



STRATEGY BRIEF

SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

How do Washington, D.C.'s community collaboratives provide **neighborhood-based supports to families?**

For nearly 30 years, Washington, D.C.'s [Child and Family Services Agency](#) (CFSA) has teamed with neighborhood partners in a unique collaboration to support families where they live through the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative. This network includes five neighborhood collaboratives, each based in specific wards of the city and focused on the particular needs of that community and its residents.¹ While community-based organizations exist in neighborhoods across the country, the longstanding, intentional partnership across multiple organizations and, in particular, with the child protection agency, sets this network apart. This partnership provides the foundation for a [population-based approach](#) to child welfare, in which stakeholders committed to a shared vision of child and family well-being come together to support all families in reaching their full potential.

Placing CFSA in neighborhoods

The partnership between CFSA and the collaboratives started in the 1990s and has evolved over the years as the collaboratives grew and working relationships matured. Today, CFSA co-locates its in-home units within each collaborative, giving supervisors, family support workers, and social workers a home base in the same neighborhoods where the families they serve live.



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An early attempt at co-locating CFSA staff in the communities failed and leaders learned more preparation was necessary. Around 2006, CFSA again began to prepare stationing staff at the collaboratives. The two-year process involved a lot of education, joint retreats, working with the unionized CFSA staff and the union itself, and getting everyone prepared for teaming differently. CFSA leaders also had to determine reporting structures and identify technology to support out-posted staff.

CFSA leadership needed to address staff concerns around neighborhood safety and teaming with staff they hadn't worked with before. Ultimately, staff realized the benefits of co-location and came to appreciate the convenience of being able to see clients in the same neighborhood. CFSA staff witnessed the value that families placed on the collaboratives, in particular that they were seen as trusted members of the community. Over time, CFSA came to be viewed as members of the local collaborative rather than as government workers, which enhanced trust, as did the fact that families did not have to enter a government office to receive services. CFSA staff came to respect the staff of neighborhood collaboratives for their knowledge and expertise about the community and its residents. Likewise, some staff of the collaboratives who had been wary of working with government officials came to see the benefits that CFSA staff could bring to families. In the end, both groups of staff realized that they wanted families to succeed, and that shared goal has unified the network partners over time.

Currently, CFSA's in-home caseworkers manage cases (either court-involved or not) that have been substantiated for child maltreatment and that have a high or intensive family risk level. Being co-located with staff of the neighborhood collaborative allows for more streamlined teaming on case management, visitation, and sharing resources and other community connections in order to address the concerns that led to the referral. Once the risk level has decreased, CFSA may refer families to the collaborative for step-down

D.C.'S FIVE COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVES

There are eight wards in Washington, D.C.; some community collaboratives serve more than one ward.

- [Collaborative Solutions for Communities](#)
- [East River Family Strengthening Collaborative](#)
- [Edgewood/Brookland Family Support Collaborative](#)
- [Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative](#)
- [Georgia Avenue Family Support Collaborative](#)

services and then close the case. In addition, when an investigation has a high risk level but the safety concern is unsubstantiated, or is substantiated but has a lower risk level, those families also may be referred to the collaborative for services. This teaming is a win-win for families — they benefit from an increased number of resources and community connections, and they receive help from trusted supports without having to travel long distances or navigate multiple entities to secure services.

Tailoring services to the community

The neighborhood collaboratives deliver supports beyond what CFSA might offer, including essential core services such as mentoring, links to housing and employment, and financial assistance. Each of the five collaboratives also offers a unique array of services targeted to the ward they serve — for example, mental health, substance use disorder, truancy prevention, and senior services.

Each collaborative has a community board of directors, and holds neighborhood meetings and events to learn from the community about what families need. In some cases, it might be parent cafés or afterschool programs. For example, when one neighborhood collaborative learned that its tutoring program attracted no students, it sought community input. High school

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students pointed out what they needed more was a place where they could do their homework before going to their jobs, so the collaborative developed an afterschool study hall, which immediately became popular.

Connecting the dots

Members of the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative rely on each other to share expertise, solve problems, and advocate. The five executive directors and their leadership teams meet on monthly calls with CFSA to share information and plan. There is a practice standards manual that all the collaboratives follow, which keeps their work aligned across organizations. In addition, they track information the same way, sharing a data system with CFSA so that citywide reports can be generated about trends in the numbers of children and families receiving services, as well as data on the timeliness of connecting families to services and the percentage of families completing the goals associated with each service.

Making an impact

Consistent with its focus on keeping families together, CFSA has [increased the number of children served in-home by 21% over the past two years](#), while achieving a simultaneous decrease of 14% in the number of children served in out-of-home care. Closely monitoring these trends and assessing the safety and well-being of all children who come into contact with CFSA is a top priority as part of the agency's robust approach to [continuous quality improvement](#).

Leaders attribute at least part of this success to the partnerships with the neighborhood collaboratives and the focus on providing in-home services to keep children safe and avoid removals. Concurrent with this effort, CFSA changed the way incoming calls were identified for investigation, incorporating a RED (Review, Evaluate and Direct) team approach at the hotline, which involves a small group of staff, supervisors, and managers who use a structured approach to

review reports and make decisions together. The agency's approach to investigations also shifted as the agency began partnering more with families' natural supports, engaging kin as well as faith and community organizations to support families in whatever ways were needed so that children could stay safely at home.

In addition, changes were made to the criteria regarding which cases are managed by CFSA's in-home services units. In order for a case to be assigned to an in-home unit, there must be a finding of child abuse or neglect as well as an assessment of high or intensive risk. If a family is assessed as having a high or intensive risk level but the child maltreatment referral is unsubstantiated, these cases are now diverted to the neighborhood collaboratives. As in-home caseworkers engage with families and the risk level goes down, these cases can be closed by CFSA and families can be referred to their local collaborative for "step-down" supportive services to address any remaining needs. This practice has alleviated CFSA caseloads.

One collaborative's experience²

Serving Washington, D.C.'s Ward 7, the [East River Family Strengthening Collaborative](#) (East River) began as part of the [Marshall Heights Community Development Organization](#) in the mid-1990s. In 2000, the collaborative was established as a separate agency in order to expand its family support services.

Services

While East River's early goals focused on prevention and community services for families already involved with CFSA, today's East River increasingly works with families not necessarily known to CFSA. Many of these connections materialize through participation in the programming that East River develops in response to the community's self-identified needs, as well as word of mouth. East River's services are designed to help families build resiliency through [protective factors](#). Mirroring CFSA's approach, East River's family support services fall into three groups:

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- Front Yard (no CFSA involvement)
- Front Porch (CFSA involvement has ended)
- Front Door (CFSA case is open and CFSA is teaming with the collaborative)

Some families may need myriad services in order to safely keep their children at home. In addition to case management services, East River maintains a network of community resources, and builds capacity in the community by funding smaller programs for parents and children. The collaborative also offers a strong parenting program based on evidence-based practices and complemented by:

- Parent cafés
- Financial literacy, tax services, and emergency financial support
- Fatherhood support
- Wellness, activity, and meal programs for seniors
- Truancy prevention
- Substance abuse prevention
- Housing support
- Programs for residents with limited English proficiency

East River celebrates successes by hosting a number of community events throughout the year, such as its Annual Gala, Women of Excellence awards, Prom for Seniors, Parents' Night Out, Community HealthFest, and Faith Leaders Breakfasts.

Staffing and funding

East River employs about 80 full- and part-time staff, many of whom live in the community. Since its inception, the collaborative has hired more than 100 city residents, including more than 50 from Ward 7. Leadership also seeks to hire staff with lived experience. In several instances, parents who completed East River programs have later returned to the collaborative as

AN EAST RIVER SUCCESS STORY

A few years ago, a young mother moved to the neighborhood with her husband and two young children, and found her way to one of East River's parenting programs. She had heard about the collaborative, and was looking for guidance in parenting her child with autism. She completed two parenting programs and told staff that the tools and techniques she acquired became instrumental in her parenting. She continued to stay in touch with East River, and eventually became a board member of the collaborative. Later, she received a mini-grant from the collaborative as part of its community capacity-building program, using it to conduct her own parent training in the community.

family support workers or parent educators. Current staff include a supervisor and the director of finance and operations, both of whom began as family support workers.

It has been a challenge to retain social workers who join the collaborative right after completing their degree. While they might want to stay, East River is not always able to compete with salaries offered by other organizations. To offset the salary discrepancy, the collaborative offers other benefits such as schedule flexibility, low-cost insurance, and opportunities for career growth, such as training to gain additional skills. Former staff have gone on to graduate school and other careers, including one person now on the staff of a U.S. senator.³

Over the years, East River's budget has grown from \$750,000 to \$9 million. Initially, East River was funded solely by CFSA, but the collaborative now has a large funding pool, drawing monies from different D.C. government agencies, as well as some federal agencies and foundations.

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Future projects

CFSA was the first child protection agency to have an approved plan for the [Title IV-E Family First Prevention Plan](#), and the agency is continuing to partner with neighborhood collaboratives on implementation. In addition, one of East River's newest projects is a contract with the city government to run two neighborhood-driven Family Success Centers. Funded

through [Families First D.C.](#), the centers will develop neighborhood resources to increase protective factors and mitigate trauma in families so that children can remain safely at home. The centers, scheduled to open in October 2020, will take into account the needs of each neighborhood. East River is currently convening a community advisory council and conducting a survey to identify the most pressing community needs.

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, the information on the relationship between CFSA and the neighborhood collaboratives was gleaned from phone interviews with: (1) staff at: Collaborative Solutions for Communities, the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative, the Edgewood/Brookland Family Support Collaborative, the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative, the Georgia Avenue Family Support Collaborative, and CFSA (January 10, 2020); and (2) CFSA Entry Services staff (January 24, 2020).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, the information about the East River Family Strengthening Collaborative is based on a May 5, 2020, phone call between Casey Family Programs staff and East River staff.
- 3 See: <https://www.erfsc.org/20th-anniversary/20-years-of-service-fulfilling-the-dream>.

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