



STRATEGY BRIEF

# STRONG FAMILIES

## How can child welfare systems **support families in rural communities?**

Due to significant differences between geographical areas, some traditional or evidence-based child welfare strategies developed for urban settings may be less effective in rural communities. Recognizing the unique strengths of rural communities and making creative use of both traditional and nontraditional funding is essential to provide services that not only protect children, but strengthen their families and support economic development and well-being for the community as a whole. Many rural communities already embody and can further leverage the [community-level social processes](#) known to be effective in reducing child maltreatment, including strong networks of local support.

Child welfare systems serving rural areas face several challenges:

- [Higher rates of child poverty.](#)
- Broader geographical spread, requiring greater travel to visit children in their homes, support family visitation, and access services.
- Limited infrastructure, such as transportation options, housing stock, and broadband internet.
- Fewer community-based services, including mental health and substance abuse treatment.



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- Difficulties recruiting and retaining professional staff.

These issues particularly may impact American Indian children and families, [more than half of whom live in rural or small-town areas \(compared to 20% of the population as a whole\)](#) and may compound their disproportionate representation in the child welfare system. American Indian families, [like all rural families](#), also are affected by generational poverty disproportionately: American Indian children have the lowest rates of upward mobility among all sectors of the population, even if they come from families with a high income.<sup>1</sup> However, there is evidence that culture and community can make a difference: American Indian children who live on or near a reservation show greater upward mobility than their counterparts who grow up elsewhere.

## Key strategies

Experts studying and working in rural and tribal communities have suggested or found the following strategies to be successful in supporting families:<sup>2</sup>

### Make culture change specific, measurable, and mandatory

Culture changes — such as addressing implicit and systemic racism, or increasing collaboration in agencies that have historically operated in silos — take time and concerted effort. “We all think we’re doing a little better than we are,” says Michael Piercy, director of Washington County (Md.) Department of Social

Services. “There’s an implicit collusion with expediency within organizations, so I have to explicitly call out new behaviors and make them mandatory. Unless I measure it and hold people accountable, it won’t happen.”

### Authentically embrace the assets of rural communities

The economic and infrastructure challenges of rural areas are widely recognized. However, they should not be considered in isolation from community strengths, which often include dense networks of relationships between service providers and families alike, as well as a strong cultural commitment to keeping children in their homes whenever possible. Involving families in decision-making further capitalizes on the inherent strengths of rural communities. “Things start to change when people who have historically been defined as the problem have an opportunity to redefine the problem,” says Patrice Kunesch, former assistant vice president and director of the Center for Indian Country Development, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

### Take a two-generation/social-ecological approach

Children thrive when their families and communities thrive. Addressing generational poverty through a [two-generation/social-ecological approach](#) by supporting efforts that build stability and opportunity will benefit child safety and well-being. The [relationship between housing and family stability](#) is undeniable: Data show that inadequate housing is a factor for at least 10% of children entering foster care, and homelessness and housing instability can delay timely permanency.

In addition to a theory of change, we need a theory of justice. What an awesome opportunity it would be if we could provide income security that reduces household stress and strain, and creates more time for parents to focus on parenting.

— PATRICE KUNESH,  
FORMER ASSISTANT VICE PRESIDENT AND DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR INDIAN COUNTRY DEVELOPMENT, FEDERAL RESERVE BANK OF MINNEAPOLIS

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In one study, 1 in 6 families needed housing support when they first came to the attention of the child protection agency.

The **Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation** in Montana have fostered the well-being of children and families by focusing on affordable housing and home ownership. Using a combination of federal programs and regulations supporting **affordable housing development and home ownership**, the [Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority](#) has created stable housing for many families as well as opportunities for tribe members to leverage trust land to build homes and businesses that further enrich the tribal economy. Many of these building projects were completed through contracts with businesses owned by tribe members. For the past 10 years, tribal leadership has sought to ensure the housing authority works closely with other departments to understand the needs of the children and families served, and effectively use available resources to meet their needs.

## Attend to the importance of relationships

Social capital — the shared values and understandings that enable trust — is critical in many rural communities. In an area with limited resources, it may be tempting to engage multiple specialists to serve a community part-time; however, rural communities may ultimately benefit more from a smaller number of generalists who maintain a consistent presence. Taking the time necessary to build authentic, personal, trusting relationships with community members, partner agencies, and local legislators also can ensure that the

child protection agency is welcomed as a community partner, and able to nurture significantly more support for the children and families it serves.

In addition to capitalizing on local relationships, maintaining social and human services jobs in rural communities has a number of additional benefits. Often, even a single position can provide a positive role model in the community for people choosing among careers, as well as add to local income and community infrastructure, such as housing.

## Combine jurisdictional resources in creative ways

When resources (both funding and staffing) are limited, it may be even more important to be as flexible and collaborative as possible across multiple departments to serve families' needs. This sometimes can be easier in a rural or tribal community with a smaller government and more centralized authority than in large, urban jurisdictions. Kathleen Belanger, professor emeritus at Stephen F. Austin State University and author of *Cultural Competence in Rural Child Welfare*, notes: "We keep thinking of child welfare as separate from everybody else, but our investment in prevention and the child welfare system impacts all of the other systems, including education, criminal justice, and health/mental health. We have to stop thinking in silos. If anyone can test some of these cross-system strategies, it's rural folks."

**Oklahoma's Department of Human Services** used federal CARES Act dollars to create more than 30 Community HOPE Centers to address and reverse the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and strengthen families so that they do not come to

We worked hard to find ways to keep people housed because it was the best option to keep that family safe. Then, we could work on the other issues that were causing concern.

— JASON ADAMS,  
FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SALISH AND KOOTENAI HOUSING AUTHORITY

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the attention of the child welfare system. The centers are based on the [Science of Hope](#) and engage community partners to provide a variety of services, including mental health care, social-emotional learning, and educational and nutritional support for children ages 5 to 18 and their adult caregivers. Each center has an embedded family support worker who can process benefits applications and provide referrals to other community services as needed. Although the centers had to be established quickly to support families struggling with virtual learning brought about by COVID-19, the state now is engaging with communities more collaboratively to develop sustainability plans and ensure each center is offering the right services in the right location for its specific community.

## Partner with the community-based providers to maximize resources

When Oklahoma was implementing Intensive Safety Services through its Title IV-E waiver, some large provider agencies were willing to offer a new service in more remote communities at an initial financial loss, due to their strong relationship and shared values with the state agency. Conversely, **Washington County (Md.) Department of Social Services (DSS)** funded community-based service providers to seek training in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy to ensure the availability of this critical evidence-based practice. This extensive cross-training and shadowing between the agency's Family Investment Administration (FIA) workers and child welfare staff resulted in better communication and coordination. Teams gather quarterly to process what they are learning and discuss

how they can use that new knowledge to improve outcomes for the families served. Through this process, they discovered that FIA workers often come across families in crisis during the application process but lack the time or knowledge to address the issues that surface. In response, DSS hired a former child welfare caseworker to serve as a navigator for families in crisis. This dedicated social worker advocates for families' needs and/or providing soft handoffs to community-based resources. These efforts have provided relief for FIA workers, particularly in the face of increased application volumes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The job shadowing also has increased understanding of the challenges families face when navigating multiple divisions.

## Understand the benefits and challenges of virtual communication

In recent years, virtual communication (by phone or web conference) has been a growing practice for service provision to rural communities. Such [telehealth](#) strategies, when used to provide physical or mental health care, can offer significant benefits by reducing transportation barriers, particularly where public transportation is unavailable, and increasing access to specialty care. Since the pandemic began, more communities have expanded the use of virtual communication tools to support [other child welfare-related activities](#), such as early childhood home visiting, parent-child visitation, and court hearings.

Despite these benefits, virtual communication should not be viewed as a cure-all for service delivery

In rural areas, you find a very different sense of community and collaboration. You have to be very strategic in your approach, finding spaces where you can come alongside the people who are already doing the work and have established relationships with those communities.

— JAMI LEDOUX,  
CHIEF OF INNOVATION, OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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I told my Family Investment Administration workers: ‘You are child welfare. Without you, babies don’t eat. Without you, kids don’t get their immunizations. Without you, mothers don’t get workforce support so that they can care for their children.’

— MICHAEL PIERCY,

DIRECTOR WASHINGTON COUNTY (MD.) DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

challenges in rural communities. In many poor rural areas, the use of virtual communication is limited not only by a lack of appropriate electronic devices but also the absence of broadband internet. Although some telehealth research exists regarding the provision of [mental health services](#), many evidence-based practices have yet to be evaluated in a virtual environment. Given the high importance placed on person-to-person relationships in many rural communities, it is unlikely that virtual meetings will ever fully replace the need for — and effectiveness of — face-to-face support and care.

## Resources

The Child Welfare Information Gateway publication, [Rural Child Welfare Practice](#), details key considerations and strategies for working in rural communities, including the provision of social services, the recruitment of resource families, and supervising

a rural child welfare workforce. [Context Matters: Recommendations for Funders & Program Developers Supporting Implementation in Rural Communities](#), a white paper by the National Implementation Research Network, explores how to fund and implement effective innovations in rural communities.

[Real Stories from the Field](#) is a project of the [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute](#) that shares multimedia, first-person stories from child welfare professionals about practice across the country. [A New Frontier for Child Welfare in Rural North Dakota](#) shares one such story.

The [Rural Health Information Hub](#), a national clearinghouse on rural health issues funded by the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy, includes an online library with a variety of [resources specific to rural and tribal child welfare](#).

1 Presentation by Patrice Kunesh, former Assistant Vice President and Director, Center for Indian Country Development, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, at Casey Family Programs' Leadership Retreat on August 8, 2019.

2 These strategies have been informed by interviews with Kathleen Belanger, Stephen F. Austin State University; Fred Fisher and Dan Cowan, Casey Family Programs; Michael Piercy, Washington County (Md.) Department of Social Services; Jami Ledoux, State of Oklahoma; and Jason Adams, Salish and Kootenai Housing Authority.

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