



STRATEGY BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How did New York City’s Community Partnerships and Family Enrichment Centers respond to families during a time of crisis?

New York City’s community partnerships and resource centers — supported by the city’s child welfare agency — sought to help families connect to resources and navigate through the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, offering one example of how local networks can be leveraged to support families and keep children healthy and safe.

Background

Family resource centers (FRCs) are welcoming, community-based hubs of support, services, and social connection that have demonstrated effectiveness in [reducing the risk of a report of child maltreatment](#) and entry into foster care. Depending on the jurisdiction, they also may be called family enrichment centers, family success centers, family support centers, or parent-child centers. Whatever the name, the centers emphasize community engagement, leadership, partnership, and the development of relationships between staff and families based on equality and respect. They can play an important role in supporting family well-being and in addressing challenges so families can thrive, particularly those issues



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that are poverty-driven and systemic in nature, and that can result in unnecessary contact with the child protection agency.¹ The [National Family Support Network](#) has developed [Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support](#) as a guide for a broad range of approaches for designing family resource centers in terms of delivery, structure, funding, and services, given the emphasis on customizing FRCs to the local community.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many jurisdictions found that their FRCs were particularly helpful in engaging and supporting families throughout a crisis. Many of these centers quickly adapted how they served families — and even the services they provided — to address emerging and changing needs. In [Massachusetts](#), for example, FRC staff shifted from in-person offerings to serving families by phone, virtually, or one-on-one with social distancing. [Colorado](#) leveraged its FRCs' close relationships with families and neighborhoods to help the state efficiently distribute \$3 million of emergency infant supplies from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Many jurisdictions [increased funding supports for FRCs during this time](#) as well: California provided \$3 million in COVID emergency relief funds for FRCs to provide emergency services and material items, assistance with isolation needs, parenting resources, and staff support to link families to other state and federal resources such as food and housing; in Utah and Vermont, federal CARES Act funds were used to increase the capacity of networks of FRCs to assist families.

In New York City, Community Partnerships — coalitions of providers and residents in 11 neighborhoods — and Family Enrichment Centers (FECs) also were able to quickly pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic to identify, leverage, and distribute critical resources to residents in their communities to enhance family well-being. By investing in both, the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has created a community-based, primary prevention network in neighborhoods with high incidences of child neglect or maltreatment reports, thereby reducing the likelihood that poverty-related challenges will lead to unnecessary child protection involvement. These communities also

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND FAMILY ENRICHMENT CENTERS IN NEW YORK CITY?

Community Partnerships are coalitions of providers and residents that coordinate services and resources in 11 neighborhoods. They serve as ambassadors to the community, advocates for families, and advisors to the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), helping to inform agency policy and practice and keep the city informed about community needs and resources. The Community Partnerships hire community ambassadors, who are local residents tasked with building trust and deeper community engagement, with a recognition that effective communication is not just one-way. The Community Partnership framework relies heavily on collective impact, two-generation approaches, and a commitment to equity. Each partnership comes up with its own mission, goals, values statement, and priorities, in collaboration with residents.

Family Enrichment Centers (FECs), run by nonprofits, provide the community with a physical gathering place for individuals and families to connect and participate in a wide variety of formal and informal activities. FECs currently operate in three neighborhoods: East New York, Brooklyn; Highbridge, Bronx; and Hunts Point/Longwood, Bronx. FECs aim to offer inviting home-like environments. To reduce stigma and increase access, no appointment is needed to visit any FEC, and residents do not need to provide any personal information to participate. FEC participants and staff co-design how the FEC operates and what happens in the space. The programming at these centers focuses on seven family protective factors: parental resilience; social connections; knowledge of parenting and child development; social and emotional competence of children; concrete supports in times of need; economic mobility; and strong relationships within families and among neighbors.

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abound with resilience and hope, and are uniquely anchored by social, cultural, and faith-filled leaders and institutions that help keep them strong. The Community Partnerships and FECs draw on these community strengths and assets to create space for community members to provide support to each other, use their voices to advocate for the next generation, and help their families strengthen their well-being. An early [evaluation](#) of the FECs, published in March 2020 by Youth Studies Inc., found evidence that these centers are having a positive impact on a range of family protective factors associated with reductions in reports of abuse and neglect to child protective services.

Pivoting to adapt to the pandemic

As early quarantines forced Community Partnerships to cancel community meetings and FECs to modify their operations, both quickly found ways to continue to support community members. One of the most common activities during the pandemic has been the **distribution of over 160,000 essential items, including bags of food, diapers, personal protective equipment (PPE), and personal hygiene items, as well as coats and other concrete resources.** More than 5,600 resources to support remote learning for children, such as laptops, tables, Wi-Fi hot spots, and school supplies, also were distributed. Food and other essential items were distributed from FEC locations, in pop-up pantries in local housing communities and parks, and sometimes directly to residents' homes. FECs and Community Partnerships approached all this the same way they provide other services: no questions asked.

In order to address families' immediate, COVID-related challenges, the FECs and Community Partnerships provided a critical avenue to identify families facing severe financial hardships and link them to emergency assistance grant funds secured by ACS. These connections resulted in **more than 100 families receiving privately funded cash grants** without the expectation of government requirements. "The pandemic underscored what we already knew: that often what families need most is concrete support and services to address poverty and its related impacts. Throughout the pandemic, as families faced an enormous amount of stress, the work of the FECs and Community Partnerships proved to be crucial," said former ACS Commissioner David A. Hansell.

The FECs and Community Partnerships also provided information and referrals, as well as social support. One Community Partnership started a "Call an Ambassador" program, equipping staff with a Google Voice service and up-to-date information about the availability of community resources. Instead of waiting to be called, community ambassadors proactively reached out to every existing resident contact, surveying everyone they could reach to query what they needed. In total, the FECs and Community Partnerships **provided nearly 10,000 referrals.** For many residents, contact with FEC or Community Partnership staff was a lifeline. "When people are going through a pandemic, they don't think anyone sees them or knows about them," says Monique Dennis Farrington, community ambassador for the Hunts Point Community Partnership. "When they get a phone call, they know somebody is paying attention."

Two of the greatest needs families have expressed during the pandemic are access to resources and parenting support. These happen to be the bread-and-butter services of any FRC. So we have seen the demand skyrocket across the country and FRCs more than redouble their efforts, stepping up and operating on the front lines, even when almost everything else shut down.

— ANDREW RUSSO,
CO-FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, NATIONAL FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORK

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Peer-to-peer support and partnership

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff from the FECs and Community Partnerships began meeting regularly once a week with ACS to share ideas and identify ways for ACS to support their efforts. (Previously, the FECs and Community Partnerships had held separate meetings.) “It doesn’t matter where we are, we’re doing the same things,” observes Rosa Diaz, community ambassador for the East Harlem Community Partnership. Farrington of Hunts Point agrees: “We need to collaborate and share resources across different areas. We’re all ambassadors, and we’re all in this together.”

Community voice

Both the Community Partnerships and the FECs involve community voice in their work. For example, everything in the FECs is co-designed with community members. This includes their names: [The C.R.I.B.](#) [Community Resources in Brooklyn] in East New York; [O.U.R. \[Organizing to be United and Resilient\] Place](#) in Hunts Point/Longwood; and [Circle of Dreams](#) in Highbridge. Community members also have a say in the furnishings and décor of the centers, and the programs they offer.

Community members and families propose offerings (within the structure of the family protective factors) and determine how they are organized and run. Advisory councils (comprised of community members) and frequent parent cafés also are sources of ideas. “Everything the FECs do is co-designed with the

community. The community members drive the programs and offerings, and they discuss with the staff what they think will work and what won’t,” says Crystal Young-Scott, ACS director for the FECs. “They really do take the lead.” Since the launch of the three demonstration sites in 2018, the FECs have offered more than 1,000 programs and activities co-designed with community members, including several that are recurring events, including a women’s small business development group, therapeutic art groups for the mothers of children impacted by local gangs, parent support groups, and movie nights for parents and their children.

Engagement and leadership by residents involved in the FECs and Community Partnerships come from staff being consistent, building authentic relationships, and developing trust. Concrete needs can be a starting place for connection. “We have to get past that trust (barrier) first — break down that wall,” says Donna Downes, community ambassador for the Jamaica Community Partnership. “Then they’ll open their door and tell us what they need.”

During the pandemic, the FECs and Community Partnerships adapted to meet the immediate needs of families by providing temporary food pantries. “Residents are learning about our services because of the food pantry,” says Dan Montas Tran, director of the Mott Haven Community Partnership, which saw its contact list grow from 70 residents pre-COVID to 1,200 less than a year later. His Community Partnership

I was in a shelter, looking for a safe haven. A few women from the shelter told me about the (Family Enrichment) Center. They were giving out fruits and vegetables that day, and they told me to go on in. I felt a warmth when I went in, like I belonged there. I felt at home. That was two years ago, and they helped me through a very challenging time. Now that I’m in my own home, they still reach out to me: ‘How’s everything? Are you O.K.?’ They’re still there whenever I need them, especially during the pandemic.

— PARENT OF SIX,
NEW YORK CITY

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has also used the distribution of food packages as an opportunity to spread the word about other community resources.

Technology has been of particular concern for families during the pandemic. Many Community Partnership activities and FEC offerings went virtual to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and they helped provide families access to Wi-Fi hot spots and devices to support online learning and connection, as well as education about vaccines and where to get them. Since the start of the pandemic, the two programs combined have hosted nearly 700 programs and activities that have served approximately 21,700 individuals. During the pandemic, Community Partnerships also served as conduits for other city agencies to get information to residents, hosting **45 presentations about city programs and resources**. Community Partnerships were not originally funded to do this work, but this is an area to explore for potential future investment.

Personal outreach

When the Community Partnerships and FECs were first established, they relied heavily on their relationships with other service providers to support outreach. Staff also made phone calls and visits to residences, schools, and other gathering places, and attended block parties and other local events. "Outreach was really talking to people, getting people to buy in and trust and want to come to the space — knowing who the 'mayors' of each block and each building were, and tapping into them," says Denise Carr, family advocate for O.U.R. Place, the Hunts Point FEC. During the pandemic, with outreach more challenging, some staff reposted announcements on their personal social media pages to both increase reach and acknowledge the value of personal connections. "I had to make my

own Facebook page public, then someone would share it," recalls Farrington. "I've been doing that for the last 11 months because it was the only way to get the message out, be consistent, and gain trust."

Flexible funding and established connections

Close relationships with trusted community partners have helped staff build relationships with residents and connect them to a wider network of formal and informal supports. Staff also listen to the community and, because of the flexible funding structure, are able to be responsive to how the community wants to spend resources. This was particularly valuable during the pandemic. Anthony Bowman, director of strategy and program development in ACS' Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships says: "Community Partnerships not only have direct connections to parents but also relationships to many providers who can offer different perspectives and resources. It's so powerful when we collaborate."

Lessons learned

Any time services are offered by or connected to an agency that provides child protective services, some families may feel wary about the potential for systemic over-reach or family intrusion. While funded by ACS, FECs and Community Partnerships are intended and designed to address families' needs in collaborative, supportive, non-intrusive ways. ACS and its FECs and Community Partnerships are learning important lessons along the way, including:

- **Take time to become a trusted community presence.** Historically, some families have not perceived or experienced child protection agencies as supportive, given their power to investigate

I've been in this community for 31 years and I had no idea that all these things existed. Now I'm trying to tell other people I see struggling, who have children, to get them involved as well. The more, the better. We're like a family.

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allegations of child maltreatment and remove children when they deem circumstances are unsafe. Families in communities of color have disproportionality experienced the harm and trauma of involvement in child protective cases. This distrust and fear that has been built over many years cannot be erased overnight. Taking the time to build relationships and invest in community healing is critical. Community Partnerships built on earlier efforts by ACS to connect with community stakeholders in New York City neighborhoods. "Over 14 years of informal networking has resulted in a solid base of people who are invested, know the community, and are able to bring others along," says Dale Joseph, assistant commissioner of ACS' Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships. "If we were starting from scratch at the start of the pandemic, I don't think we would be here today."

- **Invest in a continuum of strategies that proactively connect children and families with support.** Upstream primary preventive strategies, embedded within communities, [save money and result in improved, equitable, and just outcomes](#) for all children and families.
- **Commit to sharing power with community.** Community members must be at the table from the beginning: from early exploration into program design and assessing community strengths and challenges, to hiring program staff, co-designing program activities, and playing roles in implementation, ongoing quality assurance, and evaluation. Community Partnerships and FECs have played important roles in informing ACS policy and practice,

advancing systems equity efforts, and amplifying community voice and leadership.

- **Support grassroots organizations.** Providing flexible, community-led services is not a new idea — places of worship, mutual aid societies, and other grassroots organizations have been working this way for centuries. Although ACS employed an open, competitive grant process to identify community organizations to serve as the Community Partnership and FEC contractors, the agency has acknowledged that additional changes may be needed to create a more level playing field for smaller grassroots entities to participate. For example, [to address a similar challenge in Washington, D.C.](#), the district's Child and Family Services Agency requires community partners be equal participants in the decision-making process, providers be trusted organizations with a history in the community, and family success centers spend a portion of their grant on subgrants to local community organizations.
- **Create nimble structures and flexible funding.** Community needs can change quickly, so in addition to co-designing with residents, FECs and Community Partnerships require flexibility in funding and governance. ACS provides funding and technical assistance but keeps deliverables flexible to include a lot of community voice and leadership in decision-making, which means changes can happen more organically.
- **Be creative and patient when exploring and evaluating impact.** It takes time to move the needle on community well-being, and it is difficult to isolate the role of a single activity in a trend that is affected

The best thing you can do when opening a new center is adapt to that community. Our struggles might not be the same as 20 blocks from here. Listen to what the community needs. Go into the community and see for yourselves. Interact with the residents so you can see what we're going through and anticipate that needs change when there is a crisis.

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by many factors at once. It is important to balance quantitative data with qualitative measures and to establish meaningful interim milestones to mark progress. New York City's [Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence](#) is helping ACS gather baseline data about the Community Partnership and FEC neighborhoods. These data snapshots will allow the agency to track changes in demographics and other data over time.

- **Understand that communities benefit from a range of supports that do not include the child protection agency.** In addition to the Community Partnerships and FECs, families in New York City also benefit from community-based networks of support outside of child welfare, both formal and informal, including mutual aid groups, which also were able to quickly expand their reach during the COVID-19 pandemic, and [community care networks](#) built around peer supports.

Looking ahead

ACS is expanding the FECs, as well as the principles of community voice and co-design they are built on. In May 2021, New York City announced an expansion of the FEC model, from three centers to 30. This expansion was intended to reflect the city's commitment to addressing racial equity and inclusion

in communities that have suffered disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ACS's commitment to investing in community-led primary prevention services in those communities that have long experienced disproportionately high levels of child welfare system involvement. Following the announcement, and in part to respond to feedback from parents, ACS solicited public comment to inform the expansion plan. ACS incorporated this feedback in the development of the September 2021 request for proposals for nine new FECs that will be the first wave of expansion.

Ultimately, in order to continue to address inequities and work toward becoming an anti-racist organization, ACS must continue to deepen existing and establish new relationships and ways of working with community members. "If we want transformative systems change, we have to start by creating more positive, trusting relationships in the community, and being responsive and accountable to communities," says Bowman, the agency director in the Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships. It will also require an ongoing commitment by ACS to support and engage in efforts that promote community healing, and share and cede power to communities to lead decision-making about the investment of resources and supports in their local neighborhoods.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1 Content for this brief developed from interviews from January 26 to 28, 2021, with: three parent leaders who co-design and participate in FEC programming; six community ambassadors (Donna Downes, Jamaica Community Partnership; Nahomy Vasquez, Mott Haven Community Partnership; Elsa Ruiz, Bushwick Community Partnership; Rosa Diaz, East Harlem Community Partnership; Tania Cumbicos, Elmhurst Community Partnership; Monique Dennis Farrington, Hunts Point Community Partnership); and six staff at the Family Enrichment Centers and Community Partnerships (Lettece Layne, program director, East New York FEC; Denise Carr, family advocate, Hunts Point FEC; Christopher Dowling, director, Staten Island Community Partnership; Dan Montas Tran, director, Mott Haven Community Partnership; Lamacca Holmes, director, East Flatbush Community Partnership; Gabriela Silverio, director, Highbridge Community Partnership. Content also developed from interviews with: Naomi Schear, assistant commissioner for policy and planning—Child and Family Well-Being, and Crystal Young-Scott, director, Family Enrichment Centers, New York City Administration for Children's Services, on February 1, 2021; Dale Joseph assistant commissioner, Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships, and Anthony Bowman, director of strategy and program development, Office of Community Engagement and Partnerships, New York City Administration for Children's Services, on October 16, 2020, and March 9, 2021; and Andrew Russo, co-founder and director, National Family Support Network, on August 16, 2021.

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