Developing Collaborations Between Child Welfare Agencies and Latino Communities

Hilda P. Rivera

Collaborative efforts to achieve permanency planning and family stability for all children in the child welfare system are increasing. As Latino children and families constitute the fastest growing ethnic group in the child welfare system, it is important to understand how to develop culturally sensitive collaborations with their communities. The purpose of this article is to suggest helpful guidelines for developing collaborations between child welfare agencies and Latino communities.

Hilda P. Rivera, MSW, PhD is Assistant Professor of Social Work, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York, NY
The need for communities and child welfare agencies to work together to achieve family stability and permanency planning has been well-established (Omag & Bonk, 1999; Onyskiw, Harrison, & Spady, 1999; Power & Eheart, 2000). Child welfare agencies addressing the needs of children who do not live in their own home because of neglect, abuse, or abandonment have the responsibility for either returning the child to a safe family environment or, if that is not possible, planning a permanent new home for the child. To achieve this, the federal government is increasingly mandating that agencies and state governments change from working in isolation to working collaboratively with the communities from which the children come. For instance, the New York City Administration for Children’s Services, the city’s public child welfare agency, is moving to a neighborhood-based service delivery system in which preventive and foster home services are focusing on community districts rather than broader geographic areas (Citizens’ Committee for Children, 2001).

Achieving permanency planning and family stability is crucial for all children, but especially for children of color, who represent the great majority of children served by the child welfare system (Martin, 2000). When compared with other ethnic groups, Latino children have been found to disproportionately remain in long-term out-of-home care. In 1982, Latino children constituted 6.7% of the children in out-of-home care, and by 1993, they comprised 14% of the children in out-of-home care (Williams, 1997). As Latino children constitute one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the child welfare system, it is critical to develop collaborative efforts that involve those children’s communities (Omag & Bonk, 1999; Power & Eheart, 2000; Stehno, 1990).

Despite the importance of this topic, very little has been written about collaborative efforts between child welfare agencies and culturally diverse communities, especially those of Latino origin. The purpose of this article is to suggest guidelines for devel-
oping collaborations between child welfare agencies and Latino communities. Collaboration is described and its potential benefits are discussed, as well as the implications for involving and working with the very diverse Latino communities in the United States.

Collaboration: What Does It Mean?

Calls have been renewed for communities and child welfare agencies to come together and work on behalf of children’s safety, permanency, and well-being. As more research shows the potential benefits of developing collaborative child welfare services, the concept of collaboration has become increasingly popular among government, human service, and community organizations (Omang & Bonk, 1999; Onyskiw et al., 1999). Among the potential benefits is the development of accessible, cost-effective, and comprehensive child welfare programs and services for children and families with diverse physical, mental, emotional, cultural, and socioeconomic needs.

Nevertheless, collaboration can be a vague term. It has been defined in many different ways according to particular academic and professional fields. For the purpose of this article, collaboration is defined as a process that takes place between two or more professionals or organizations who decide to work together on behalf of children’s safety, permanency, and well-being. Those involved in a collaborative effort may keep their own individual job responsibilities, but they must periodically communicate with each other and coordinate their respective services to avoid duplication and jointly work as a single, helping team.

Mattessich and Monsey (1992) added that a collaboration is a “mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals” (p. 7). As they explained, the relationship created by the members of the collaboration should be one of commitment to: (a) the devel-
opment of mutual goals, (b) jointly developed structured and shared responsibility, (c) mutual authority and accountability for success, and (d) shared resources and rewards. This definition clearly underscores four important elements that child welfare agencies must consider before they enter into a collaborative effort: (1) vision and relationships; (2) structure, responsibilities, and communication; (3) authority and accountability; and (4) resources and rewards.

The structure of collaborations varies depending on the particular needs and resources of the organizations or agencies involved. There are two common types: the interdisciplinary or interprofessional, and the interorganizational collaborations. An interdisciplinary or interprofessional collaboration involves two or more members of different professions or disciplines working together toward a common goal. For example, a child welfare agency might call on a social worker, psychologist, physician, nurse, teacher, political official, and clergy member to help a multiproblem family that requires a coordinated scope of services. Each member of this small group is trained in different professional disciplines and brings unique knowledge, skills, and work experiences that can contribute to the resolution of common problems and the achievement of common goals. For the team to work collaboratively, it is necessary that each member is committed to engaging in a continuous process of communication, examination, and evaluation of his or her individual efforts toward comprehensive planning and common goals. This type of collaboration should not be limited to members of the professional community. It should include all family and community members involved in the case.

Another type of collaboration involves different agencies or community organizations working together to provide a more extensive, comprehensive, and coordinated range of services for a child and the family. This is called interorganizational collaboration. For example, a community notices a rise in young moth-
ers entering the child protection and welfare system. Leaders from the child welfare system, schools, youth organizations, health centers, and the community could come together to affect the identified problems. They might find that many of the agencies already provide services to teen mothers, but because those services are provided in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner, many of these young women could be falling through the cracks of the system. Respective leaders may make the decision to develop a collaborative community initiative to effectively address the problem. As discussed earlier, collaborations bring previously separated agencies or organizations into a new structure and/or relationship that allow the sharing of expertise and resources to resolve common problems and develop programs of mutual interest. Undoubtedly, the successful development of any interorganizational collaboration requires a great deal of commitment, comprehensive planning, and well-established communication mechanisms.

Understanding Diversity Within Latino Communities

The development of any type of collaboration between communities and child welfare agencies can be very rewarding and challenging, especially if issues of diversity are taken seriously. This section focuses on the high degree of diversity within Latino communities and the importance of developing collaborative initiatives that are culturally competent.

Child welfare staff at all levels who want to engage Latino communities in their collaborative efforts should be culturally competent. As Lum (1999) described, a culturally competent practice is one that incorporates cultural self-awareness, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and inductive learning or participation in continuing discussions of multicultural practice. Lack of knowledge about the community and lack of skills to establish communication and relationships will delay any collaborative
process. Moreover, unresolved issues of racism, oppression and discrimination, inequitable policies and services, misunderstanding and miscommunication from child welfare agencies and other organizations, and a hesitation to actively involve diverse communities in meaningful dialogue will severely limit the potential benefits of working in collaboration (Colon, 2001; Derezotes & Snowden, 1990; Hogan & Siu, 1988; Williams, 1997).

Therefore, it is crucial that child welfare agency staff who commit to effectively collaborating with Latino communities first reflect on their own history of individual and institutional racism, prejudice, and discrimination and their effects on professional attitude, perception, and behavior toward this population. Importantly, this reflection may lead to the reexamination and perhaps drastic revision of agency policies, procedures, practices, staff training and patterns, and organizational structures.

Who Are Latinos?

The number of Latinos (people of Latin American descent) in the United States has significantly increased in the past several years. According to the 2000 census, the Latino population increased by 57.9%, from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million in 2000, compared with an increase of 13.2% for the total U.S. population. This population group is also incredibly diverse, with Mexicans (20.6 million), Puerto Ricans (3.4 million), and Cubans (1.2 million) as the three largest subgroups. There are also approximately 3 million Central and South Americans and nearly 1 million Dominicans. Latinos are expected to continue to grow numerically and constitute a population of 51 million people in the United States by year 2020 (“Americans,” 1994).

Although Latinos share many characteristics, they are highly diverse in terms of race, language, national origin, religion, socioeconomic status, historical experience, and immigration and citizenship status (Castex, 1994; Gutierrez, Yeakley, & Ortega,
2000; Zambrana & Dorrington, 1998). Not recognizing the extraordinary diversity that exists within Latino groups, and taking a simplistic approach based on reductionistic cultural assumptions that are not based on research, can lead to problematic practice (Padilla, 1996).

Assumptions related to language, religious affiliation, immigration, and citizenship status are common and often wrongly made about families of Latino origin. Very often Latinos are assumed to speak only Spanish. However, Spanish might be the second language or only one of the many languages spoken by some of them. In fact, many may be fluent in other European (e.g., Portuguese, French, and English), indigenous (e.g., Quechua, Mayan, and Guarani), or Creole dialects and languages. Latinos are often assumed to be Roman Catholic. This assumption ignores the large and growing group of Protestant Latinos and many other Latinos who are spiritual but not religious. In addition, other Latinos have been influenced by diverse African and indigenous beliefs, which may be solely practiced or integrated in their Christian and/or Catholic rituals (e.g., Santeria and Espiritismo). Finally, immigration and citizenship status tend to be solely assumed by the family’s appearance, language proficiency, speech accent, and historical experiences, among other things. This assumption does not acknowledge the fact that many Latinos living in the United States are documented (have a legal right to live and remain in the United States, including those who are already full citizens), and those who are undocumented still have rights, such as a child’s right to schooling.

Neither prescriptions nor recipes can be given or made for working with all Latino populations. Yet, agencies and staff seriously committed to developing a culturally competent practice will find the process of working with and learning from Latino communities very exciting and rewarding. In this path, the significant degree of diversity within Latino communities will be seen not as a hurdle but as a tremendous opportunity.
Involving Latino Communities

Communities, especially communities of color, have been historically described as having many deficits and needs rather than many assets and resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Latino communities are no exception. Although social evidence and census data indicate that Latino communities are at risk of poverty, low educational achievement, mental health disorders, and other serious problems, these communities still have many assets and resources that should not be underestimated (Colon, 2001; Delgado, 1994; Derezotes & Snowden, 1990; Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991; Simoni & Perez, 1995; Zambrana & Dorrington, 1998).

The belief that Latino communities have many problems and few resources has limited child welfare agencies and other organizations from working more closely with members of these communities. Delgado (1998) pointed out the importance of developing interorganizational collaborations based on community assets rather than deficit models. He argued that social services agencies should better assess existing community organizations (e.g., bodegas, food establishments, botanical shops, and recreational centers) that are popular among Latino community members and that already provide them with some kind of social services.

As stated earlier, there are different types of collaborations covering a wide range of activities that vary in structure and membership, authority, labor intensity, and resources. The following case illustrates how collaboration can be creatively developed to use the existing resources in the community:

Restaurant “E” had been in existence three years, open six days per week and eight hours per day. Both owners of Restaurant “E” (husband and wife) are also foster parents to a number of children. In order for them to become foster parents, they have had to take workshops that have increased their helping knowledge and skills. Consequently, they have a basis from which to provide information and make referrals to social service agen-
cies. The restaurant has several bulletin boards that provide agencies or community groups with the opportunity to post information of community interest and social services available within the community. (Delgado, 1998, pp. 65-66).

This case shows how child welfare agencies and other social service organizations attempting to engage Latino communities in collaborative efforts must be open to a broader perspective of community so that they include organizations that play a meaningful role in the lives of children and families. These might include churches, businesses, and social clubs such as marketplaces, grocery stores, restaurants, botanical shops, sport leagues, and barber or beauty shops, just to name a few. Their reputation in the community, willingness to help, and access to a vast number of families can greatly contribute to the agency's outreach, program planning, and service delivery.

Guidelines for Planning Collaborations

This section suggests some guidelines for planning collaborations between child welfare agencies and Latino communities. It is expected that the following guidelines will facilitate the development of collaborations that can effectively contribute to family stability and child permanency planning efforts.

Organizational and Administrative Adaptations

By their very design, the friendliness and accessibility of child welfare agencies toward the community's children and families come from vary. Agencies that are attempting to make themselves accessible to Latino communities and hoping to establish collaborative relationships with these communities and organizations should take a close and critical look at their ways of conducting community outreach and planning, implementing, and delivering services. Communities and people of color often do not understand the services provided by child welfare agencies and fre-
quenty have negative opinions about them. Therefore, it is very important that the agency assesses its resources and needs, including community visibility and rapport.

In the assessment process, the agency should identify which areas need to be enhanced. Some of the organizational and administrative areas that might need to be improved are adding bilingual personnel, developing strategies and skills to conduct community outreach, and increasing expertise to develop collaborations. Besides addressing the agency limitations, it is also important to recognize its resources. Many times, child welfare agencies are not accustomed to collaboration with community members and organizations and think that they do not have anything to offer or that it is too late or difficult to initiate a relationship. This is not necessarily true. Agencies with a strong and sincere commitment to work with the community—in this case, the Latino community—will find that they may have much to contribute and that it is never too late or too difficult to involve the community in the helping process. Although the agency assessment process is a first step, it is important for staff at all levels to understand that this an ongoing process. In other words, this process will probably take time and a great deal of energy.

*Identification of Community Resources*

The assessment and identification of community resources can be achieved in diverse ways. Children, families, and staff can participate in the process of gathering information about the community. Children and families can provide information about their help-seeking patterns and identify places in the community that they use for help and support. Moreover, diverse community members can serve many important functions such as members of advisory boards, recruiters of foster parents, and bridges to other organizations in the neighborhood.

Agency staff at all levels should participate in the information gathering process. They should be willing to get to know the
community by walking around the community, visiting local establishments and organizations, frequenting the local library, reading local newspapers, participating in community meetings and special events, and so forth. They should take the time to talk with community members about the community's history of migration, cultural traditions, and values. Staff may be delighted to find that many community members enjoy talking about their culture when they have respectful and sympathetic listeners. In sum, it is important that agency staff raise public visibility by promoting and practicing the agency's mission and commitment to children and families.

**Relationship Building: Importance of Confianza**

Relationships, especially collaborative relationships, do not occur overnight. They involve thoughtful processes in which all partners involved are flexible and willing to grow and work together. When developing collaborations with Latino communities, it is very important to maintain open channels of communication. Although technological advances to facilitate speedy information exchanges are becoming popular, frequent face-to-face interactions are essential. Written communication, such as follow-up letters or thank you notes, is also an important tool at the agency's disposal.

For collaborative relationships between agency staff and Latino communities to develop, they should be based on *confianza*, confidence or trust. As noted by Delgado (1998), confianza implies pure friendship that is based on mutual trust, understanding, and appreciation. This is obviously a process that involves openness among all involved parties. Staff, who are not necessarily accustomed to working outside the agency, need to feel comfortable spending time in the community, sharing information, and trusting community members. One can notice mutual confianza among both parties in the case presented earlier. The owners of Restaurant E showed their trust and satisfaction with
the agency services by marketing them in their business, and the agency trusted them to post information about its services.

For the agency to connect genuinely with the community, it is crucial to establish an ongoing dialogue and address any negative opinions and concerns that are sometimes spread about child welfare agencies. The development of mechanisms such as surveys and focus groups for obtaining feedback from the community is critical. It is equally important to create systems to effectively review the feedback received from the community and to address questions and concerns in a kind and timely manner. Also, never forget to show appreciation.

Once a comfortable degree of confianza has been achieved, it is important to begin to negotiate the structure, characteristics, and extent of the collaboration. Delgado (1994) pointed out that this process might be influenced by four main factors. These are (1) the level of service provision and willingness of local community organizations to get involved, (2) agency capability (e.g., culturally competent staff), (3) relationship with the community (e.g., positive, neutral, negative), and (4) willingness to collaborate.

Conclusion

The development of collaborations between child welfare agencies and Latino communities may be challenging and time consuming but, at the same time, such development can be very rewarding. All the work put into creating collaborations is rewarded when not only agencies but the whole community works together to achieve family stability and permanency planning for all children. This article has attempted to initiate a timely dialogue about the importance of developing collaborations between child welfare agencies and ethnically diverse communities. Although it focuses specifically on Latinos, it is hoped that this article provides useful guidelines to work with other populations.

Finally, the knowledge base for developing and implementing effective collaborations between child welfare agencies and
ethnically diverse communities should be expanded. More research in the areas of community-based practice and collaboration building with Latino families and communities involved in the child welfare system is needed.

References


Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research.


*(Address requests for a reprint to Hilda P. Rivera, 129 East 79th Street, New York, NY 10021.)*
Copyright of Child Welfare is the property of Child Welfare League of America and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder’s express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.