


Family-Serving Organizations doing Systems and Policy Change Work

Research Summary

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July 2024

A network diagram background consisting of a grid of interconnected nodes and lines. The nodes are represented by circles of varying sizes, and the lines are thin, connecting the nodes in a complex, web-like structure. The diagram is rendered in shades of orange and brown, with a lighter green background on the left side of the page.

PREMISE OF THE RESEARCH

Direct-service nonprofit organizations (DSOs) serving families—or family-serving organizations (FSOs)—have a unique role to play in ensuring policies reflect families' lived realities. This is because of their direct service role in communities, their connections with families, and their involvement in policy and systems change work. FSOs have the potential to influence policy and decision-making in a way that better meets the needs of families and engages and centers them in systems and policy change.

This exploratory research aims to better understand what is currently known about FSOs by asking three questions:

1

How do FSOs identify themselves, and how do they differentiate themselves from other types of (DSOs)?

2

What is known about the characteristics and external conditions that facilitate or constrain DSOs from engaging in the policy and systems change ecosystem, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?

3

What is known about the models, frameworks, and approaches that DSOs draw from to center most affected people in their systems and policy change work, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?

The research team is grateful for the contributions of several experts for sharing their insights and supporting the research approach (see full report for details).

This brief presents potential directions for future research, grounded in findings from our literature review on DSO advocacy and constituent engagement, 5 interviews with FSOs, and learning conversations with RWJF and experts in the field.

KEY CONCEPTS



'Family-serving organization' (or FSO) is not a commonly used term, but conversations with interviewees showed that these organizations do identify as having an explicit focus on families.

A family-serving approach is not about defining what families are. It is about engaging with a family unit, within wider systems.

'Family serving' means building "family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together to integrate services and supports to move the whole family forward," aligned with a [2-Gen Approach](#).

People we spoke to often told us to be cautious of creating a new term that puts organizations and people in boxes. In this research, while we use the term 'family-serving organization', we do so openly to encompass all organizations that provide a service to families.



Most DSOs engage in some form of systems and policy change work, when we define that broadly.

'Systems and policy change' can mean a range of influencing activities—from educating the public, engaging voters, interacting with officials, policy advocacy, lobbying, and more. **When a broad definition is used, the majority of DSOs in the literature engage in some amount of systems and policy change work.** Many organizations view this work as an important aspect of, or complementary to, the services they provide to communities.

However, we occasionally use the term 'advocacy' to reflect the state of the research and how FSOs and other nonprofits refer to their work. What is important to remember is that, regardless of the term used, these organizations often make significant efforts to shift the systems and structures within which the families they serve are embedded.

What will it take to strengthen FSOs' participation in collaborative spaces, such as coalitions, across the systems and policy change ecosystem?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Many factors, like size, budget, resources, capacity, funding source, advocacy infrastructure, and context affect how/how much DSOs (including FSOs) are able to engage in systems and policy change work. Collaboration with other organizations—in advocacy or services—supports their advocacy work.

One of the most common ways DSOs engage in systems and policy change work is in coalitions. Participating in coalition enables them to be able to participate in the advocacy ecosystem, especially when their primary mandate is to provide a direct service.

Even though collaborating with other organizations supports their systems and policy change work, DSOs may be tokenized and may not be considered as legitimate and full partners in the advocacy space.

GUIDING QUESTIONS



How do FSOs show up in collaborative systems and policy change spaces, such as coalitions? How are they perceived by others in that space?



What gives FSOs legitimacy within coalitions, and what is needed to allow them to engage in authentic, sustainable ways that value their expertise?



Why is it important for FSOs to strengthen their participation in coalition? Does that allow families to be centered in the systems and policy change space?

What will it take to enable FSOs to best represent their constituents' interests in systems change and policy work in a manner that is sustainable and suitable to their direct service structure and focus?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Direct service work gives legitimacy to FSOs' advocacy, and it gives them the knowledge and ability to truly represent community needs.

There are many ways organizations engage their communities, like asking families what the major issues are, creating advisory boards, and having most affected people on staff. Shifting power, building relationships, and meeting families where they are at are essential for engaging families.

FSOs are not always able to represent their communities as well as they would like to because of several factors, including organizational infrastructure, time, resources, and capacity; families' lack of time, capacity, and interest; and organizational structures and power hierarchies.



GUIDING QUESTIONS



What does family engagement in advocacy look like for an organization providing direct services?



What is unique about organizations representing families well in their systems and policy change work?



How do families want to be engaged? What skills, capacity, and resources do they bring that can be leveraged, and that pose as challenges?

What will it take to shift money and resources to FSOs so that they can pursue the systems change and policy work they want to engage in?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Many DSOs, including FSOs, believe that engaging in systems and policy change is an important aspect of their work, but a major challenge they face is lack of time, capacity, and resources.

Organizations that have designated resources (e.g., staff, partner organization, or representation on coalition) and explicit infrastructure and intention to engage in systems and policy change are more likely to do this work that they deem so important.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

What is needed, both by individual actors like funders, as well as wider structural changes, to allow FSOs to have the time, money, and other resources they need to engage in systems and policy change efforts?

What combination of designated vs. flexible funding allows FSOs to be able to engage in systems and policy change work? How can funders support this work, while taking organizations' and families' lead?

What organizational infrastructure is best suited to hybrid service-advocacy approaches?



THANK YOU!

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