turn, can create a sense of community between parents and providers.

For the community, a standalone system that is local to a community is often seen as a “member” of the community as opposed to an agency “serving” the community.

- **Shortcomings of a Standalone System:**

For the provider in a standalone system, the principal source of revenue is child care fees, therefore, fewer alternative financial sources are available

Sponsorship by an Agency with a Human Services Orientation

- **Definition:**

The sponsoring agency is focused more broadly on child development or human services. For example, a Community Action Program or a Head Start program would administer this type of Family Child Care System. This type of system in Massachusetts typically contracts with 10 to 100 providers.

- **Strengths of a Human Service-Oriented Agency System:**

For the provider, a human service-oriented agency system offers potential movement up the career ladder and additional available departments and services. Family child care providers can access agency services to maximize the efficiency of their own work, such as legal and accounting expertise, public policy awareness and advocacy on behalf of children and providers, development support to obtain funding, and agency liaison to public agencies.

For the parent, a human service-oriented agency system offers increased options for education and care, and better coordination if families are receiving services from multiple programs.

For the child, a human service-oriented agency system offers improved early education and care services due to the availability of more diverse resources, and access to supportive services such as therapy for socio/emotional delays.

For the community, a human service-oriented agency system means that more members of the community are invested in supporting and cultivating family child care businesses.

- **Shortcomings of a Human Service-Oriented Agency System:**

Because the agency is not solely focused on family child care, decisions about resources are not always made with family child care as the top priority. The very structure of planning and decisionmaking within the agency may be such that family child care institutionally has a lesser voice.

Systems That Serves the Needs of a Specific Cultural Group

- **Definition:**

Although this type of system can be a standalone or operate within an agency, it provides resources for only one cultural group. For example, all the family child care providers in the system may speak Chinese, or all the family child care providers may be Latina. This type of system includes, on average, 15 to 50 providers.

- **Strengths of a System That Serves the Needs of a Specific Cultural Group:**

For the provider, systems that serve the needs of a specific cultural group offer resources and materials in an appropriate language, with focal cultural considerations and a strong sense of community due to the shared culture/language.

For the parent, systems that serve the needs of a specific cultural group provide sensitivity to the cultural needs of families.

For the child, systems that serve the needs of a specific cultural group offer sensitivity to the child's cultural expectations and lack linguistic barriers.

For the community, systems that serve the needs of a specific cultural group reduce the isolation experienced by some linguistic minorities.

- **Shortcomings of a System That Serves the Needs of a Specific Cultural Group:**

Systems that serve the needs of a specific cultural group may lack integration with other cultures or language in a community. Children in exclusively minority language family child care may leave less prepared for their experiences in majority language kindergarten/first grades.

Systems That Serve a Broad Geographic Region

- **Definition:**

A system can be created based on geographic criteria such as city or state boundaries. These types of systems tend to be larger, with a range of 100 to 250 providers.

- **Strengths of a System That Serves a Broad Geographic Region:**

For the provider, a system that serves a broad geographic region presents economies of scale and can offer greater technical assistance capacity.

For the parent and child, a system that serves a broad geographic region offers increased opportunity for continuity of care and more easily allows a parent to find a new provider within the same system if the family

moves.

For the community, a system that serves a broad geographic region offers the potential to host trainings and conferences and provides uniformity of policies and procedures across a region.

- **Shortcomings of a System that Serves a Broad Geographic Region:**

Providers, children and families in some regions may have less support and technical assistance than in others. The agency is usually not embedded in the fabric of the communities.

Nonsystem Structures in Family Child Care

In addition to the Family Child Care Systems outlined above, other structures organize family child care providers in less intensive formats.

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

Child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies can contract directly with family child care providers to provide subsidized child care, and providers obtain referrals from the CCR&R for children who can access these slots. In Massachusetts, Child Care Resource and Referral provides training for family child care providers, although trainings are not exclusive to system providers. In this type of network, parents use one access point to identify multiple care arrangements. Additional services for families are not usually coordinated through this network.

Informal Provider Networks

Family child care providers may also come together to create a network to share resources and create opportunities for peer support. These types of networks are designed to share information and resources, without the administrative support characteristic of a formal system.



CONCLUSION

Licensing requirements and standards exist in most states for family child care providers. Therefore, much of a system's work is directed toward helping *providers* become licensed and reach the high standards of quality set by organizations such as the National Association for Family Child Care (<http://www.nafcc.org/accred/accred.html>) or the American Academy of Pediatrics and American Public Health Association (<http://nrc.uchsc.edu/CFOC/index.html>). Currently, however, no national program standards for Family Child Care *Systems* are available. This is an area for further work and collaboration, as family child care systems become an increasingly effective means to promoting family child care business and high quality early care and education.

