

Presentation to CWDA Conference (11/19/04)

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As I begin my remarks this morning I think it's important to state the obvious. Trying to build organizational awareness and capacity around issues of fairness and equity, racism and disproportionality in the child welfare system is a process. It's a process because these issues are difficult or uncomfortable for people to talk about. For Casey Family Programs the process began back in 1966 when our operating foundation was created by Jim Casey, founder of United Parcel Service. At that time, during the height of the civil rights movement in this country, Jim Casey proclaimed that Casey Family Programs would serve "any child regardless of his or her race or creed". Ten years later, in 1976, Jim Casey's vision around valuing diversity would be expanded upon. That year, our Seattle area field office conducted a study analyzing services for children. Concerns were expressed in several areas:

- only 10% of the offices' child care population were children of color
- all children of color were being placed in white foster families
- no staff of color worked in the field office

As a result of the study, Casey's intake process changes to better reflect the diversity of the youth coming into the larger systems, and initiates diversity work to better meet the cultural needs of children in care. Increasing awareness and skill of staff to meet the needs of children included staff training, individual case consultation, and better linkages to the communities these children were coming from. In 1978 Casey hired its first cross cultural coordinator to work with the Seattle field office staff regarding culturally appropriate clinical work. This work expanded across the organization in 1980. By 1983 each field office throughout the country had appointed a cross cultural coordinator to lead this work.

Between 1986-1995 Casey leadership moved to further examine and enhance cross cultural work. In 1990 a cross cultural task force was convened to review past and present cross cultural trends and make recommendations for future work. A multiracial national advisory group emerged to counsel the organization on clinical and organizational cross cultural issues. Members came from academia, social work, health care and cross cultural consulting fields. From the advice of this group came planning and tracking templates for cross cultural work. Each field office was responsible for creating an annual cross cultural plan, and a self-assessment tool to measure against a model of cultural competence. When we talk about cultural competence we speak of "the knowledge, skill or attribute one has to cultures other than their own that is observable in the consistent patterns of an individual's behavior, interaction and work related activities over time, which contributes to the fulfillment of the mission and accomplishment of the strategic objectives of the organization". It's a long definition, but it really helps us to be clear on what we're talking about and what we measure.

In the year 2000, as a result of recommendations coming from the advisory group and the field, Casey leadership created the Office of Diversity in an effort to better coordinate, integrate and align Casey's expansive diversity efforts into all areas of its work. Diversity was not going to be simply a function of and an adjunct to the Human Resources department. Part of the creation of the Office of Diversity included an expansion of the scope of diversity work to include all aspects of diversity, not just race and ethnicity.

In the 2000 Casey Family Programs strategic plan that we are currently under, we list very prominently the organization's values. One of those values includes "valuing diversity and anti-racism". Having the value prominently displayed in the strategic plan requires that our organization remain diligent in "walking the talk". The Office of Diversity was charged with the responsibility of providing the leadership and the direction for the organization to continually walk the talk. To this end, one of the first things we had to do was to have some real clarity on what it means to be an anti-racist organization. The fact that 62% of the youth in child welfare are youth of color was a major impetus for seeking this clarity. To this end, nearly 1000 of our staff members, including our leadership team and the Board of Trustees have participated in an Undoing Racism workshop presented by the Peoples' Institute for Survival and Beyond out of New Orleans, Louisiana. The workshop is a unique training that really helps people to understand, through an historical, scientific, and practical analysis of how racism was constructed in the United States and how it exists as a systemic and institutional problem, and not simply a problem of individuals. Racism was constructed, and as such, it can be deconstructed. Using the child welfare system as one of the systems impacted by institutional racism, Casey staff was better able to understand the connections between this issue and their work. The organization's values around diversity and anti-racism, and understanding the impact of institutional racism on youth and families of color, clearly paved the way for the organization's adoption of Disproportionality as an organizational goal. In helping to build capacity around these issues with our external partners and collaborators, we also introduce them to these concepts of how to become an anti-racist organization.

When Casey Family Programs talks about Disproportionality we talk about it in two ways. First, we talk about it in terms of the overrepresentation of youth of color in the system, and secondly, the disparate outcomes they experience while in care. We're looking at this issue both internally and externally as we partner and collaborate with other public and private agencies. We know too well that Casey nor any other single organization can address disproportionality on it's own.

So, what I've shared with you is the journey that Casey has begun and continues to pursue. It may sound rather linear, and that it has been a journey with very few challenges or problems. I do not want to give you that impression. Talking about and addressing issues of race is extremely difficult, even in 2004. I also want to again state the obvious. Yes, we are a privately funded organization, with the kind of resources readily available to do staff trainings and other capacity building activities. However, even with these resources decisions still had to be made by leadership this the work

around disproportionality and our ability to live our values around diversity and anti-racism were important if we were truly going to be a “difference maker” in the lives of the children and families we work with. As I mentioned earlier, when you try to build organizational capacity around issues that have a tendency to make people feel uneasy or takes them out of their comfort zones, there will be many challenges and a great deal of push back. People will get angry; people may get offended or feel a sense of guilt. However the biggest challenge for any organization as they deal with these very sensitive and personal issues will be its ability to stay focused and to keep it’s eye on the prize. What are we doing? What can we do better to improve the lives of all youth and families we’re serving?

Thank you very much.