

**Changing the Rules?**

**County Collaboratives' Roles**  
**in**  
**Improving Outcomes for Children and Families**

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## **Introduction:**

In more than forty California counties, there is a county-wide body which addresses children and youth issues with members from both the public and private/non-profit sectors. In virtually all counties, there are county-wide bodies which address cross-cutting issues such as child abuse, early childhood, or children's health. Over the past two years, a series of assessments of the capacity of these collaboratives has built up an information base deeper than has ever been available before. This report summarizes the results of a survey of all these entities as well as a series of site visits and phone interviews conducted by members of the Foundation Consortium staff and the Center for Collaboration for Children at Cal State Fullerton.

## **Summary:**

**County collaboratives continue to broaden their capacity to work within county government on issues of children, youth, and families; the strongest of them are affecting county policy by building more community-level collaboration across agencies and moving toward increasing accountability for better outcomes. While public and private funders have provided support to these cross-cutting collaboratives, at the same time they have created new "categorical collaboratives" that have further fragmented their work. Collaboratives generally express the desire for more contact with each other, and some have requested ongoing training and technical assistance on priority topics.**

## **Methods of the Study:**

The county-level collaboratives in California differ as widely as the counties themselves do, ranging from bodies that have been existence for more than a dozen years with significant staffs of their own to much smaller and informal groups which are more recent in origin and have no full-time staff. Some of them were formed to address single subjects such as early childhood, violence, adolescent health issues, or child abuse; others encompass the full range of county-level issues affecting children, youth, families, and communities, including education.

Given this diversity, it is necessary to make some initial distinctions among the different kinds of collaboratives. The survey results (the survey is available on request) are totaled across all 29 responding counties, and have also been reviewed based on the categories of collaboratives which were developed for this study. In

addition, interviews were conducted by Foundation Consortium staff with five of the collaboratives' senior staff members, and annual and special reports from several others were reviewed. The frequencies reported in this document are for the 29 counties responding to the survey; in several cases, data from 31 counties is reported based on the interviews conducted with five counties, three of which responded to the survey as well.

This study also benefitted from prior work, including a survey targeted on county social services directors conducted by Philliber Associates. The study draws upon work undertaken by Sid Gardner, its author, with county collaboratives in California dating from 1988 and on a report on the collaboratives then existing which was co-authored with Hedy Chang of California Tomorrow and colleagues from the Child and Youth Policy Center in 1991.<sup>1</sup>

**Three levels of county collaboratives exist: the older, best-established ones, those that are newer, and program-oriented ones.**

We can distinguish among three broad levels of collaboratives in California counties, although it is hazardous to generalize across 58 governmental entities that vary from the size of nation-states to counties with a few thousand residents. But there do appear to be some patterns that are visible after more than a decade of experience among some of these entities. First, there are the oldest and best-established collaboratives which have either had staff or leadership with substantial tenure or outside “champions” who have been a source of sustained expertise and advocacy for these bodies. These include San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Los Angeles, Stanislaus, Humboldt, Alameda, Kern, Contra Costa, Placer, El Dorado, Fresno, and San Mateo.

There is a second tier of collaboratives which have made significant progress, even though not as broadly based or lengthy in tenure. Some of these, such as San Diego, have recently reorganized. Finally, there is a third tier of collaboratives which are more programmatic in nature, focusing upon a single program area such as health, child abuse, early childhood, or family preservation. The full listing of these collaboratives and the categories they have been placed in is in Appendix 1.

The responses to these surveys and the interviews were prepared by the staff of the county-wide collaboratives that dealt with children and family issues. They tend to be more optimistic about their own efforts, but they are also the county and non-profit agency staff who are closest to the work of the collaboratives and thus have the greatest familiarity with their agendas and accomplishments.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Chang, et al., (1991). Fighting Fragmentation: Collaborative Efforts to Serve Children and Families in California's Counties, California Tomorrow and the Children and Youth Policy Project.

## The Political Context

Many, but not all of these collaboratives include elected officials in their membership. Some were originally formed by judges, who have unique convening powers in county government. Several are chaired by members of the Board of Supervisors. This political base has brought both stability and a pace that is much more evolutionary than entrepreneurial. Since counties are the critical level of service delivery in health and human services in California, their role in children and family services is extensive.

At the same time, county political life in California takes place in an arena that mirrors both the state's diversity and the issues that the state as a whole is still struggling to handle. Prominent among these are the structural imbalances and tensions built into state-local fiscal relations, the challenge of responding to growing numbers of lower-income families from other nations, and the lag in governmental inclusiveness that does not fully reflect the changing demography of the state. County politics is based upon who *votes* in local elections, which is a very different demography than who *lives* in California's communities. As an example, the Latino vote in the March 2000 primary was 7%, though 30% of the state's population is Latino. The older population of the state votes in significantly greater proportions than its numbers in the total voting-age population; the younger voting-age population votes disproportionately less.

Since children are the major target group of these new collaborative bodies, issues arise from the even greater mismatch between the makeup of the voting population and the makeup of California's children, who are far more diverse. So it is important to know who we are talking about—and how much the intended beneficiaries of the collaboratives' efforts differ from the elected leaders, governmental staffs, and community leaders who make up the collaboratives' membership.

For many of these counties, agriculture, law and order, transportation, and a regional economy that has not caught up to the rest of the state—especially in the Central Valley—are all issues that supersede children and family issues. As a result, some observers in these counties point out that having a forum for the first time where children and family issues are discussed in a sustained process represents real progress in getting visibility for these issues.

**In some counties, having a forum that addresses children's issues for the first time is real progress.**

## Context: Supportive and Undermining Factors

The context of collaboration at the county level also involves a set of forces that tend to be supportive of the role of the collaboratives and a second set of forces that tend to undermine their role. The most important of these appear to be

### *Supportive Factors*

1. Legislation that uses collaboratives as conduits for funding.
2. Increased funding from private foundations for county-level collaboratives.
3. Wider dissemination of information about the available tools of collaboration from California non-profit groups including the Foundation Consortium, national organizations such as The Finance Project, and organizations of state and local elected officials.
4. The growing tenure of some of the oldest of the county-level collaboratives and the staff who have been with these collaboratives for some time.
5. The central role of county governments in the delivery of health and human services in California.
6. Overall, there is simply more funding available as the state and federal government have emerged from recession in the early 90's (mid-90's in some counties). New categorical initiatives were typical federal and state responses to local governments' needs (in lieu of permanent realignment of funding post-Proposition 13, some would argue). So collaboratives had more programmatic substance to talk about, in contrast with eras when cutbacks or stable funding were the norm.

### *Undermining Factors*

1. The continuing creation of new funding streams that require separate, "categorical collaboratives" in areas such as violence prevention, substance abuse, and other program areas. Nearly every collaborative responding to the survey agreed with the statement that the county used other collaborative mechanisms beyond their own organization.
2. The large amounts of funding passing to county governments from state sources for "big ticket" programs such as TANF and Medi-Cal which affect county budgets far more profoundly than the grant funding which county collaboratives tend to address.
3. A perception among some of the collaboratives that the state—under both current and past administrations—has not been actively supportive of county collaboratives in its legislative or executive branch agendas. (This is undeniably a perception, based on the comments of some of the collaborative staffs; the reality of the role of the state appears more mixed,

**The work of these bodies is affected by major supportive and undermining factors.**

with important variations on the overall theme of neglect, especially the AB 1741 effort since 1993.)

1. Turnover in elected leadership.

### Summary of Impact

What is unmistakable is that relative to a decade ago there is far more capacity and interest in county-wide collaboratives as a significant element of the delivery and governance systems of counties in California. In many of the counties, it can be said that the cross-cutting collaboratives are important adjuncts to the agency-based, Board of Supervisors-dominated ways of doing business in California counties. They have evolved from “getting to know you” forums for information exchange to genuine forces for innovation in county government. They have built a cadre of 20-30 professionals who have staffed and led these bodies in several of the counties for more than a decade, acquiring a keen sense of how to move a change agenda through dense thickets of governmental obstacles to change.

In addition to the categories set forth above, a second categorization of collaboratives relies upon four stages of collaborative activity which were originally developed in the 1991 assessment of the county-level collaboratives of that era. These are

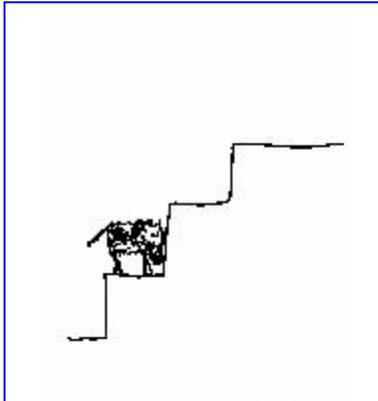
1. Information exchange
2. Joint project operations
3. Changing rules
4. Changing systems

Using this categorization, most collaboratives would end up in the first two stages of collaboration. Only a very few have moved out of the project stages to challenging the underlying rules that govern agency operations at county levels. By far the most interesting and impressive collaborative efforts, however, are those being made by these collaboratives. The rules that have been most directly challenged by the most active collaboratives are those of budgeting, the use of state and federal categorical funds, and organizational cultures that rely upon centralized service delivery by a single-focus agency.

When a collaborative undertakes rule-changing, it encounters a paradox: for the group’s full membership to be actively mobilized in changing the rules, a consensus on challenging the status quo is needed. But challenging the status quo is rarely a consensus position—at first. So the group often adopts a style of advance and then consolidate, advance and then back off, advance and then pause to deal with the concerns of reluctant members and to let them catch up. One of the reasons

**Only a few of these collaboratives have moved to the third stage of collaboration: changing the rules.**

collaboratives so often get “stuck on the second floor,” i.e., restrict themselves to doing projects at the second stage of collaboration, is that consensus is much easier to form around the idea of doing projects. As Lisbeth Schorr and others have noted, projects are sometimes how systems insulate themselves from change.<sup>2</sup>



“Face to face with the second step”<sup>3</sup>

Yet what remains impressive is that the most innovative of these bodies have brought most of their members along over time, and have defined their agenda as more than projects. The evolution of the SPAs in Los Angeles, the linkages to county-wide networks of Healthy Starts and neighborhood resource centers in Stanislaus, San Mateo, and Fresno, and the work of the six AB 1741 counties (San Diego, Fresno, Placer, Contra Costa, Alameda, and Marin)—these are larger enterprises than just doing projects. These efforts have begun to change the rules of working with communities and working across categorical programs, and they would not have been achieved without the existence and energy of the collaboratives in these counties.

### **Basic Description of Collaborative Operations and Characteristics**

#### *Staffing*

Collaboratives are increasingly supported with their own staff or staff detailed from agencies; some have staffs as large as six. The norm remains a single staff coordinator, however. Of the 29 persons responding, 12 are full-time staff with the collaborative. Twenty-three of 28 responding were staffed with their own budget. Other responses of interest: of the 29 who responded, 20 have been in their jobs less than 4 years; only 8 have been in their jobs with the collaborative 5 years or more.

#### *Membership and Leadership*

Most collaboratives are a mix of public and private members. They are chaired by members of the Board of Supervisors, county agency heads on a rotating basis, senior judges from the juvenile system, county superintendents of education, and, less often, respected leaders from the non-profit arena. As mentioned,

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<sup>2</sup>L. Schorr, (1998) Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America. New York: Anchor.

<sup>3</sup> This drawing is from a cartoon by Richard Stine which has been adapted by Ashley Gardner.

representatives of ethnic communities are included in the larger and more diverse counties.

### *Tenure of Collaboratives*

Two of the 31 responding and interviewed were formed before 1990; 23 were formed in the 1990-94 period. It is not clear whether this active formation period came in response to the state's economic downturn during that period or to the several preventive initiatives that came forth during that period, including Healthy Start, the federal Family Preservation effort, and the continued expansion of the Children's System of Care initiative in mental health. The availability of support funding from private foundations in California also appears to have had an impact on the cluster of collaborative formations during this period.

### *Links to the Board of Supervisors*

While a majority of the responding organizations were not formally created by the Board of Supervisors, this is moderated by the fact that the largest ones and some of the most effective tend to be. In Los Angeles, San Diego, Fresno, Contra Costa, and Alameda, the collaboratives are formal bodies created by the Board and/or are chaired by a Board member.

Some of the interviewed staff pointed out that there are two critical effects of Supervisorial or senior judicial leadership: (1) visibility and credibility of the Commission and (2) education of these leaders over time about the nature of cross-cutting issues outside their own areas of expertise and interest. Rotating leadership can be frustrating, but it is felt by some of those county staff affected by it to have a major benefit in achieving an important form of continuing education for elected officials.

**The largest and most effective collaboratives tend to be those created by the Board of Supervisors.**

### *Structure vs Strategy*

In many ways, the formal links to Boards of Supervisors may matter much less than other factors in determining the efficacy of a collaborative in affecting the county's agenda. For example, in San Mateo County, the Peninsula Partnership is privately and publicly supported; though not serving as a direct arm of the County government, it has actively involved county officials from its inception. It uses county-directed Family Preservation funds to support a variety of projects and works closely with school districts as well. So the formal structure of such collaboratives matters much less than the process of negotiations they have undertaken and the content of their policy agenda—which deals directly with the

issues facing county government as well as non-profit and private sector agencies and organizations.<sup>4</sup>

## Accomplishments

### *Results-based Accountability: Community-wide Outcomes and Agency Performance*

The collaboratives have addressed outcomes at both ends of the spectrum: “macro” community-wide outcomes and “micro” program outcomes. Eleven respondents to the survey said they had developed a report card of some kind, and two more of those interviewed but not responding to the survey have done report cards (this does not include non-surveyed Orange County, which has an annual report but no cross-cutting public-private collaborative, although one has recently been proposed as a broad-based successor to the prior Children’s Systems of Care collaborative and an internal county committee).

Some collaboratives distinguished between county agencies adopting results-based accountability that emphasizes the outcomes of county-funded programs and cross-cutting interagency outcomes such as reducing out-of-home care, risky behavior by youth, or improving school readiness. There is wider acceptance of “vertical outcomes”—outcomes restricted to a single agency and its programs, as opposed to shared outcomes that are at the systems level, e.g. the early childhood system or an adolescent prevention agenda. These cross-cutting outcomes, when they exist, are still stated at a fairly high level of generality. As a result, it is very difficult to identify the tradeoffs among different outcomes—such as those framed several years ago in one county’s collaborative when a sustained debate between advocates of a 0-5 strategy and those who wanted to respond to youth at risk of delinquency ended up, in the words of one of them, “for the first time understanding a lot more about the other side and where the two strategies connected.” These are still infrequent discussions—and even less frequently do such discussions lead to results-based budgeting choices.

**Progress in developing outcomes is greater at the level of program outcomes than in identifying the tradeoffs among competing outcomes.**

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<sup>4</sup>S. Gardner. *Communities and Children: The Prospects for Strategic Policy Responses from California Local Governments*, California State University, Fullerton (forthcoming).

### *Influencing County Budgets*

On county budgets, there have been some collaboratives that have been involved directly in preparing or commenting on county budgets—but most have done so only at the margins when new funding is available from state or federal sources. This assessment documented some impressive beginnings of budgetary impact, including San Diego’s discussions of outcomes-driven budgeting and the LA Children’s Planning Council’s strategic issues list in their ten-year report.

County collaboratives have moved in some cases well beyond rhetoric on results-based accountability to seriously addressing the challenges of budgeting that is driven by outcomes. Some counties [San Diego] use the language of “turning the curve” on poor outcomes, which is a formulation of Mark Friedman’s that has been adopted by a number of counties. Others are facing up to the distance between articulating outcomes in county-wide “score cards” and actually using those outcomes to move resources from one set of programs to another. San Diego’s “virtual regional budgets” are a framework for flexible, results-based accountability, while recognizing just how categorical the current funding system really is. The attempt in Los Angeles to use regional Service Planning Areas to inventory resources and set priorities can be linked back to efforts in the 1970’s to establish “neighborhood governments” and later efforts to operate state-sponsored regional planning entities in a number of states.

**A few collaboratives have moved toward results-based budgeting.**

In a few counties, comprehensive outcomes frameworks have been developed [Monterey, Kern] using the California Matrix model of measuring family well-being on a five-level scale. In Los Angeles, an extensive data collection effort over more than ten years has produced a report card, a children’s budget, and decentralized Service Planning Areas which respond to the complexity and size of the County. In San Diego, Kern, Santa Barbara, San Bernardino, and others, county “report cards” have become institutionalized, annual public documents that update trends on a set of 20-30 key indicators collected from county government and local school districts.

### *Involvement with Major Funding Streams*

Responses to the survey indicated that collaboratives are involved in several of the major programs sponsored by state and federal government. The survey asked about Healthy Start, Family Preservation, welfare reform, Proposition 10, and Healthy Families. When asked which of these statewide initiatives they were involved with, the highest responses were for Healthy Start and Healthy Families. Family Preservation (now relabeled the Preserving Safe and Stable Families Program), and child abuse were programmatic areas mentioned frequently. A

number of the collaboratives grew out of initiatives of Child Abuse Councils [Kern, Sacramento] and others are still operating as CA councils in name.

Respondents were able to add other cross-cutting programs in which they have been involved. Of these, the most frequently mentioned were Children’s Systems of Care (mental health), wrap-around services, ABC (Answers Benefitting Children), CAPIT (Child Abuse Prevention, Intervention, and Treatment), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, state SB 1756 After School Programs, Safe Futures, the AB 1741 Youth Policy Project, and OCJP’s violence prevention programs. For several of the collaboratives, the Sierra and Wellness Foundation health initiatives were mentioned as major program areas.

*Roles in Proposition 10*

On Proposition 10, more than two-thirds described themselves as agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “Our collaborative has a significant role in the planning for Proposition 10 allocations in our county.” While it is too soon to see how extensively county collaboratives are involved in Proposition 10 planning, those that appear most engaged have been able in some cases to use the Proposition 10 arena as a setting for raising results-based accountability issues. The potential drawback, however, is that Proposition 10 commissions were created as new bodies with the sweeping label of “county commissions on children and families.” These new bodies have important overlap with the county collaboratives in some counties, sharing appointed supervisors and other officials. But in others, they have inevitably been seen as “stealing the spotlight” from the prior collaboratives, due to the sizable amounts of new funding involved under Proposition 10 and the need to produce a new strategic plan against tight deadlines. The opportunity to build upon needs and community assessments already performed by some counties’ “report card” efforts has been utilized in some counties, but in others a largely separate effort has gone on under Proposition 10 commissions that has essentially ignored the existing collaborative and most of its data collection. While seven of the responding counties said that their links with Proposition 10 were among the best examples of “our county’s use of our collaborative for planning a major initiative,” concerns were expressed by others that relations between the two bodies were too new to sort out yet and might become competitive.

**Due to its size and its overlap with the collaboratives’ missions, Prop 10 funding may become the elephant in the living room.**

Proposition 10 may become the elephant in the living room for some collaboratives, since the Proposition 10 Commissions deal with a funding stream bigger than any of the programs now under the auspices of most of the collaboratives, and overlaps considerably with their responsibilities. The overlap is unavoidable, since divorcing issues of younger children from the rest of the

programs affecting children and families would be illogical and could undermine the effectiveness of both bodies in responding to families as whole entities.

### *Roles in Welfare Reform*

For the largest program area affecting children and families—welfare—most collaboratives are much less involved. One collaborative staff member described it as “a government effort, as opposed to our collaborative public-private efforts.” Fewer than half of those responding (14 of 31) said they had been actively involved in welfare reform, despite its being the largest single program enrolling children in most counties, with the exception of Medi-Cal and food stamps. Again, however, there is a sizable divide between the most active counties with the longest tenure and those that are program-oriented or more recent in origin. Only four of the thirteen collaboratives formed *after* 1992 were involved with welfare, while thirteen of the sixteen collaboratives formed in 1992 or prior years were involved. While some of the collaboratives have formed welfare reform task forces or subcommittees, for most it appears that these are bodies that receive reports on progress, rather than forums for monitoring impact on clients or determining which outcomes are appropriate.

**Fewer of the collaboratives are involved in welfare reform than in other funding streams.**

### *Operational Reforms*

At the service delivery level, multidisciplinary teams [MDTs] are a frequent tool for interagency work, but no county has yet articulated how to replicate MDTs at scale and move beyond their use as “pilot projects.” The benefits of MDTs have not yet been documented by any collaborative in a way that has built a solid case for replication and expansion of MDTs to cover a significant portion of the children and families that could benefit from the approach.

Innovative funding models include Kern’s use of CAPIT funds which leverage other state and federal funds and Fresno’s weaving together of Healthy Start, Family Preservation, and realignment funding for its neighborhood resource centers. Placer County has developed a Unified Case Plan for Mental Health, Child Welfare and Substance Abuse Services, which has enabled a single case plan concept spanning all of the County’s health and human services intake, including adult behavioral health and CalWORKs services.

### *Blending Funding*

The six counties involved with 1741 have all described their role with this unique state-local initiative as positive. A recent evaluation of AB 1741 Youth Pilot Project found that significant progress had been made, despite obstacles

encountered at both state and county levels, in this effort to provide greater flexibility in the use of state funding.

For some of these accomplishments, definitions are important. For example, on questions about “blending funds,” some collaboratives responded positively when what they had really done was to combine two funding sources in a single project. As one respondent put it, “we blend services, not funding.” Since blended funds are a means to the more important goal of better services outcomes, progress with blending funds should be reviewed carefully against its results in improved client outcomes, not just more convenient management or even more funding. The “single fund” envisioned by AB 1741 does not exist, except in Alameda County, but a number of counties both in and out of the 1741 group have worked very hard to link previously categorical funding sources, in schools and in the community as well. The progress that should be underscored is achieving a less categorical use of funds that were previously held closely by each agency, rather than the creation of a single unified fund as such.

**Even though most have not achieved “blended funding,” closer links among categorical programs have been achieved.**

In their work with school-linked or school-based services and after-school programs, a number of the collaboratives have developed formal subcommittees and task forces with the responsibility of serving as a forum and an action arena for these issues. Stanislaus, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, Alameda, and others have moved in this direction, defining Healthy Start grants and the more recent state and federal after-school funding sources as major concerns of the collaborative.

#### *Regional Networks of Collaboratives*

An innovation of special importance to rural counties has been the attempt within the past two years to link the 15 northern-most counties in the state through an annual children’s summit and out-stationed staff and consultants working under contract with the State Departments of Social Services, Alcohol and Drug Programs, and Mental Health. These counties have worked together to allocate adolescent drug treatment funds for a shared facility among several of the counties

and have explored other inter-county collaborative arrangements. They are also experimenting with satellite video cross-training sessions using the facilities of Chico State.

## Problem Areas

When asked in an open-ended question what were the most important barriers they faced, the collaboratives responding to the survey said they were affected by

- § the lack of funding,
- § a combination of staff and volunteer turnover,
- § inadequate staffing, and
- § a lack of integrated data systems.

One county respondent seemed to speak for several others with the comment that a major barrier was “the lack of agency heads who get it when we talk about building community.”

### *Use of Collaborative Tools*

Few of the collaboratives have developed a full array of the core tools of collaboration, including matrices of the major collaboratives, children’s budgets, ongoing data matching that identifies overlapping clients across multiple agencies, case reviews undertaken by members of the collaborative as a joint learning exercise, or geographic information systems (GIS) used to map and allocate resources to geographic areas of greatest needs. Most of the collaboratives have used one or more of these, but few have used all of them. Eight have developed children’s budgets and six have them in progress.

### *Tackling the Tough Issues*

Few of the collaboratives have addressed the most contentious issues in children, youth, and families, although some have dealt with controversial issues. Three notable examples of issues generally avoided are the public charge issue in enrolling children in CHIP/Healthy Families, education reform in the classroom, or tracking welfare “leavers” who remain below the poverty level although counted as successes by county and state government.

Values debates tend to be avoided in most of these organizations, in part because there appears to be a concern that the consensus will not last through such a debate and in part because the style of governance is still letting the politicians work out these “hot issues” and seeing debate of such issues in collaboratives as inappropriately confrontational behavior. As one collaborative member put it, “we did address Prop 187, but it was controversial.” Another reported a decision by the collaborative to “remain neutral” on the public charge issue that has directly affected efforts to expand enrollments for Healthy Families in many counties.

**Only a few of the collaboratives have debated the more controversial issues affecting children and families.**

### *Diversity and Inclusiveness*

Reflecting the diversity of the county itself and the clients is felt to be a problem in nearly all of the collaboratives. Representativeness has been addressed in a number of ways, including seats for community-based organizations on the collaboratives, providing active training and technical assistance to CBOs, formal representation of ethnic groups on the collaborative structure, the geographic decentralization efforts mentioned previously, and ongoing efforts to disaggregate data by ethnic and other groupings and discuss the significance of disproportionate outcomes.

Los Angeles' Children's Planning Council issued a separate report on the ethnic communities in the County in 1997. But none of the organizations surveyed were confident that they had resolved the problems of public and non-profit agency leadership and staffing which are not reflective of the general populations in their counties.

### *Decentralized Service Delivery*

A related issue, the decentralized delivery of services at the community level, has also been a concern of nearly all of the county collaboratives. One county undertook a comprehensive survey of all its decentralized county-supported operations four years ago and ended up with several pages of multiservice centers, networks, and neighborhood-based projects that the county had never before compiled in one place. This appears to be a unique product, with the notable exception of LA's use of its SPAs as regionalized information networks. San Diego's regionalized system is moving in this direction, however, and Fresno's neighborhood resource centers raise similar issues, as do Kern's community collaboratives. Alameda's Interagency Children's Policy Council has a formal structure to address issues of neighborhood policy and governance, underscoring the difference between decentralizing what the county does and building stronger community capacity to provide oversight and feedback on whether programs are effective. More of the collaboratives appear to be working on a decentralization approach than on a governance approach.

But all of these efforts, whether aimed at decentralization or community-building, encounter a common obstacle: the continuing proliferation of categorical efforts at the community level for which none of the county-wide collaboratives has yet developed a strategy for rationalizing the different structures. The challenge remains deciding how new funding can reinforce the efforts of prior initiatives. A specific example: in one county, six different networks of family resource centers—three using that designation and three others performing the same generic functions—operate side by side without any table in the county where all of them can meet, even to compare notes at the first stage of collaboration.

**Some collaboratives have been involved in decentralization efforts; fewer have addressed governance reform.**

### *The Role of Higher Education*

Generally, there has been limited use of regional higher education resources, with some alliances in San Diego, San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, LA, Monterey, and Kern. The typical role is an evaluation contract or single-subject technical assistance by a single faculty member who is usually not acting as part of a university team. Some collaboratives report frustration in getting higher education institutions to provide “what we want instead of what they teach and research.” “We’ve tried—with mixed success” was one collaborative staff director’s succinct response to the survey question about working with higher education.

### *The Problem of Proportionate Focus*

But in some ways the most problematic issue in the responses of the collaboratives is the issue of *proportionate focus*: the ratio of funding and number of children affected by a program to the amount of time spent on programs is not a direct one. In some collaboratives it appears to be inverse, i.e., much more time is spent on smaller pilot programs compared with the “big ticket” items such as welfare and health coverage. Those issues are still reserved for the most part to the agencies that handle them, and the fact that those programs are deeply embedded in county budgets seems to create further obstacles to addressing them in depth in the collaboratives.

While this focus on the smaller programs is not in itself a problem, it may signal a larger issue of reluctance to address the possibility of *redirection of current funding* and less concern with sustainability of funding than with securing new grant funding. In answer to a survey question concerning the collaborative’s focus on grants contrasted with local priorities, there was strong disagreement with the statement “priorities in our collaborative are primarily driven by external events and funding, rather than our own decisions about local needs and assets;” only four of 29 respondents agreed or were not sure. But on the question “our collaborative spends most of its time on grant funding, rather than the institutionalized funding that is already in our county,” fourteen respondents agreed or strongly agreed, while fifteen disagreed or strongly disagreed. In addition, only nine of the 31 counties responded that they had re-allocated funding based on use of outcomes and effectiveness measures—one of the lowest response

rates for all questions about collaborative capacity. This set of questions gets to the heart of the redirection question, and the lower response to questions about involvement with the larger programs affecting children suggests that this is an area on which the collaboratives differ in important ways.

**More time is spent in most collaboratives on smaller programs than on the larger ones affecting children.**

### *The Role of K-12 Education*

Education is a separate area for a host of structural and political reasons—but here, too, the focus has been upon add-on grant programs and school-linked services in most collaboratives, rather than the core of the educational function or a sustained effort to relate education reform in the classroom to the health and social services needs of the students who are least likely to succeed. For all the importance of the Healthy Start agenda in these collaboratives, far less time appears to have been devoted to link these services with the core functions of academic achievement, classroom size, and the quality and diversity of new teachers. Those functions still “belong” to education, and the children’s agenda and the core education agenda remain separate in most of these counties.

### *State and Federal Support*

While the collaboratives have sought help from state agencies, there was mixed reaction to whether the state has adequately modeled collaborative efforts in its own operations. The possibility of extending the proposed AB 1352 legislation beyond the six current 1741 Youth Pilot Project counties is an issue here, and a potential resource which in effect sunsets this year. The inclusion of three California counties in the federal Boost4Kids effort sponsored by the Vice-President’s Office is a further opening to state-federal connections on behalf of the collaboratives, but like AB 1741, is not available to the majority of the collaboratives at this point.

**Some collaborative members express concern that state efforts do not model the extent of collaboration achieved in the counties.**

Some of the senior collaborative members expressed concern that there is no formal part of the state government charged with liaison with all of these collaboratives, that the state had never assembled all of these collaboratives for a joint exchange of information, and that recent changes in staffing the AB 1741 project may suggest a lower emphasis on these state-local innovations.

A 1998 summary of recent juvenile justice initiatives prepared by the League of Women Voters stated that

Restructuring at the county level is hard because the corresponding state departments are not redesigning themselves. The county[ies] found that they needed to restructure to be able to be partners with local schools, business, and non-profits. They found they could share what they are learning with other AB1741 programs, but that it is hard to share with the state.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Juvenile Justice in California Part II: Dependency System. League of Women Voters of California Education Fund, Juvenile Justice Study Committee. July 1998.

Eight of the 29 collaboratives responding indicated that they had received technical assistance of some kind from the state. Half of the counties said that “funding” was the major form of assistance from the state. One county said that state “non-intervention” was a help.

### *Categorical collaboratives*

The issue of public and private funders’ support for separate collaboratives that divert energy from these cross-cutting collaboratives is a concern to some, but not all of the collaboratives. At the same time, some funders, including Sierra, Stuart, Cowell, Packard, and others have for more than a decade provided support for county-level collaboratives that has been a vital source of flexible funding to county-level demonstration projects, and to the collaboratives themselves.

What is unclear is whether health-only collaboratives or those that have focused on adolescents, child abuse, or early childhood can or should evolve into a more cross-cutting form of governance and results-based accountability. The jury is still out on this whether this potential can be realized, but the comments of some of the collaboratives suggest that the issue is a significant obstacle for them in seeking to move to the next stage of their development.<sup>6</sup>

When breaking out the small counties (those under 100,000) as a separate group, there are predictable differences between their responses and those of the medium- and larger-sized county collaboratives. They tend to be less involved in welfare reform, less involved with results-based accountability changes, and to have had less of an impact on budget changes.

An index was constructed using thirteen of the survey items which appear to be those in which counties were most widely variant in their responses, based on the progress they had made. This index serves as a tentative, very preliminary “capacity score” for each county. To be useful, this set of indicators would need revisions and more feedback from counties. Its further validity would obviously be improved if a much more detailed questionnaire were administered in an extended interview, rather than a simple survey based on self-reports. In addition, the discussion among counties about which items should be used as fair measures of their capacity might, in itself, be a useful exercise that would clarify the counties’ own definitions of collaborative capacity. Rating the counties using this

**New categorical collaboratives are seen as assets in some counties and potential obstacles in others.**

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<sup>6</sup>An additional perspective on this issue from a significant source came in the County Supervisors Association of California Legislative Bulletin of August 1997. This article, written by Lynn de Lapp and Margaret Peña and titled “Managing ‘Collaborative Proliferation,’” set forth concerns about “well-intentioned requirements for collaboration [which] lead to redundancy and inefficiency.” The article cited studies in Los Angeles and Stanislaus counties that inventoried 370 and 38 collaborative groups in the two counties, respectively.

measure results in higher scores among a cluster of roughly half of the counties responding to the survey; the remainder tend to be those that are newer, with part-time staff or a single-program focus.

### **Need for Additional Support and Technical Assistance**

In answer to a series of questions about technical assistance needs, a sizable majority of these collaboratives would like additional TA, particularly around integrating performance measures with community-wide indicators. One county responded that they needed a “TA support center for collaborations (some exist, but they don’t get it).” Specific topic areas mentioned by counties on which they would welcome technical assistance included

- a. How do you use Healthy Start to build a community agenda?
- b. FS/FRC [family support/family resource center] model. Here’s what it looks like, here are challenges to the model, examples of blended funding
- c. Mark Friedman’s results-based accountability
- d. Evaluation
- e. Data integration and information systems
- f. State staff assistance with grant programs

A larger question was raised by one of the longer-tenured collaborative staff leaders: “How do we get more people who can do this work?”

#### *Sources of Assistance*

More than half of the collaborative staff responding indicated that they had received help from a variety of outside organizations. Those mentioned most frequently were the Foundation Consortium, Mark Friedman’s Fiscal Policy Studies Institute, the Center for Collaboration for Children, the Center for Collaborative Planning, the Children’s Defense Fund, SRI, Children Now, and “each other.”

#### *The Opportunity to Learn from the Other Collaboratives*

Several of the staff responding to the survey were very interested in the prospect of closer ties with their counterparts. It should be noted that from 1987 to 1993, a statewide group known as the State Interagency Network, which included more than a dozen of the earlier collaboratives and their precursors, met regularly, usually in the Bay Area. Websites shared by the collaboratives and other options for networking which were mentioned all met with favor from a majority of the

**Most of the collaboratives seek closer ties with each other and additional help from outside organizations**

respondents. Some collaboratives made the point that the older, more experienced collaboratives may well be “net exporters” of assistance to the others, and should be reimbursed accordingly by external funders and/or recipients of their help.

## The Intangible Attributes of Strong Collaboratives

What are the attributes of the best collaboratives? From the interviews, the survey, and conversations over the years with many of these extraordinary individuals, some themes emerge that are more intangible than the quantitative responses—but no less important.

1. **Leadership** matters.
  - a.. Sometimes it is tenure— institutional memory is so rare and turnover is so typical that being on the ground trying to work to change the system over time accrues some benefits—at the very least, learning where the walls are hardest when you run into them
  - b. Sometimes it is deliberately near-invisible leadership, as exemplified by the sign on a former President’s desk which said “There is no limit to what you can get done as long as someone else gets the credit for it.” Flashy, claim-grabbing leadership rarely wins the day in collaboration work.
  - c. The tone which is set by leadership in a good collaborative is more often shared accountability than the “blame game” in which funders and other levels of government are to blame for what the collaboration can’t achieve for its clients.
- 2.. **Trust** is essential, and it comes slow. This sounds so obvious, and is mentioned in every collaboration book. But where trust comes from is harder to specify in concrete terms. It seems to come from a combination of seeing the same faces in the same places, not being betrayed in conflicts over resources, and coming to see how the other person in the other agency is really trying to make things happen for their clients—who may also be your clients. It is a truism that collaboration is about personal relationships—but it is a lesson ignored when structural solutions are treated as more important than building those relationships over time.
3. **Information** and water are the two critical commodities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is said, and a collaborative without a strategy for getting better information and using it to make better decisions is just doing things

**The intangibles of collaborative success include the extraordinary people staffing them, the leadership they get, trust, information strategies, and persistence.**

instead of asking whether what they do makes a difference. The collaboratives that have begun to make a difference have a “data maven” somewhere, or a group of them, who are committed to better information about children and families and willing to engage in lengthy, sometimes tedious discussions with information systems staff who can sometimes be very protective of data, but who may never have been shown how their data could be used for policy-making.

The second and related dimension of this attribute is an unrelenting commitment to outcomes in the form of better results. The strongest of these collaboratives understand that accountability for results is not just about changing RFPs and re-allocating funds—as important and difficult as those can be. It is also about an ongoing dialogue among members of the collaborative on “what is getting better— and what isn’t.” Some county-level score cards are published, and that is all that happens. Others become the basis for searching inquiry about *why* the numbers are moving in the direction they have taken. These sessions include serious debate about the differences between causes and effects. Such debate about priorities and the rationale for choosing one set of programs over another is all too rare, but has happened in those collaboratives that have devoted time and energy to stating their basic principles, such as Los Angeles, in producing a document that goes well beyond conventional motherhood statements of generalities.

4. Some collaboratives raise and address **the values issues**— most don’t yet. Some have an ethical core that underlies their decisions about who gets helped, but others simply treat targeting clients as whatever a funder tells you to do. In a way, this simply restates the leadership and trust issues, since a collaborative that has found a way to discuss issues of controversy on which its members’ values may differ usually has leadership that sets a tone of trust. That tone leads members to realize that the organization has a shared mission that is larger than specific differences over values.
5. Implicit in all of these is **persistence**. The best of these collaboratives have leaders and members who have worked without widespread success on many of these issues over the years, but have not given up. They are in it for the long haul, not the quick fix. They have both a sense of urgency, knowing that each day opportunities are lost for thousands of children, and also a detailed knowledge of the detailed tools of collaboration.

While there are diagnostic signals that can detect these attributes, some of them are best assessed in a conversation rather than a formal interview. Sometimes it is what is *not* said that is more revealing than what is said, as when as a

**These collaboratives are staffed and led by people who have sense of urgency about outcomes for children and a keen sense of how to get things done.**

collaborative member never mentions clients, outcome measures that are getting better or worse, or disagreements among collaborative members. Sometimes it is the realization that the staff director of the collaborative has been working at some of these issues for more than a decade, and has a keen sense of what is progress and what is just another meeting or press release.

Again, it should be stressed that the human resources behind these collaboratives are some of California's most important professionals in the entire arena of children and family services. The staff and senior advisors to some of these organizations know that non-trivial change requires both persistence and audacity— the persistence to keep at it year after year and the audacity to propose changes that have never been done that way before. Against sizable odds, they are trying to put the pieces together so that children will get a better chance at a better life. Working within systems that most often reward fragmented efforts more than wider, more comprehensive ones, they have built connections among people, programs, and institutions.

The best of these people are among the best that we have—worth as much or more than top agency directors or elected leaders who turn over more often than the support staff. Sustaining commitment while providing continuity is a difficult thing, and the derisory comments made at times about the “B team”—those staff members who will always *be* there no matter what—miss the point about how valuable the qualities of commitment and continuity can be when combined. These collaborative staff leaders are “most valuable players,” and we need more of them.

## Conclusions

As noted, summarizing trends across 50-plus counties is risky business. But it is clear from this assessment that California county government is better for the existence of these collaboratives, and that these collaboratives are getting better at affecting county government policy and practice. Their catalytic roles and operating styles at the community level come closer to meeting the prescriptions set forth in the Foundation Consortium's community approach than any other structural or policy remedy currently available. Their efforts deserve more support, notably through reducing the fragmentation of categorical collaboratives and assisting them in building more effective networks among those collaboratives who are seeking help in doing their work. Continuing assessment of the impact of those efforts over time is a further way to provide such support.

To return to the issue of context, California has been highly innovative in governance in its recent history. New governmental entities have been created to

**These collaboratives' efforts come closer to the Consortium's community approach than any other structural or policy remedy available.**

deal with the endemic problems of air pollution and water shortages. Governing a state of 33 million people demands great flexibility and the willingness to innovate when old rules prove unable to meet the conditions of new times. For California's nearly ten million children, these collaboratives are vital, evolving attempts to re-form governance so it becomes capable of creating better futures through its own efforts and the citizen and non-governmental energy it can stimulate and support. With resources far less than the agencies they seek to link together, these collaboratives represent the future of California's communities— not mandated by higher levels of government, but negotiated among elected leaders and the communities to which they are accountable.

## APPENDIX 1

### **Categories of Collaboratives Addressing Children and Youth Issues\***

[Those underlined either responded to the survey or were interviewed]

#### **Oldest and Broadest Collaboratives**

San Bernardino, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Los Angeles, Fresno, Alameda, Contra Costa, Humboldt, El Dorado, Placer, Stanislaus, Kern, San Mateo

#### **More Recently Formed or Reorganized Collaboratives**

San Diego, Nevada, Ventura, Inyo, Riverside, Butte, Calaveras, Kings, Lake, Monterey, Plumas, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma

#### **Collaboratives Focused on Program Areas (education, early childhood, child abuse, youth development, children's health, others)**

Colusa, Del Norte, Glenn, Imperial, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Sacramento, San Benito, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Sierra, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, Yolo, Yuba

#### **Emerging Collaboratives**

Orange County Children's Services Coordinating Committee [considering expansion to include non-public members]

\*In compiling this, we have relied upon the survey responses for those counties which sent them in and the excellent annual compilation done by Hedy Damery of the Santa Barbara Kids Network. We regret any mis-categorization and do not intend any "grading" of quality or accomplishments by these categories.

## APPENDIX 2: Key Responses to the Survey

	Number	Responding*
Full-time staff	12	29
Staffed with separate budget	23	28
Staff less than 4 years	20	29
Staff 5 years or longer	8	29
Formed prior to 1990	2	31
Formed 1990-94	23	31
Formed after 1994	6	31
Report card exists or is in progress	13	31
We have developed children's budget or have one in progress	14	31
Involved in Proposition 10	23	31
Involved in welfare reform	14	31
We spend most of our time on grant funding	14	29
We have re-allocated funds based on use of outcomes measures	9	31
We have received technical assistance from the state	8	29

\* These totals on some items include the two collaborative staff members who were interviewed in addition to the 29 who responded to the survey; not all responded to all items. The total survey and frequencies are available at the Website of the Center for Collaboration for Children:  
<http://hdcs.fullerton.edu/cc/index.htm>