



**EVALUATION OF THE
URBAN CHILD WELFARE LEADERS GROUP**

Thomas E. Backer, PhD
Human Interaction Research Institute

Final Report to the Annie E. Casey Foundation

January 2010

The *Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group* brings together commissioners or directors of child welfare systems in ten of the largest urban areas in the United States. The UCWL Group's mission is to provide professional development and support for these leaders, and to help them improve the effectiveness of their organizations. A series of two-day peer networking meetings are the Group's principal activities. Collectively, this peer network represents more than 50 percent of all children in care in the United States.

In a recent study of peer networking process, (Backer, 2008), the UCWL Group was found to be successful in part because, according to its participants, it is the one meeting where they are "truly among peers" and can feel comfortable talking off the record about their successes and failures. The challenges of running complex child welfare systems in big cities are different than those of states, or systems in smaller towns or rural areas. Thus an additional major advantage of the Group is its focus on these jurisdictions. The evaluation study reported here looked for evidence of impact from the Group's activities, and examined its process in more detail.

Overview of the UCWL Group's History The UCWL Group was started originally in 1997, and operated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, with leadership now provided by Abel Ortiz (more details on history are provided later in this report). The Group is now run in partnership with Casey Family Programs.

Overview of the Group's Impact As already stated, the Group's members assert that its most important impact comes from getting together leaders of large urban child welfare systems, so these leaders can feel supported and connected, and so they can work together to facilitate change nationally and in their jurisdictions. Education and joint problem-solving also are regular parts of the meeting process, and the meeting structure (e.g., presentations by outside experts, unstructured time for members to share best practices) helps to support this.

As with all peer networks, one of the challenges is that the learning and inspiration provided by the UCWL Group is difficult to translate back into a complicated and often highly-stressed system at home. Group members often feel they lack the tools for change needed to make it happen, and in particular that they don't have access to the resources that larger-scale systems change would require. The Group's meetings deal candidly with these shortfalls, recognizing that not all problems can be solved in this peer networking environment.

Overview of Study Report After a brief discussion of study method, evaluation findings are presented in five categories. A final section of the study report places evaluation results in the larger context of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare initiative, and of results from the 2008 study of peer networks, already mentioned.

Study Method

This small-scale evaluation was commissioned to learn more about process, and to obtain evidence about impact, of the Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group - both on its individual members and on the child welfare agencies they lead. Impact was measured both by statements from Group members about the success of the Group, and by specific examples they offered of impact on their agencies. The evaluation also examined the Group's meeting planning process, and compiled suggestions for improvement in the UCWL Group's operations by its members.

The principal method used to obtain input from Group members was a structured interview (almost all of them done by telephone) with current Group members (one interviewee retired while scheduling of the interview was in process). Unstructured interviews also were conducted with selected Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs staff who are involved with this program. In addition, documents from the Group's 2005-2009 meetings were reviewed. And the study author observed part of the February 2009 Group meeting in Las Vegas.

The questions asked in the interviews were:

- * *What has been most useful to you personally about participation in the Group?*
- * *What has been most useful to your organization about participation in the Group?*
- * *Since the Group more recently got involved directly in planning the meetings, what's worked the best in the planning process, and what has been the most challenging?*
- * *What have been the most and least successful aspects of the Group's meeting process?*
- * *What have been the most and least successful aspects of the Group's meeting reports?*
- * *What suggestions do you have for improving the Group's functioning?*

Evaluation data from these sources were combined in a draft study report, which then was reviewed by all those interviewed to obtain their further input, as well as any needed corrections. No inputs or quotes were identified by name, as had been promised during the interviews.

A revised draft of the report then was presented at the August 2009 Group meeting in Chicago, for a further review and discussion about implications from the evaluation. The report was revised again based on input provided.

Study Results

Evaluation findings are presented in the following categories:

- * *History and Context of the UCWL Group*
- * *Specific Examples of Impact*
- * *Successes of Meeting Planning*
- * *Overall Impact of the Meetings*
- * *Suggestions for Improvement*

Quotations given are unattributed, for the reasons indicated above.

History and Context of the UCWL Group The UCWL Group was started in 1997 after informal discussions among several child welfare agency leaders. These discussions acknowledged that the then-existing professional organizations tended to focus on states more than large urban jurisdictions, even though the challenges faced by these two types of child welfare systems differ

in some important ways. Thus it was felt that it would be helpful for big city leaders to come together, in order to share information, discuss successes and failures, and identify emerging issues - all in a confidential, comfortable environment.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was approached to sponsor and coordinate such gatherings, originally to be done as an aspect of their Family to Family program. In more recent years the Group has been operated independently, although many of the members as well as Foundation staff have also been involved with Family to Family.

More than a year ago, David Sanders, former child welfare commissioner in Los Angeles, and now vice-president for systems reform at Casey Family Programs, expressed interest in co-facilitating this peer network. A partnership between the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs, its philanthropic “sister organization,” has resulted. Since this collaboration began in 2008, staff from both Caseys report they have developed a broader perspective on the work and on their own activities.

There are about 20 members of the UCWL Group at present, and they now include deputies as well as commissioners/directors for some agencies. Originally, the Group met quarterly, and typically was hosted by one of the members in his or her home city. More recently there have been two or three meetings a year. The two Casey hosts provide meeting space, food, pay to bring in guest speakers, and fund hotel accommodations for the participants. Travel costs and costs of time to participate are borne by the Group members.

Over the last year, an effort has been made to keep the administrative costs of each meeting to less than \$20,000, exclusive of AECF/CFP staff time. Interviewees assume that per-meeting costs may have been greater in the past, but no separate financial records were kept to verify this.

A few of the leaders interviewed had been to many of the Group’s meetings, but most were newer to the peer network and had only been to one or two meetings. There has been considerable turnover in the Group, especially in recent years, but there is a handful of core members who’ve been part of the UCWL Group from its inception.

The longer-tenured leaders (in their jobs more than a decade, in several instances) are looked to as role models and mentors for the newer leaders. Frequent turnover is the norm in the child welfare agency realm (as it is with other executive positions in local government health and human service agencies). The new leaders sometimes arrive in their posts with limited background related to the formidable challenges of their new jobs. This can make participation in the Group particularly important because it provides a kind of informal “orientation program” for the new leader.

Today, the Group is a mix of leaders from large county or city jurisdictions, along with several leaders of state-level child welfare agencies. In addition, several smaller jurisdictions, all intensively involved in reforms and systems change work, have been added to the membership roster. This provides a diversity of viewpoints that enlivens conversations, but also means that there is a mix of issues and priorities, rather than a single focus as was the original goal. But since the state leaders in the Group have large urban areas in their states, the emphasis still is on the process and management of child welfare services in large urban jurisdictions.

There is no consultant to facilitate the Group’s meetings. Agendas are set by the Group, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation in collaboration with Casey Family Programs provides administrative support to organize and conduct the meetings. Each meeting includes structured presentations on selected topics (e.g., a presentation from researchers in a topical area, such as older youth aging out

of foster care). After these presentations, invited guests depart, so the leaders can talk amongst themselves (Casey staff, two of whom are former Group members, remain). These relatively unstructured discussions provide an opportunity for Group members to share current challenges and best practices, ask questions of other group members, and look at child welfare in the larger professional and political context.

The structured presentations have covered a wide variety of topics. To give an idea of this diversity, from 2005-2009, the topics were:

- * 8/09: Budget Cuts; Evaluation of the UCWL Group; Data on Caseload Trends Relative to the Economy; Permanency Outcomes for Older Youth; Effective Medication Management
- * 2/09: Impact of the Economy; Public and Private Provider Agency Partnerships; Fatality Reviews/Transparency; Key Issues Regarding Initial CPS Contact
- * 9/08: Adoption Disruption; Reducing Racial Disparity and Disproportionality
- * 3/08: Youth Who Run From Care
- * 10/07: San Francisco Family to Family and Children of Incarcerate Parents Initiative; Sustaining Reform in the Midst of a Crisis
- * 3/07: Permanency
- * 11/06: Working with the Media
- * 6/06: Management of Provider Performance and Outcomes; Families with Long-Term Involvement with the Child Welfare System; Federal Child Welfare Financing Reform
- * 2/06: Reunification, Adoption, Permanency: What Are We Doing?; Staying on Track While in the Spotlight; MyCSW
- * 9/05: Collaboration Between the Courts and Child Welfare Systems; Key Issues Facing Urban Systems; System Collaboration and the CSFR; Fostering Court Reform; Updates on Kinship Care and Guardianship Issues
- * 5/05: Older Youth in Child Welfare
- * 1/05: Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality and Disparities for Children of Color in the Child Welfare System; Pew Charitable Trusts Update; Child Welfare Legislative Outlook

The Group also has collaborated on joint meetings with the Pew Commission on Child Welfare (a past meeting included judges from each system that is part of the Group, and representatives from the National Center on State Courts). In the future, Pew indicated it might co-fund some deeper examinations of court reform, a topic the Group already has addressed. However, there have been no discussions recently to explore additional joint meetings of this type.

The UCWL Group is not entirely unique, although as will be discussed later, many if not most of its members regard it as having a unique place in their professional lives, and for the work they are doing. Two other national meeting series and several at the state and local level were identified during this evaluation, and will be discussed briefly here for comparison purposes.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) holds a Commissioner's Roundtable every July or August, a three-day meeting structured somewhat like the UCWL group. There are usually at least 25 states represented at the Roundtables. At the July 2009 meeting an administrator from Bermuda was present as well. At times, more than one senior leader per state attends. The 2009 meeting agenda included state-by-state reports from those present, and a series of presentations (covering topics like "helping roles" for child welfare agencies, strategies for taking care of agency workforces, trauma-informed child welfare systems, approaches to engaging families, kinship care, rural practice, and legislative developments).

Interviewees for this study suggested that there is some overlap between the UCWL Group and the CWLA Roundtable meetings, and that discussions between their organizers might result in some efficiencies. One possibility might be to combine the two meetings, at least on occasion.

This is particularly important given both the constrained resources child welfare agencies must now deal with, and the general proliferation of professional meetings in the child welfare field. “There are more and more meetings out there and it is hard to go to them all,” as one interviewee put it. Others remarked that the CWLA Roundtable has moved away from spending meeting time on direct exchange among its members, and has become more like a conference than a peer networking group.

It was also noted by several interviewees that CWLA is beginning to struggle with declining participation in the Roundtable. As importantly, this group only convenes once a year, and some of those interviewed assert that this isn’t often enough to maintain good group cohesiveness.

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), whose members are the top leaders of state child welfare agencies, has a 25-member Executive Committee which meets monthly by telephone conference call, both as a governance body for NAPCWA and to share information on important issues. In March and September, the Executive Committee meets face to face prior to the NAPCWA conference, providing networking and educational opportunities as well in a format somewhat similar to the UCWL Group meetings - though there is appropriately an emphasis on NAPCWA governance issues.

At the state level, there are several relevant organizations that provide child welfare leaders with peer networking and resource sharing opportunities. For instance, the California Welfare Directors Association has a meeting every month of its Children’s Committee, which consists of county child welfare directors from throughout California. These also are groups that focus on children’s services in a particular urban area, e.g., the Denver Metro region. These too can offer valuable inputs and networking opportunities, though of course they tend to focus on local issues.

Interviewees said that such state or local meetings are valuable precisely because they allow leaders to interact with each other about more local problems (e.g., as they relate to state or county budgets, or to child welfare challenges specific to a particular region). And there are opportunities to share best practices that might be acted upon by a group of child welfare directors acting as a consortium, e.g., to share funding resources, a technical expert consultant, etc.

Specific Examples of Impact The following specific examples of impact on child welfare agency planning and practice were offered by interviewees as coming directly from their participation in the UCWL Group:

* A leader came back from the recent Las Vegas meeting with information on how the Las Vegas child welfare agency “turbocharges” their family search effort (undertaken in the first hours a child comes into protective custody). The leader reports that her agency’s staff followed up with their Las Vegas counterparts on what she had learned at the Group meeting. They got specifics about how Las Vegas staff planned and structured family search activities, and on the software program they now use to search for relatives. This has helped to shape a similar effort in the leader’s own agency.

* As this same leader’s agency changed its family search process, which in the past had been “somewhat laissez faire,” as the leader put it, it was necessary to increase its staffing. Since this change also involved a significant shift of agency resources, being able to point to the success of the Las Vegas agency’s program was of considerable value in convincing the fiscal office overseeing the adopting agency’s finances that the change was worthwhile.

* Several agency leaders reported that through Group meetings they have been able to get a much broader perspective on agency reform efforts spurred by a lawsuit against the agency - unfortunately now a common occurrence in the child welfare field. The information and discussion offered at the

Group's meetings, these leaders reported, was helpful in deciding how to implement changes that had been agreed to in settling a lawsuit, looking for the maximum impact and minimum cost.

* Richard Barth of the University of Maryland gave a presentation about adoption practices at one of the Group's meetings. According to interviewees, this helped some of the agency leaders think more critically about the issues surrounding kinship legal guardianship and subsidy. They each were able to think about how the presentation applied to their particular agency's situation, including whether the negatives about subsidy that were discussed applied in their situation. One agency's leader brought what was learned in the presentation back to her organization's leadership team, and now has a task group working on subsidy issues.

* One commissioner has taken on disproportionality as a system-wide priority, and benefitted from hearing at an UCWL Group meeting about the perspectives of both Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs staff on this subject. Previously the staff of this leader's agency had not looked seriously at this issue as it affects child welfare. Now disproportionality is a topic of regular consideration at the state level, and a report is generated each month about this problem in various geographical areas of the state. This would not have been possible without input from the Group meetings on this important topic.

* A \$4 million Federal grant awarded to one state was the direct result of what a leader learned from networking with peers in another state. This peer networking took place outside the Group meeting process, but was made possible by relationships first developed in the Group.

* After the recent Las Vegas meeting, a leader came back home and reviewed all of the agency's procedures about how to handle the media after an infant dies in custody. This is a highly emotional experience for any agency's staff, and only made worse if media are not responded to properly. Strategies learned from other agency leaders sitting around the Group's meeting table were mentioned several times as inspirational not only for specific changes, but also for the emotional encouragement they provided ("it is possible to get through this").

* At a Group meeting, valuable brainstorming was done about what is the most effective way to achieve permanency in larger county systems. This included listening to what others are doing, as well as reviewing national and regional data that have been gathered recently about permanency.

One agency's practices were impacted by what has been happening on this topic of permanency in Denver and New York City - e.g., how these two jurisdictions are enhancing contact visits, and how they are increasing the level of documentation about services provided. These are best practices that can be more widely shared than was done at the Group meeting, in the view of those interviewed.

* New York City has regular "stat meetings," where the Commissioner meets with managers around data issues pertinent to agency operations. At these meetings, data on hand are used to shape actual changes in practice, particularly because this allows talking with managers about specific cases. There is increased quality control for cases because managers are required to report out on them, and they can look as a group at consistency of practice. Another agency learned about this program at a Group meeting, and now has implemented a similar effort, which they call the "human service agency statistics" meeting. As with the New York City program, specific cases are brought to these meetings so they can be looked at in light of actual data. The adopting agency director noted that it might have been ideal to actually observe one of the data meetings in the New York environment, but that the report on them at the Group meeting was quite vivid, so it sufficed to inspire adoption.

* A leader listened closely to the work New York City has been doing with youth who are absent from their placements (either run-aways or youth living in an unapproved setting), because in her own community there were 60 runaway youth at that time. The discussion at the Group meeting gave her the inspiration to do something different - her agency subsequently dedicated staff to work with runaway youth, and posted these staff at police stations, so they could immediately search for and find them. As a result, her agency has reduced by 50% the youth in her jurisdiction who are on runaway status.

* A discussion at a Group meeting focused on how to better engage birth parents in the service process. Subsequently one of the leaders contacted another Group member and asked him to send his staff to her jurisdiction so they could learn more about the parent orientation and engagement program he had described at the meeting. This helped jump start the program in a new setting, and it now has been successfully implemented.

* At a Group meeting, the Philadelphia Independent Living Program was described, and a leader brought back information about this program to his jurisdiction. The decision now has been made to implement this program in the leader's agency.

* A leader reported that he was "hammered on by the Group" (in a collegial way!) to expand services for youth through the age of 21 (services had only been provided until age 18 in his jurisdiction). Based on the friendly arguments presented by his colleagues in the Group meeting, the leader and his colleagues decided to implement such a service expansion in their agency.

* At one of the Group meetings, a presentation was given about a multipurpose visitation center, a "one-stop shop" that addresses every need a parent might have. After hearing about this center, one of the leaders took materials on it back to her staff, so that they could address some issues related to staffing a similar visitation center that was to be opened in her jurisdiction.

* A leader learned at a Group meeting about operational matters related to a family engagement decision-making model program recently implemented in her jurisdiction. After the meeting, her staff talked to staff in another Group member's jurisdiction who have run a similar program for a long time, and made some important adjustments based on this input. As a result, the interviewee asserted, the newer program has been more successful.

* Documents sent to a member after a Group meeting helped her agency's staff to articulate a better argument for how to use the agency's funding. They were able to create PowerPoint slides for a budgeting presentation to decision-makers that summarized Federal funding for child welfare, showing why the jurisdiction should put more of its general fund dollars into prevention (90% of Federal dollars go to residential services, so not much is left for supporting prevention activities).

* Several agency leaders reported that the Group helped them make contact with their counterparts (also Group members) in another jurisdiction, in order to obtain useful information about a particular child or relative who had migrated from one jurisdiction to another.

These 17 examples show actual programmatic and policy change that resulted directly from what was learned either at a Group meeting, or from some type of interaction with a Group member or their staff (telephone calls, e-mail exchanges, provision of written materials, site visits, etc.). Programmatic change includes both implementation of a new program and re-shaping of one already in existence.

However, it should be noted that these evaluation data are based only on self-reports from Group members, since the programs and services discussed here have seldom had any type of independent third-party evaluation. Only a couple of the examples include actual data about impact on services (e.g., a 50% reduction in the number of runaway youth), and no data were even mentioned that took that evidence to the next level - improvement in quality of life or mental/physical well-being for youth being served by these agencies. Since the latter kind of data-gathering is infrequent in child welfare evaluations of all sorts, it is hardly surprising here.

Successes of Meeting Planning Interviewees were consistent in praising the meeting planning process. As mentioned, planning of all Group meetings is done by the Group members, with support from Casey staff. Said one interviewee: “I do like how the Group goes about planning the meeting agenda - everyone has an opportunity to suggest topics.”

Planning centers on a telephone conference call with all available members to talk about the meeting agenda, including outside presenters to be invited, special topics to be covered, etc. Casey staff then organize the meetings based on a template developed during the planning call.

Usually about ten Group members participate in the planning calls, which happen a month or so before the meeting. Several interviewees emphasized that the fast-changing nature of their work makes it inappropriate to plan a meeting agenda three or four months in advance (though they usually do talk at least a little about the structure and content of the next meeting at the end of each gathering of the Group). There is a need to focus the meetings on “what’s hot now” in order to be really relevant.

Notes from the planning meetings are later shared with the entire Group. One member noted that if she can’t participate in the planning calls, it is still possible to provide input by e-mail. Another interviewee suggested that it would be helpful to encourage more participation in these planning calls, since participating in the planning helps to keep members engaged in the Group.

Overall Impact of the Meetings The majority of members interviewed emphasized the importance of the UCWL Group’s meetings in their professional lives, and in providing useful guidance for their agencies. Said one: “If I had only one out of state meeting I could go to a year, I would go to this one.” Another remarked that she had paid for her own air fare to come to a recent meeting - also evidence of the high value members place on the Group. And they offered a number of specific reasons why this is so.

“Part of the power of the Group is that we’ve known each other for years, so we can be trusting and open and honest,” according to one interviewee. Several Group members stressed that there simply is no other place they can share problems and get input from people who live in the same kinds of trenches they do. Directors of other agencies in their jurisdictions don’t understand the unique pressures faced by child welfare agencies, and it is inappropriate to bring up certain problems with one’s own staff.

Another interviewee put it this way: “you can read the concept papers and journals - but there’s nothing like hearing from your peers.” The Group meetings offer a unique place to “hear how your peers are dealing with issues in their jurisdictions, and talk on a peer to peer level.” They can share experiences and perspectives with others who are having some of the same issues and struggles.

The peer-to-peer contact isn’t just about technical, professional, budgetary or political challenges. Several interviewees emphasized that “this is a very lonely job,” and only one’s peers understand the personal stresses that go along with it. As a result, “some of it is just plain old therapy,” as one

interviewee put it - a chance to talk about the intense personal pressures associated with leading an organization that focuses on children who are abused and sometimes die. "You can let your guard down," as one leader expressed it.

The latter was a particular focus in the February 2009 Las Vegas Group meeting. Several of the jurisdictions whose leaders were present had recently experienced a series of tragic child deaths. These members were grateful to have a chance to talk about what their agencies and staffs were going through, and especially to hear that other leaders were feeling some of the same emotional reactions personally.

Members also could discuss the practical issues of how to handle the resulting lowered staff morale and high stress levels, with the politics of dealing with their governance bodies on such a high-visibility issue, and with the local media that often were "battering the agency." As one interviewee put it, "I really appreciate the frankness of the dialogue - everybody is very transparent about what's working and what the challenges are."

At a more technical level, the Group meetings offer both peer-to-peer exchanges and presentations from leading national experts about best practices and lessons learned from what didn't work well. Members cited the UCWL Group as critical to their efforts to "push forward with new practices," as one interviewee put it.

The peer-to-peer consultation and information-sharing at each meeting has been particularly helpful in measuring the pulse on the national scene of child welfare, and how that relates to particular jurisdictions. This helps to shape the practical and policy functioning of each agency, as well as spurring professional development for the leaders individually.

It is clear that the organizations ultimately benefit, not just the individual leaders - particularly from the Group's contribution to implementing best practices in public child welfare coming out of research, national professional development, and the experiences of each of the agencies at the table. This includes best practices coming from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs. For example, one member emphasized that access to Family to Family tools on disproportionality would not have been possible without these meetings.

Several interviewees were pleased that the meetings allow them to keep in touch more generally with both Caseys. This was valuable not so much for access to funding (though of course that is an important factor for some of the jurisdictions represented), but for the chance to hear about what these two leading funders are thinking about, and what kinds of new initiatives they're supporting.

Those interviewed liked the balance between structured time for presentations and unstructured time for dialogue and networking. The general discussion at the meetings was "my favorite part," said one interviewee. "If you have something on your mind you have an opportunity to hear what other directors think about it - I was a groundhog in my own county so this was really useful."

At the same time, the invited presentations were mentioned by a number of interviewees as an important part of the meetings' structure for success. This gives an opportunity to learn about a variety of programmatic, policy and procedural issues. The learning materials (PowerPoints, articles, etc.) provided allow learning to continue back home, both for the leaders and their staff.

Interviewees felt that the structure of the meetings overall was about right. One recalled a meeting in which there was only open discussion, and that, he felt, was less productive than the typical format that balances unstructured discussion and presentations on specific topics.

Several Group members reported that they now keep in touch with other members by phone or e-mail in between the meetings. They come home with ideas and materials that help them to think in new ways about systems change efforts in child welfare, and then make contact with other members to learn more about the ideas that had been presented at the meetings.

Generally the directors and commissioners interviewed liked the expansion in membership of the Group that has taken place over time. In particular, most of them are pleased that they can now include their second-in-commands. Leaders' views were a little more mixed about the presence of outside experts at the meetings. Several of those interviewed said they liked the technical expertise provided by these outsiders, but also felt that having non-leaders present changed the nature of the conversation, making that portion of the meeting less open (the solution, as noted, has been to include outsider experts only in one portion of the meeting).

Suggestions for Improvement Interviewees had very few directly negative observations to make about either the process or impact of the UCWL Group. But they did have a number of suggestions for improvement in the way the Group operates:

1 - Location Several Group members asked that the meeting organizers be cautious in selecting meeting sites that are in any way controversial. These members said they were not able to attend the Las Vegas meeting this year because to do so would have had political ramifications for them. One noted that he has to file a report with the state legislature any time he leaves the state on business, and that a Las Vegas destination would have attracted unwelcome attention. These interviewees recognized that Las Vegas was selected for cost and centrality reasons, but said that unfortunately the "appearance" issue was the defining one for them.

2 - Timing Several interviewees also noted that when Group meetings fall in the calendar year at the state or city/county levels also influences whether or not they can attend a particular meeting. Having available a regularly-updated matrix of budget and legislative cycles for all active members would enable greater attention to these timing issues, although members were realistic that no meeting date will ever be workable for all.

3 - Group membership There were some concerns about "who is an urban child welfare leader" as the Group now defines it. As noted previously, the Group has expanded somewhat beyond the original objectives, to include several state agencies of states with large urban areas, and several smaller jurisdictions deeply involved in systems change. The very largest jurisdictions do have challenges that are not shared by smaller ones, but there is a judgement call here about what constitutes "large," as well as about how including some other agency leaders can enrich the platform for discussion, especially about systems change work.

Several interviewees suggested that this be talked about at a future Group meeting, and that a brief written summary of membership criteria be developed so that it can guide future decision-making. The general opinion expressed by participants in the August 2009 Group meeting was that membership criteria should remain fairly flexible, so that the Group could have some discretion in who is invited into membership.

There also was some questioning about whether the Group should get any larger than its current 20-member size. And a couple of those interviewed also wondered about whether in some cases the #2 persons invited end up deferring to their bosses, thus limiting their participation (this might be addressed by a stated Group decision to encourage more openly the active participation of second-in-command staff). As mentioned, however, generally the agency directors/commissioners in the Group are pleased that their deputies can come to the table.

4 - Alternate meeting formats Since the costs of meeting attendance (both time and money) have become more and more a constraint during the current recessionary times, several of those interviewed suggested possible alternatives to the two-day in-person meeting format that has been used for the Group's interactions so far:

a. telephone conference calls - these are the easiest and lowest-cost low-tech solution to getting the Group together, though they are more difficult to run successfully when there are as many as 20 participants, and it would be impractical to have a day-and-a-half of meeting time on a call. Shorter (two to three hour) conference calls might be feasible as "updates" between in-person Group meetings.

b. videoconferences - these could be particularly useful for meetings that include several guest presentations, whose input also could be provided through a videoconference linkup. However, the mechanical challenges of linking up a large number of sites for a videoconference may prove challenging, and the costs are not incidental (though probably less than doing an in-person meeting).

c. webinars - these could be useful to address a single topic of particular interest, again as a supplement to in-person meetings rather than as a replacement (with or without a participating expert). Webinars recently offered by the Children's Bureau of the Administration on Children and Family, addressing topics such as "Applying Evidence-Based Practices in Communities of Color," might be reviewed for input on family and contact (though a few interviewees said they were not especially impressed by these webinars).

The general opinion was that 2-4 meetings a year are needed for good Group cohesion. These alternate meeting formats might replace one in-person meeting, but still keep the total number of annual Group contacts in the desired range.

It should be noted that when these alternative approaches were reviewed by the Group at its August 2009 meeting, the majority felt that they would simply not be as productive as an in-person meeting. However, it also was recognized that the current recessionary times can place real barriers to participation for some members. One other suggestion was to have an open telephone conference line at each in-person meeting, so that some who could not travel to the meeting might still participate.

5 - Future meeting topics Several interviewees wanted to have particular topics addressed in future Group meetings:

a. the future of the UCWL Group - an open discussion was recommended about how the Group will continue under support from the two Caseys (and how the Group relates to their organizational priorities, a topic that not all interviewed were clear about - more on this in "c" below), along with exploration about how it will be structured given current circumstances (e.g., considering a new format of one in-person meeting a year with telephone conference calls and/or webinars for updates and to keep the Group together as a peer network, plus fine-tuning the meeting format) .

b. how to leverage funding - a presentation from an outside expert on this important topic would be helpful, combined with an opportunity to hear about best practices from among the members.

c. activities and priorities of the two Caseys - it was noted that the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs staff (appropriately) now use the meetings as a forum for briefly describing their own efforts. However, several interviewees said they would like to see more "air time" devoted at meetings to hearing about what both funders are doing - including how both relate to

national policy issues, to infrastructure development in communities for child welfare, and their respective national initiatives.

Since both are major players in the world of child welfare, such updates would be helpful to the Group's members, particularly for those whose agencies are collaborating with the two Caseys in other ways. The Family to Family program is the most obvious such connection, but not the only one. It was suggested that brief updates from the two Caseys could simply be added to the meeting agenda each time, with the possibility of more extended presentations when that was appropriate.

d. leadership turnover in child welfare agencies - the Group is in an unusual position to discuss and make recommendations about how to prepare the next generation of leaders of public child welfare, especially since its membership includes both new and long-tenured leaders. This could be tied into the development of a best practices "toolkit" (suggestion #8) and new members orientation (suggestion #10). When the initial focus would be on leadership development for the large agencies that make up the Group, these deliberations could well be expanded to a national level. For instance, the Group could prepare (perhaps with consultative support funded by the two Caseys) a white paper on leadership development, and then convene a joint meeting with the CWLA Commissioners Roundtable and the NAPCWA Executive Committee to discuss the implications of this piece.

e. measures of success for child welfare - the field is developing empirical measures of success (as part of the national movement towards Evidence-Based Practices in the health and human services field), interviewees said, but much more discussion is needed about them, and how they might best be used by the jurisdictions represented in the Group. It is difficult to compare outcomes now because they are expressed in different ways. For instance, jurisdictions count foster care differently; thus it is difficult to know what a low number for maltreatment means.

6 - Co-convenings A number of interviewees thought that it would be valuable to hold selected future UCWL Group meetings in conjunction with the peer networking activities of CWLA or NAPCWA already mentioned, e.g., the day before or the day after these other meetings. This would provide an opportunity for expanded dialogue, and also might be more time-efficient for UCWL Group members who also participate in the gatherings of these other organizations.

A co-convening with Federal policymakers or other foundations that fund child welfare services, research and professional development might also be of considerable value. This might be done, for example, through convening an UCWL Group meeting in Washington, DC. One interviewee suggested that a meeting also could be co-convened with a particular state legislature, to provide an opportunity for dialogue with state level policymakers. It was noted that there are great differences between states, but also some common themes and challenges could be addressed through such a collaboration.

7 - Meeting reports Several interviewees mentioned the desirability of getting a written summary soon after the meetings occur, to highlight what happened in a concise format. While meeting notes have been prepared for most of the prior meetings, they are most used internally by Casey staff. Making past meeting summaries available in an online format (e.g., on the AECF or CFP websites) also would be useful, in case new members want to get access to them.

8 - Toolkit of best practices One interviewee suggested that it would be valuable to have a "toolkit," a collection of resources leaders and their staffs could use, developed for some of the critical topics that have been covered in these meetings. Such a toolkit publication could also be shared with other leaders of child welfare agencies across the country.

9 - Open discussion In creating a balance of activities during future UCWL Group meetings, several interviewees felt that even more time should be allowed for open discussion, since they felt these were the most valuable parts of the meetings. It is not clear whether this is a majority view, so this suggestion needs further review by the Group.

10 - New members orientation It was suggested by several interviewees that a brief orientation program be developed for new members of the Group. This would help them understand the way in which these meetings are run. For instance, it was observed that when some new directors come in they are sharing only their successes, and are not talking candidly also about problems and ways in which they are resolved. The orientation also could offer a brief history of the Group, and an overview of how meetings are planned and structured. A summary of findings from this evaluation also could be provided.

Most of the orientation information could be presented handily in an “orientation package” PDF. This package could then be supplemented by a telephone call from a Group member who would volunteer for this responsibility.

This orientation also could be shaped so that it would be helpful more generally for new Group members who are also new to their leadership positions in child welfare agencies, as is often the case. However, the main purpose should be orientation to the Group - other entities, such as the Child Welfare League of America, also provide orientation programs for their new members. The CWLA new member orientation is currently being re-worked, and in its new edition will offer both in-person and on-line (webinar) learning opportunities.

The Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators, whose members are the chief executive officers of juvenile justice agencies, has since 1999 provided an annual peer-led training for new directors, funded by the National Institute of Corrections. The two-day seminar is led by veteran directors and includes interactive sessions on topics such as leadership, crisis management, budget and operations, and current issues and trends in juvenile justice. So far 73 directors have successfully completed the training program, and it could provide a valuable model for an expanded UCWL Group orientation program.

11 - Follow-up Some interviewees suggested that a more systematic procedure be developed for facilitating follow-up on a topic emphasized or a working arrangement agreed to at a meeting. For instance, members often will volunteer to send information to all other members about a topic that has been discussed at the meeting. A memo summarizing all these commitments could be sent out by Casey staff within a week of each meeting, so that everyone is reminded about what they’ve agreed to do.

12 - Travel funding A couple of interviewees mentioned that they have support (e.g., from Casey Family Programs) for their travel to these meetings, and that only the availability of this outside funding makes it possible for them to attend. Others asked whether either or both of the two Caseys might provide travel support at a higher level than has been the case up until now, at least until the economic crisis lessens.

13 - More small group work While the full-group meetings are very productive, several interviewees also suggested that there be provision for small-group breakouts. These could be used to have a more intimate discussion about serious challenges faced by a particular sub-group of UCWL Group members. Small groups might also be done by geographical clusters, to provide an opportunity for discussion of regional issues and of potential information-sharing or collaboration.

14 - Electronic planning meeting input A couple of interviewees lamented that the planning telephone meetings are difficult for them to participate in because of other commitments. If a more regular means for providing input via the Internet were made available, that would encourage broader participation in the planning process.

15 - Public policy advocacy To date, interviewees say that the Group's action on public policy issues has been limited. Several suggested that options be expanded for how the UCWL Group's membership could develop a collective "voice" on public policy, e.g., issuing a statement on a policy issue in child welfare signed by all the members. On the other hand, one interviewee reported gratitude that the Group had not become "a lobbying organization," since he felt this would divert energy from the Group's other purposes. This interviewee suggested that the UCWL Group's input on policy issues could instead be shared with other more politically-active groups, to inform actions they might wish to take.

The Larger Context

This small study has identified a number of successes of the Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group peer network, some challenges that impede its impact on the participants and their systems, and a number of suggestions for future improvement. These all can be explored further in future meetings of the Group. Two larger platforms can help to provide context for these discussions.

The first is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Portfolio *Foundation Investment Summary*, which provides a comprehensive review of the Portfolio as well as a vision for its future evolution. The Foundation emphasizes systemic reform in eight areas, such as addressing racial disproportionalities and disparities, and increasing permanency for children in foster care. Its major investment through this Portfolio is in the Family to Family Initiative.

The 2009 Budget Year *Foundation Investment Summary* indicates that the Foundation is now transitioning to a more integrated approach. This will include more comprehensive measures of system performance, enhancements to the four core strategies (building community partnerships; team decision making; resource family recruitment, development and support; and self-evaluation), and re-targeting of some services to enable increased coordination within the system.

The analysis provided here makes it clear that the UCWL Group has examined the core components of the Child Welfare Portfolio, discussions and presentations from which Annie E. Casey staff doubtless has benefitted. A question arises: would some more targeted discussion of the Portfolio and the Foundation's future approaches be of value? Interviewees did not mention the Portfolio by name, though they did ask specifically for upcoming Group meetings to focus both on the future of the UCWL Group and the activities and priorities of the two Caseys (Suggestions 5a, 5c).

The last request points up the need to explore any similar planning document from Casey Family Programs, now that it co-coordinates and sponsors the Group. Also, because the Annie E. Casey Foundation is currently making major changes to its funding priorities and programs (e.g., more emphasis on implementing Evidence-Based Practices), it would be helpful for the Group to receive some orientation to these new directions.

The second platform is the Backer (2008) study of 19 peer networking activities. That study identified ten challenges and ten good practices of peer networking, based on input provided about a wide range of Casey-coordinated peer networks, plus some in which Casey is a member with other funders.

Implications for each challenge and good practices specific to the UCWL Group follow . These could be explored further by the Group.

Challenges of Peer Networking Some observations follow about each of the ten challenges of peer networking identified in the 2008 study:

- *Peer networking is costly in both time and money*

No cost data are available about the actual operating expenses of the UCWL Group, but it is clear that over the years there have been substantial personnel-related costs both for the two Caseys and the child welfare agencies participating - with travel time, participants are away for two to three working days each. There are also some costs for transportation, meals and other meeting expenses, costs for bringing in guest presenters, etc. And there are time costs associated with planning the meetings, including time spent on planning telephone conference calls. It would be helpful to construct a rough cost analysis in order to frame the benefits of the UCWL Group against its costs to both sponsors and participants.

- *Participants in peer networking may find it difficult to take action on good ideas they've developed*

UCWL Group members agreed with the finding from the larger study that it is often difficult to translate good practices or policies they hear about at Group meetings back into their own complex environments. Sometimes this is purely a matter of having personnel and financial resources needed for implementation, but there also can be difficulties associated with engineering change, e.g., in the larger bureaucratic structure within which their agency sites, or with policymaking bodies at the local or state levels. Group members noted that sometimes what they learn about the success of an innovation at the meeting can be used to persuade decision-makers "back home." Thus having clear, well-packaged evidence of impact for what is presented at the meetings is helpful.

- *The goals of peer networking may be difficult to identify and to share with others*

Using the February 2009 meeting in Las Vegas as an example, Group members indicated that it is unfortunately easy for outside observers to discount the value of this peer network, seeing only the expenses involved or a seemingly-inappropriate site. A 1-2 page summary statement about the impact and outcomes of the UCWL Group, perhaps based in part on findings from this evaluation, could be made available to all members, which they in turn could share with local stakeholders.

- *Peer networking may be difficult to integrate with other activities of its sponsor*

The UCWL Group does not appear by name in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Child Welfare Foundation Investment Summary discussed above. While those interviewed from both the Foundation and Casey Family Programs reported satisfaction with what they are learning from the Group's meeting, and with the value it appears to have for child welfare agency leaders, there may be additional opportunities for integration, as outlined above. It is not known whether there is a similar planning document for Casey Family Programs, to which the UCWL Group's activities could be tied.

- *It may be challenging to balance equality with expertise in selecting peer networking participants*

This finding from other peer networks does not seem to relate to the UCWL Group, since its members are determined by leadership status in the largest child welfare agencies in the U.S.

- *Organizational complexity and culture of a peer networking sponsor may limit chances for success*

There are two ways in which this finding may apply to the UCWL Group: (a) opportunities to learn more about other peer networking activities of Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs could help to shape new thinking about the Group, e.g., by looking at peer networks that are composed of organizational leaders, such as the National Partners Network and Lead Program

Executives (it is not known whether there are similar peer networking activities sponsored by Casey Family Programs); and (b) opportunities to examine what impact, if any, the recent co-coordinating of the Group by the “two Caseys” has had on the peer network’s operation - interviewees did not mention this change at all, except to express interest in learning more about the priorities and activities of the two funders as a part of future Group meetings (suggestion 5c).

- *It may be challenging to develop a good exit strategy for a peer networking activity*

No one interviewed for this study indicated that any discussion has occurred about ending the UCWL Group, which has been in existence since 1997. However, suggestion 5a did encourage having a Group meeting focus on the future of the peer network, at which point the question could be raised about whether the Group is intended to continue indefinitely, or may at some point conclude, as did the Child Welfare Training Directors Group.

- *Replicating peer networking activities may be difficult*

This finding does not appear to be relevant to the UCWL Group, as no one interviewed raised the possibility that the Group’s activities might be replicated.

- *Participant turnover may limit the success of peer networking*

As noted earlier in this report, turnover amongst top officials of child welfare agencies in this country is the norm, not the exception. Despite that, some of the UCWL Group’s members have been in their posts for many years, and have participated in the Group throughout that time. It was noted that this helps to provide some real continuity for the Group. Moreover, several members have transitioned from one type of role with the Group to another, e.g., from being an agency director to an executive with one of the two sponsors. This also provides continuity.

- *Individual and group psychological factors may limit the success of peer networking*

No one interviewed for this study raised issues about the negative impact of Group or individual dynamics; to the contrary, as discussed below, there was strong affirmation of the trustful atmosphere of the Group and how much that helped the meetings to be successful.

Good Practices of Peer Networking Observations about good practices of peer networking identified in the 2008 study include:

- *Provide a safe, trustful place for participants to interact on topics important to them*

This has already been discussed at length - Group members in particular reported that the high-trust environment of the meetings (especially when outsiders had concluded their participation and departed) gave them a safe, trustful place to discuss difficult issues such as how to deal with the death of a child in their agency’s care, and the resulting media frenzy.

- *Encourage personal as well as professional interactions among participants*

Group members reported that they keep in touch with each other between meetings, offering information and collegial support. However, there is no infrastructure to support such contacts - the possible value of some simple system for connecting between meetings might be discussed by the UCWL Group at a future meeting.

- *Customize the peer networking structure to meet specific participant needs*

UCWL Group members were firm in their support for the two-part structure of the meetings - one part for open discussion among just agency leaders with no “outsiders” present; and one part professional presentations, with outside experts invited to share research and policy information.

- *Promote opportunities for the participants and their organizations to collaborate*

No formal opportunities for collaboration were identified in the evaluation study, and this would seem a fruitful topic for conversation about the future of the Group. How could a simple Group meeting structure be set up so that it would provide a platform for discussion of collaborations, both among the agency leaders and their staff teams? This also could include opportunities for collaboration with other institutions, such as the CWLA Roundtable and the NAPCWA Executive Committee, as well as with the Pew Commission or other bodies looking at child welfare systems in the U.S.

- *Encourage participant feedback about the strengths and challenges of peer networking*

This evaluation study provides a first opportunity for UCWL Group members to share with each other, and with staff of the two Caseys, their perceptions about the successes and challenges of the Group. One suggestion might be for each meeting to include an identified time for feedback, with a reporting process so that criticisms offered or suggestions made can be acted upon in the follow-up to the meeting by staff of the two Caseys, who are at present the vehicles for continuity.

- *Build the activity's initial success before broadening its range of participants*

There have been several efforts to broaden the range of participants in the UCWL Group, e.g., to include agency second-in-commands. (This effort appears to have been largely embraced by the Group as a whole, although a few wonder about whether some “self-editing” happens because their subordinates happen to be in the room), One meeting also included agency public information officers (this apparently was done as a one-time thing because of the meeting focus on the media). As the Group leadership looks more carefully at the future activities of this peer network (suggestion 5a), this topic of membership expansion could be addressed again.

- *Offer resources for participants to translate ideas into action*

The Children and Family Fellows Alumni Network has had considerable success in providing small grant support for projects its members want to take on through a peer-led application and review process. While the UCWL Group provides support for the meetings themselves, it has not yet developed any kind of grantmaking process of this type for members. Perhaps the exploration of future directions for the Group of suggestion 5a could address this possibility.

- *Create sub-groups within the peer networking activity to focus on particular topics of interest*

The UCWL Group apparently has operated mostly as a “body of the whole,” with no break-out of subgroups. Again, this possibility could be explored as part of the dialogue suggested in 5a.

- *Shape the activity by analyzing the successes of other peer networking activities*

Comparison of the UCWL Group's activities and outcomes with those of the other 18 peer networking activities presented in Backer (2008) already has begun in this section of the evaluation study report, and could continue in future Group meetings.

- *Level the playing field by sharing basic information about the focal area of peer networking*

According to the review of UCWL Group meeting documents, and the members interviewed for this study, considerable sharing of information already occurs. Some additional “basic facts” might be assembled together to support new members who also are also new to the public child welfare system, at least at an executive level.

Reference

Backer, T.E. (2008). *Peer networking and community change: Experiences of the Annie E. Casey Foundation*. Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Acknowledgments

This study was inspired by discussions with Wanda Mial, former Senior Associate for Child Welfare and the Family to Family Initiative, Annie E. Casey Foundation; and coordinator of the Urban Child Welfare Leaders Group. Helpful guidance for all aspects of the evaluation was provided by her successor, Abel Ortiz. Lindsay Mason and Brittany Anuskiewicz of Annie Casey and Indra Trujillo of Casey Family Programs offered input to the study design and results, as well as coordinating study activities, such as the two presentations made to the Group. Thanks are given to all the UCWL Group members who participated in the evaluation study, both through telephone interviews and in an August 2009 Group session. Project coordination at HIRI was provided by Julaine Konselman, and editorial support by Terri Ruddiman

Appendix - Study Interviewees

Director Interviews

Alan Abramowicz, State Director, Family Safety Program Office, Florida Department of Children and Families
Yolanda Baldovinos, Director, Alameda County Social Services Agency
Carol Collins, Assistant Director, Alameda County Social Services Agency
Marc Cherna, Director, Allegheny County Department of Human Services
Mary Harris, Retired Director, Child Welfare Services, San Diego
Debby Jeter, Deputy Director, San Francisco Human Services Agency
Anne Kisor, Interim Director, Richmond City Department of Social Services
John Mattingly, Commissioner, New York Administration for Children's Services
Thomas Morton, Director, Clark County Department of Family Services
Christine Mozes, Director, New Jersey Department of Children and Families
Patricia Ploehn, Director, Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services
Toni Rozanski, Director, Child Protection & Safety, Denver Department of Human Services
Dean Sparks, Executive Director, Lucas County Children Services
Tena Thompson, Regional Director, Missouri Children's Division
Mark Washington, Assistant Commissioner, Department of Human Resources, Georgia Division of Family and Children's Services

Background Interviews

Brittany Anuszkiewicz, Annie E. Casey Foundation
Zeinab Chahine, Casey Family Programs
Lindsay Mason, Annie E. Casey Foundation
Abel Ortiz, Annie E. Casey Foundation
David Sanders, Casey Family Programs
Indra Trujillo, Casey Family Programs