

**Local Stakeholders' Perceptions  
of Cherokee County Services  
for Children and Families**

Special thanks to all the participants who gave so generously of their time for this project.

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## Executive Summary

This report summarizes and interprets the findings from a series of focus groups and interviews conducted during October, 2004, in Cherokee County, Kansas, to provide a baseline portrait of Cherokee County residents' perceptions of child welfare services in their community. Audio tapes of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative research methods to identify the themes emerging from participants' comments. The presentation of these themes or findings is grouped by the six Systems of Care principles.

Interagency communication and collaboration are critical to the success of child welfare services in the eyes of Cherokee County participants. In particular, participants noted the need for a more formal approach to defining interagency roles and responsibilities and the positive influence such activities would have on the work they do with children and families.

Family involvement is seen as central to child welfare services. Participants' observations suggest that both workers and families would benefit from additional information about how to make family involvement in the case planning conference more meaningful and empowering to families.

Cherokee County participants are very supportive of the ideals represented in the principle of individualized and strengths-based services. However, participants would like to work toward making the shift from a problem focus to a strengths perspective and individualizing services.

Participants most often identified a 'culture of poverty' as the primary challenge they saw in terms of cultural competence in child welfare services. Language barriers with a recent Micronesian immigrant community were also noted.

Participants expressed pride in recent accomplishments in community based child welfare services, particularly noting the Family Life Center, PACCC, and the new Juvenile Intake worker. Remaining challenges include providing services in four cities in the county, reducing the number of teenagers placed in foster care, and developing additional services for children and families.

Accountability was seen as closely tied to good leadership from agency administrators and elected officials. Participants would like for child welfare information to be more readily available to the community. In particular, participants noted that sharing child welfare success stories could attract more community interest and support for child welfare services.

## **I. Introduction**

This report summarizes and interprets the findings from a series of focus groups and interviews conducted during October, 2004, in Cherokee County, Kansas. The focus groups and interviews were conducted to provide a baseline portrait of how residents and workers in Cherokee County, Kansas, perceive the county's child welfare service delivery system.

This baseline portrait is one part of the start up process for a federally funded Systems of Care initiative through the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services. The initiative is funded through a grant from the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Children's Bureau website<sup>1</sup> offers the following introductory description of the Systems of Care approach as it relates to child welfare services:

The Systems of Care approach is based on the development of a strong infrastructure of interagency collaboration, individualized care practices, culturally competent services and supports, and child and family involvement in all aspects of the system. The end result is better outcomes for children and families.

This report is one part of a baseline community portrait developed to help guide the Cherokee County Systems of Care initiative through their system of care development process. The other, complementary, part of the baseline community portrait is a summary of the available quantitative data on child welfare in Cherokee County. The quantitative data are represented by numbers that summarize the experiences of children coming into contact with child welfare services in Cherokee County. This report is a qualitative research report. That is to say, it summarizes the perceptions that workers, informal helpers, families,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/profess/systems/index.cfm>

and youth shared with the team about their child welfare experiences and perceptions.

A team composed of a researcher from the Kansas Systems of Care (KSoC) grant's external evaluation team and two members of the KSoC grant staff conducted the focus groups and interviews in Cherokee County, Kansas, during October, 2004. The team conducted focus groups and individual interviews. The focus groups and interviews provided 100 hours of raw data for analysis.

Following an open ended question about general perceptions of child welfare services in Cherokee County, focus group and interview respondents were asked a series of questions informed by the Systems of Care principles. The Systems of Care principles reflect both the philosophy and identified best practices associated with successful systems of care initiatives. The following brief summary of the six Systems of Care principles is also from the Children's Bureau website<sup>2</sup>:

[Interagency Collaboration](#)

Interagency collaboration within Systems of Care engages all child- and family-serving agencies at all levels of the public, private, and faith-based sectors, including child welfare, juvenile justice, mental health, education, substance abuse, health, and (if separate) the agency responsible for serving Native American families.

[Individualized Strengths-based Care](#)

Every child enrolled in a System of Care participates in an individualized plan of care that focuses on the needs, strengths, and challenges of the child and family.

[Cultural Competence](#)

Systems of Care tailor services (location and types) and programs by considering the cultural, ethnic, and racial makeup of the community. Agency policies, training, and family engagement are critical to ensure cultural competence.

[Child and Family Involvement](#)

In Systems of Care full family participation requires mutual respect and meaningful partnership between families and professionals in the planning, implementation, and ongoing operation of the Systems of Care.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/profess/systems/learn/gp.cfm>

### Community-based Services

Children thrive in the context of their homes, communities, and schools. Systems of Care ensure a wide range of home- and community-based services and supports. Decision-making responsibility rests at the local level, with key links to the county and/or State government.

### Accountability

Systems of Care ensure outcome data is collected, analyzed, and reported on the individual child and family services system, performance, and financial efficiencies. The information is used to inform all stakeholders and serves as a quality assurance process.

This report is presented in five sections. The introduction outlines the basic ideas behind the Systems of Care approach and the connection between that approach and the purpose of this study. The methodology section provides a complete description of the process of development, conduct, and analysis of the focus groups and interviews. The findings section summarizes the themes describing child welfare services in Cherokee County identified from the analysis of the focus group and interview data, organized by the previously described Systems of Care principles. The conclusions section of the report connects the findings with the Systems of Care principles.

## **II. Methodology**

The Methodology section summarizes the methods used to design the study, gather the data, and analyze the data. The general method for the research process described in this report is known as Qualitative Research. Qualitative research is by nature descriptive or narrative. In this case, the raw data are the words spoken by the Cherokee County participants in the focus groups and interviews. In qualitative analysis, the analysis of the data follows a process moving from the specific to the general, so that broad themes eventually emerge that best summarize the common meanings underlying the many individual comments from participants. In this study, those themes were then

organized by the six Systems of Care principles to help tie the findings to the task of developing a System of Care in child welfare services in Cherokee County.

Focus group and interview participants represented the mental health agency, health services, elected representatives, attorneys, juvenile justice, social services, education, substance abuse, recreation, vocational services, law enforcement, and the faith community. Family members, foster parents, and youth also participated in focus groups.

The purpose of the focus groups and interviews was explained to participants. The researchers took notes and recorded the focus groups and interviews to facilitate data analysis. Care was taken to protect the confidentiality of participants in keeping with federal statutes protecting research participants. The tapes were transcribed by contract employees of the University of Kansas who are familiar with the requirements for confidentiality and privacy. Copies of the questions used in the focus groups and interviews, the letters of consent, and a more detailed list of findings are available upon request through the local Systems of Care Coordinator, Catherine Houser at the Family Life Center.

A condensed copy of the findings reported in this report was mailed or emailed to participants for the purposes of member checking. Member checking is an important step in qualitative research. At each point in the analytic process, the researcher makes decisions about what is content and what is not content, about what the underlying meaning or theme is for the phrases and sentences that are included as content, and, finally, about how to organize and present the themes that were identified.

Once the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, the researcher read through the transcripts several times. First, each participant comment was identified by a brief theme name. Through subsequent readings, comments with related themes were grouped together. After several readings and recoding, the main themes presented in this report began to emerge. Most of the themes were derived from the comments of a number of participants speaking about related experiences. A few themes were included that represent the perspective of a smaller number of participants. These themes were included because one of the strengths of a qualitative approach to research is to include all perspectives, not just the most common ones. In summary, the series of small decisions that preceded the summary of the findings presented in this report was made with two goals in mind: 1) to accurately capture the community's view of child welfare services in Cherokee County and 2) to include the perspectives of participants whose views diverged from others. The main themes from participants' comments were then organized by the principles of the systems of care approach to child welfare services.

### **III. Findings**

This section of the report summarizes the themes identified from the analysis of the transcribed focus groups and interviews. The findings are organized by the Systems of Care principles: Interagency Communication and Collaboration, Family and Child Involvement, Individualized and Strengths-Based Services, Community-Based Services, Cultural Competence, and Accountability. The findings are presented in a single-spaced format and the

explanations and comments are presented in a double-spaced format so that the reader can readily distinguish between the two.

In general, researchers were impressed by the number of people in Cherokee County sufficiently interested in child welfare services to participate in the focus groups and interviews. The participants were well informed and thoughtful in their responses. The focus groups for youth and family members provided a counterpoint for the perspectives of the participants who work in the various agencies in Cherokee County that serve children and families. In this analysis, every effort was made both to honor this willingness to participate by accurately summarizing the content of the focus groups and interviews and to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

At first read, it may appear that the many of the findings are negative but that appearance is deceptive. The findings reflect the things that participants are concerned about. The focus groups and interviews were presented to participants as an opportunity to have input in preparation for a new initiative to improve child welfare services in their community. It was common for participants' comments to include a general aside about positive aspects of an agency as well as their concerns. The nature of this type of analysis excluded many of these positive comments because they did not converge together to form a theme. Additionally, a few participants reported that they are much more likely to hear child welfare stories in which the services have failed or failed to meet expectations.

## **A. Interagency Communication and Collaboration**

This principle suggests that children and families will benefit from efforts to enhance interagency communication and collaboration. Potential benefits include reduction in the duplication of services, greater facility to meet the unique needs of each child and family with the resources available, reduction in the incidence of conflicting demands on families' time and efforts, and enhancement of agency workers' ability to respond to children and families in a timely and effective manner.

### **Interagency communication**

Many of the themes grouped within other principles might have been included in this section as well. When speaking of their concerns about child welfare services, participants often expressed a lack of information or understanding of the services or programs related to their concerns.

In general, it appears that current interagency communication is informal and works best when workers know one another and one another's routines and expectations.

- This informality may contribute to inconsistencies and failures in communication where personal relationships do not exist between workers in partnering agencies.

Cherokee County participants described challenges for social service agencies in the county posed by the county's proximity to three other states.

Participants report that Cherokee County has a large population of highly mobile low income residents for a rural county because of its proximity to three other states.

The process of clarifying roles and responsibilities and defining the channels for interagency communication can be seen as preparation for the agencies to provide similar information to the children and families they serve.

Participants express concern that the difficulties they experience in communication with other agencies may be more problematic and confusing for children and families.

The following three findings are examples of how informal approaches to interagency communication among helping agencies may fail to effectively meet the needs of the children and families they serve.

Participants from the education community report difficulty in obtaining educational information for foster children entering their schools.

- Schools need special education information, in particular.

Participants report that the Family Life Center, SRS, and the Farm do not routinely share court reports prior to scheduled court reviews.

- Participants would like for the Family Life Center to routinely share their reports prior to court hearings and to participate in case planning conferences.

Several participants mentioned experiences of families in Cherokee County that suggest that SRS could improve intra-agency communication about the status of families involved with Child Welfare services.

- Reports included failure to help parents secure court ordered child support payments.
- Participants reported the paralyzing effect that the loss of benefits such as income, Medicaid, and housing has for parents whose children are in out of home placement.
- Participants reported an SRS practice of requiring parents to pay child support at the same time they are struggling financially to achieve required reintegration goals such as housing or drug testing.

### **Interagency collaboration**

Participants reported examples of successful collaborations in Cherokee County, both currently and in the recent past and made note of the challenges of sustaining effective collaboration over time. They voiced the need for a more focused and formal approach to encourage collaboration among agencies for the benefit of the children and families they serve. In particular, participants want a shared vision of the community's child welfare services. This shared

vision, or 'big picture,' would include a common understanding and knowledge of each agency's services including eligibility rules, the expectation that all the agencies working with a family participate in the case planning process, the expectation that these agencies also agree on a mechanism for sharing progress and court reports, and articulating community standards for the safety and well being of children.

In general, participants report that some examples of interagency collaboration seem to work at times, but participants also reported that these collaborations are not consistent either within agencies or among all the agencies they work with.

Participants noted that the formal structure of the Wraparound approach coupled with the services of a coordinator to bring the involved agencies together were key features of the program's success. The most frequently cited barriers to sustaining successful programs included the loss of funding (particularly for programs initially funded by a start-up grant) and changes in personnel.

Several participants cited Wraparound Services as a helpful model for working with children and families with serious mental health or multiple challenges. In addition to describing this and other successful programs, participants articulated the challenges of sustaining successful programs over time.

- Truancy program
- School resource officer program

The following participant observations of the features of PACCC (Partnership for All Cherokee County Children) that contribute to its success are excellent examples of the promise of interagency collaboration to enhance agencies' capacity to help children and families.

Participants observed that they experienced more success in interagency communication and collaboration among the agencies that were well represented at PACCC meetings.

- Participants suggest that broader participation from the court and law enforcement is important to a local Systems of Care initiative.
- Participants report several reasons why they believe PACCC participation strengthens individual participants, agencies, and services to children and families
  - PACCC members educate other members about their agency's services.
  - Agencies share data, gather data from other sources, and work together to understand the status of children in Cherokee County
  - PACCC planning sessions led to the development of the Juvenile Intake program in the county.

Participants with first hand experience working with the court and children and families identified concerns with the interactions of the agencies most directly involved in that process. A common theme was that different agencies have different expectations of agency roles and responsibilities in this process. The concerns identified about this process by participants from different agencies were similar in that regard.

Participants would like more effective working relationships between child and family serving agencies, the county attorney's office, and the court.

- Participants reported that the court's response to professional recommendations was inconsistent, and sometimes seemed to them to be inconsistent with the best interests of the child.

While most of the themes listed in this report represent the distillation of the responses of a number of participants, a few themes portray concerns raised by only one or two participants. The following theme was identified by only a few participants, but was included in the findings as an example of the potential benefit of bringing more participants to the table to benefit Cherokee County children and families.

Participants from the faith community in Cherokee County expressed an interest in playing a larger role in supporting vulnerable children and families in Cherokee County.

- The child welfare serving community seemed reluctant to access the resources of the faith community.
- The faith community has many resources relevant to helping children and families, including:
  - Youth programs
  - Marriage strengthening programs
  - A church community to provide social support for children and families.

## **Family Involvement**

Historically, child welfare services have focused on saving children. More recently, child welfare policy and practice has moved toward recognizing that the role of the child's family is central to the task of protecting children. Cherokee County participants' comments about family involvement in child welfare services reflect this interest in how to best balance the interests of the child and the family.

Both agency staff and family member participants reported that Cherokee County families do attend case planning conferences. The extent to which families participate in a meaningful way in the development of the case plan is less clear.

Family members' comments about case planning suggest that families could be better informed about the roles and responsibilities of the case planning process

- Families are not always active participants in the process
- Participation from extended family is not consistently sought out

Agency staff comments indicate that meaningful family participation in the case planning process may be constrained by the limited number of services they can provide for families.

- Families' ability to meet case plan requirements are often affected by lack of transportation and other resources.

Case planning conferences rarely include all the people involved with the family in a child welfare matter.

A number of agency based participants expressed concerns about the motivation of families to participate in child welfare services. Explanations for the

perceived lack of family motivation often included family membership in a “Culture of Poverty.” Other explanations focused in some way on families’ relationship with authority figures suggesting that families will only respond to court orders and that families with a history with SRS or law enforcement may be suspicious of service providers.

Some participants believe families are not sufficiently motivated to succeed in child welfare services.

- Parents who demand more get better services.
- Family motivation may be affected by prior history with SRS, family preservation, and law enforcement
- Negative perceptions about families
  - Family may admit problems, but will not make the effort necessary to change without a court order.
  - When a family resists participation in services the fault is with the family.

A few participants expressed the belief that child welfare services are best focused on the child. They are concerned that children might be denied services if their parents fail to participate.

Some participants don’t feel the need to involve families in treating the child.

- There is a fear that services could be too restricted if parents are required to participate.
- Professional status as mandatory reports places the emphasis and priority on the child.

Participants shared a number of viewpoints about the role of extended family in child welfare services. Many participants saw extended family member participation as a source of support for the parents involved with child welfare services. Others suggested that extended family members might facilitate the working relationship between child welfare workers and the family. Family member participants as well as some agency based participants reported that

extended family members, in particular grandparents, often feel marginalized by the planning and delivery of services to their loved ones.

Participants reported varying views of the role of extended family in child welfare services.

- Parents may be more willing to hear the concerns others have about the problems in their family from friends and relatives than from professional helpers.
- One participant described the importance of accepting the family's definition of the membership in that family.
- Both helping professionals and extended family members reported that grandparents and other relatives often feel marginalized or excluded when they try to get involved with child welfare services to their loved ones.

A number of participants reported that they would like for child welfare services to provide more direct services for parents and for a longer period of time.

Participants expressed concern that child welfare services are not effective when they are too brief in duration or when they are child rather than family focused.

- Child welfare issues need to be seen as a family problem, not an individual problem.
- Service providers must form an alliance with parents in order to realize sustainable change in the family.
  - Effective change doesn't happen in three to six months.
- Out of home placement doesn't help the children if the parents have not made changes and improvements during the child's placement.

Participants from child and family serving agencies in Cherokee County offered a number of ideas about the challenge of finding ways to engage and empower child welfare involved families in a process of positive change. These observations suggest the broad spectrum of beliefs about families and the potential for change that child welfare workers bring to their work with families.

Several participants suggested ways in which more could be done to empower families who come into contact with Cherokee County child welfare services.

- Currently services are something done to the family rather than with the family
- Helping families out of poverty.
- Maintaining parents' authority to make decisions about their child's care and treatment while the child is in foster care

## **Individualized Services**

Many participants discussed the challenges of providing individualized services to children and families. Some of these challenges are the result of service eligibility and funding restrictions. Ironically, some appear to arise from a natural tendency to involve as many families or children as possible in a single service because that service has been effective. The following findings represent an attempt to capture the most representative comments about the challenges of providing individualized services to children and families.

Participants report that cookie-cutter case plans and treatment plans are more common than individualized plans.

- Workers are trained to identify the need for individualized services, but programs and services are so limited that the services are all the same
- The child's behavior is just a symptom of a bigger problem that won't be resolved by foster care unless services are provided to the parents.
- Day reporting is a good program, but the court may order this service in instances where a different approach might be more effective.
- Many participants suggest the need for intensive long term programs like day reporting and Connections for parents.
- Participants reported that there are not enough parenting classes, and the ones that are available are too brief in duration.
  - Available parenting classes are too brief in duration
  - Transportation and child care are not part of the service
  - Some families would be better served by in home services than classes
- Participants had varying perspectives on the value of in home services.
  - "If we leave a kid at home with their parents and we're going out there 2-3 days a week to work with the parents, we're doing a lot more good for that family than if we place the child in a foster home or group home."
  - Families don't want people coming into their home.
  - Family Preservation services can be very effective, but they don't last enough for families to really change old habits.

The following four findings suggest some of the barriers child and family serving agencies in Cherokee County face when trying to provide individualized services.

Transportation to services and resources presents a significant barrier for many Cherokee County families.

- Cherokee County doesn't have a single population center like most rural Kansas counties.

Some SRS policies and practices can create barriers for individual families

- SRS doesn't provide daycare for the time that a mother spends seeking further education or job training.
- Participants reported parents whose reintegration plan hinged on their securing suitable housing for their family while SRS was claiming as much as half of their income as child support to cover the costs of foster care.
- Parents whose children are in foster care can lose their Medicaid coverage, which may seriously limit their access to the services they need to achieve reunification with their children.

The scarcity of safe and affordable housing affects families' ability to care for the children and to achieve reunification with their children.

- Housing is a common barrier to family reunification. Unsafe housing can also prompt out of home placement for children.
- There are not enough safe, low cost housing units available in the county and there is a six to twelve month waiting period for HUD housing.

Schools need more information at the time of enrollment to be able to effectively meet the needs of individual foster children.

- Without historical educational information on a child, it is impossible for schools to plan a transition that minimizes trauma and anxiety for the child.
  - Children with special education needs may be at even greater risk.

### **Strengths-based Services**

Many participants reported that their agencies use a strengths based assessment or evaluation instrument. Several participants commented that many of the families they work with are not able to identify their own strengths.

Participants often acknowledged that it is challenging to shift one's focus from the

family's problem to the family's strengths. Other participants were skeptical that a strengths approach was at all suitable in their work with families and children.

- Workers from a number of agencies reported using strengths based assessment and evaluation tools.
- Several participants report skepticism that a systemic strengths approach to working with families could be found in their agency.
- Many participants reported that despite discussion of strengths, most services in Cherokee County are problem-focused.
  - You've got a problem so you've got to be about solving that problem.
  - We need to work with both strengths and problems.
- Participants report pessimism about families' capacity to work from and see their own strengths
- Participants report experiences that helped them understand the value to families of hearing their strengths discussed
  - A lot of our families never hear anything good about themselves.
  - Working from their strengths is a good way to get the family invested in completing the tasks required for reunification.
- Participants report that parents' love for their children is the most common and basic of all strengths that they try to build on in their work.

### **Cultural Competence**

The Systems of Care philosophy emphasizes the centrality of cultural competence in practice with children and families. Cultural competence reflects the mix of cultures unique to each community. Cherokee County participants reported the challenges they experienced in trying to work with a growing Micronesian population in Baxter Springs. A small number of participants noted concern that children of color placed in Cherokee County foster homes and group homes may encounter racism in the community. A number of participants reported that a culture of poverty was the main area in which they felt they needed to develop cultural competence.

Participants report that there are very few minorities or non-English speaking residents in their communities.

- There is a growing community of Micronesian immigrants in the Baxter Springs area.
  - Agencies reported challenges in serving this community because of language barriers and difficulty in finding basic information about their culture.
  - Participants reported concerns about the need to use school age children as translators at times.

Participants report that very few agencies have access to language services.

- Only a few participants reported knowledge of how to access translation resources but SRS does have a telephone translation service.
- Law enforcement and education have access to a sign language interpreter.
- Participants reported that agencies are becoming more aware of the need to have written materials at lower reading levels for adults with poor literacy skills and for non-native English speakers.

Participants reported a variety of experiences in terms of their agency providing training in cultural competence; no participants reported that cultural competence training was a routine part of their agency's employee training.

Through home visits, participants reported some success in engaging families who do not speak English.

- The Healthy Start visitor visits women who are pregnant or have newborns. Because several Micronesian families live together, she is able to reach out to other family members, too.

A number of participants talked about the challenges of working with families from another culture; in Cherokee County the other culture is often described as a culture of poverty.

Many participants reported a sense that the families they work with live in a different culture, a culture of poverty.

- There is a sense that poverty is deeper, more entrenched, and more likely to isolate families than ever before.
- Many of the parents in the child welfare system have very limited resources.
- Educational attainment for many of these parents is very low.
- They are afraid that they may lose their children if they go to SRS or another agency for help with family problems
- Participants reported some training on the Culture of Poverty, but not enough to help them deal with what they see as a challenging task.
- Participants reported the importance of being aware of all the barriers families face.

- No transportation, low educational attainment, no job skills, no money to buy clothing suitable for job search and working.
- Participants believe that many families have lived in poverty for several generations and do not want to live differently than their parents or grandparents.
- Participants are concerned that most middle class families in Cherokee County have no idea how serious the poverty problems are in their communities.

## **Community Based Services**

Cherokee County participants were very vocal in expressing the strengths and challenges of their community's response to the needs of children and families. In an effort to fully represent the contributions of the participants, the description of the findings related to this systems of care principle have been divided into three sections. The first section summarizes findings related to the community as a whole; the second section summarizes participants perceptions of how a number of child and family serving agencies function within the community; the third and final community based services section addresses participant observations about out of home placement in Cherokee County.

### **Community Based Services—The Community as a Whole**

This section of Community Based Services describes how participants see Cherokee County in terms of services and resources for children and families. The themes included in this section include overall impressions of Cherokee County child welfare services, the importance of sharing stories of both success and challenges, community strengths, the unique geographic challenges of Cherokee County, and concludes with a wish list for free and low cost family friendly activities.

Cherokee County Overall

- Participants who live in Cherokee County generally reported more positive images of the county than participants who work in Cherokee County but live elsewhere.
- Participants reported frustration that too often good programs for children and families have disappeared because of lack of funding or changes in administrators in agencies.
- Participants reported pride in the growth of new services for Cherokee County's child welfare system such as the Family Life Center and the Juvenile Intake Worker.
- Participants report feeling overwhelmed at times by the scope of the county's child welfare problems in proportion to the available resources.

### Sharing Stories

- One participant reported, "We have to figure out ways that we can affect change over time and then tell the stories because that is what people want to hear and that is what people relate to."
- Several participants suggested that the success stories are not as often told as the problem stories and that a commitment should be made to telling about the successes in child welfare services.

### Community Strengths (outside formal child welfare services)

- Youth sports programs.
- At-risk after school programs and summer camp with free transportation.
- Churches offer a wide variety of family, youth, and child activities.
- Scouts and 4-H.

### Geographic/Population Challenges

- Services that work well in one Cherokee County community may not be available in the county's other towns.
- The need to duplicate a service in four communities increases costs and can diminish the overall effectiveness of good programs.
- Agencies are also challenged by the number of families living in rural areas of the county.
- Transportation to activities and services is a challenge for families living in rural areas of the county.

Participants would like to see more local activities for families that are low cost or free to families and children.

- Parks
- YMCA
- Bowling Alley
- Skating Rink
- Library
- Public Transportation
- Movie Theatre

## **Community Based Services—Agencies**

This section summarizes observations about Cherokee County agencies. The following bulleted points are presented to suggest a context for the findings about Cherokee County agencies serving children and families. All agencies were praised for their efforts. No agency escaped comments about areas that need improvement

- Suggestions of areas that need improvement were often qualified with comments about funding, geographic limitations, and other challenges to agency effectiveness.
- Participants often spoke of the fact that the stories they hear are about the problems and their comments reflect that experience.
- The inconsistency in participants' comments about these various agencies suggests that many participants (mostly professionals in child and family helping agencies) may not share a common understanding of the roles and practices of other agencies.

The rationale behind grouping these observations by agency was to provide individual agencies and the Systems of Care steering committee with a sense of the perceptions that community members have of the roles of different agencies in the county. Employees of some of these agencies may be very surprised by some of the participant perceptions listed here. Some of these perceptions may be accurate; others may be wholly or partially inaccurate.

### **Law Enforcement**

- Participants reported favorable experiences with county and municipal law enforcement agencies.
- Participants observed that Cherokee County law enforcement agencies do not seem to have a consistent or unified response in arrest and crisis situations involving children.
  - It was not clear from participants' comments the extent to which the community as a whole is aware of the recently created Juvenile Intake program.

- Participants noted that there are a number of different small law enforcement agencies in the county.
- In general, participants wish that local law enforcement officers could have training in how to approach situations with the potential of child welfare involvement.
  - Participants are concerned about what happens to children who are present in the home for drug busts.
  - It was recommended that children exposed to methamphetamine production should be screened routinely for possible health problems.
- Law enforcement participants reported a lack of consistency in their interactions with child welfare agencies.
- Law enforcement participants reported concerns with children in homes with alcoholic parents and domestic violence.

#### Court

- Participants reported that the local judge and panel attorneys are committed to helping children and families
- Participants anticipate improvements in the relationship between child welfare agencies and the court with the election of a new county attorney.
  - Concerns were expressed that a number of cases of child sexual abuse have not been prosecuted.
- Participants reported that the timeliness of hearings for court reviews and adoptions could be improved upon.
- Participants would like for their recommendations to carry more weight with the court, particularly in situations in which they believe the court's ruling failed to fully consider documented threats to a child's safety.

#### Family Life Center

- Family Life Center was praised for its new facility and its programs for children and families.
- Participants would like to see FLC provide more in home services to children and families.
- Participants express frustration that many of FLC's best programs are restricted to children with serious mental health diagnoses.
- Many participants praised FLC's day reporting and after school programs
  - Others felt the program was not flexible enough to adequately meet the needs of all the children directed to participate.

#### Schools

- School participants do not appear to have a shared understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of the schools and other child and family serving agencies in Cherokee County.
- The schools have a variety of academically based programs that could be part of the support system for children
  - After school tutoring

- Saturday school
  - Extracurricular activities
  - Alternative classrooms
- Participants reported the importance of getting more families more involved with their children's education and with their children's school.

#### Early Childhood Services

- Participants report waiting lists for Early Childhood services.
  - Additional funding would allow existing services to reach more families with programs such as Head Start and Parents as Teachers.
- Participants report that Parents as Teachers is a wonderful program, but that it may not have the resources to be fully present in all the communities of the county.
- Participants report concern that because there are so many poor families in Cherokee County programs like Head Start and Parents as Teachers may primarily be serving the families with the greatest skills in accessing available resources as opposed to the families who most desperately need help.

#### Family Preservation

- Family preservation is widely seen as a good service.
- Participants expressed concern that Medicaid rules require that mental health services be suspended while a family is receiving family preservation services.
  - Participants see the two services as very different and that it is not helpful for families to switch back and forth between the two.
- Family preservation services may not be of sufficient duration to assure sustainable change in families.

#### SRS Services

- Participants reported that SRS responds promptly to reports of child maltreatment.
- There does not appear to be a community wide understanding about the standards the agency follows when making family service decisions, such as informal supervision, family preservation, or foster care.

#### Juvenile Intake

- Participants reported very favorably about the new juvenile intake position funded by SRS and Family Life Center
- Some participants reported concern that local law enforcement agencies do not fully utilize this service while others reported that Juvenile Intake is routinely called by law enforcement.

#### Parenting Classes

- Participants often suggested that parenting classes need to be available

more frequently and in more locations in Cherokee County.

- Participants would like to target at-risk children's families with a variety of prevention oriented activities such as parenting classes, budgeting, nutrition, and community resources for children and families.
- Participants suggested that parenting resources need to be available for parents whenever they need help or information.
- Parenting classes should include daycare.

#### Wish List of Services Needed In Cherokee County

- A service like "Daily Reporting" for adults including:
  - Random or scheduled drug tests
  - Parenting skills, household and time management skills, budgeting.
  - A way to support parents in making and maintaining changes to improve their lives and their children's lives.
- A Big Brother/Big Sister program would be a useful resource in Cherokee County.
- Several participants suggested the need for a parent hot line or an easily accessible parent resource center.
  - Including information about positive discipline, nutrition, school issues, health.
  - Participants expressed concern that the families who most need help in Cherokee County are often the families who know the least about what help is available.
- Literacy and Adult Education
  - Participants suggested that parents who are more confident in their own skills will be more active in helping their children learn.
- Alcohol and Drug Prevention/Intervention
  - Local intensive outpatient programs so that parents can stay at home while in treatment and so that children can be involved, too.
  - Participants expressed concern that there is not an easily accessible, low cost option for drug tests.
- Participants would like to see a free or low cost dental clinic in the county.
- Participants would like to connect more Cherokee County families with the workforce with life skills training.
  - Including job coaching, basic life skills, and interpersonal skills to improve job performance and success
- Earlier Intervention/Prevention
  - Help parents make the right decisions regarding their children
  - Break some of the cycles of addiction and poverty.
- Ongoing Support/Aftercare
  - Participants believe that families need more support once their children are reintegrated into their homes.

- Participants report concerns that children cycle back into child welfare services too quickly because parents don't have that ongoing support after the children come home.

### **Community Based Services--Placements**

Two of the primary goals of the Kansas Systems of Care initiative are to reduce the numbers of Kansas children who must be placed in foster care and for those children who must be placed to increase the numbers of children who can be placed within their own community and school district. Participants were supportive of the goal of preventing out of home placement for Cherokee County children. Many participants would like to see more services provided to parents to prevent placement. Participants' different perspectives on out of home placement yielded a wide range of observations.

- Several participants reported that the recently developed Juvenile Intake program has had a very positive impact in reducing the number of Cherokee County placed in foster care.
  - Participants expressed concern that the success of this program was not widely known.
  - Participants expressed concern that more informal approaches to placement decisions were still used by law enforcement.
- Participants identified truancy, methamphetamines and parent/child conflict (CINC/NAN) as the main reasons children are placed in foster care in Cherokee County.
- Participants expressed concern that too many children are in out of home placement because of truancy.
- Participants report that in Cherokee County, neglect is almost always related to parents' drug and alcohol use.
- Participants report concern that foster care is like punishing the children by removing them from their homes instead of holding parents responsible.
  - They would like to see intensive services for the family to prevent placement.
  - Family counseling or individual counseling could be done with the child remaining in the home, or in a nearby relative or kin placement.

## Placements

- Participants suggest that if a child is going to be removed from their own home, the change should be a positive one.
  - Some relative and some foster placements do not provide a positive experience for children.
- Participants report that Cherokee County has some really good foster homes, but other local foster parents are ‘in it for the money.’
- Participants reported that foster parents need better training to manage the behaviors and problems of children in foster care.
- A child in a therapeutic foster home is not eligible for mental health case management services and therapeutic foster homes may not have enough training to be substitute case managers for these children.

## Accountability

The notion of accountability is central to the systems of care philosophy. For example, this report is part of a baseline community profile developed by the Kansas Systems of Care grant’s local evaluation team. This baseline profile is designed to give the local Cherokee County Systems of Care Steering Committee information useful to the task of developing a local plan to improve child welfare services. This profile also can be seen as the first step in a continuous feedback loop. The local evaluation team and the national evaluation team will continue to provide both qualitative and quantitative data to the local steering committee. Additionally, the steering committee will ask questions about the data provided and ask the evaluation team to provide additional data once they begin to define the focus of local systems of care activities.

Participants offered a wealth of observations on the meaning of accountability. Perhaps the most common theme related to accountability is one that has been expressed in connection with several of the systems of care principles. Participants frequently expressed the need for more information about child welfare services and for ready access to that information.

Participants mentioned sources of information about child welfare services in their community.

- Informal and formal sources of information
  - Newspaper, agency reports, gossip
- Hearing stories from people who are frustrated by their experiences with a child welfare agency.

Participants would like for more information to be shared with the public about the status of Cherokee County children and families.

- PACCC does a good job of sharing information among agencies, but not enough information is shared with the community.
- Participants believe that a broader exchange of information could increase community interest in the well being of children and families in Cherokee County.

Participants perceive a gap between what agency personnel understand about the status of children in Cherokee County and what the general public understands about county rates of poverty and child maltreatment.

Even among the child and family serving agencies, participants would like for more information to be shared in a routine way. When agency administrators do share this type of information, the information does not routinely reach staff working directly with children and families.

Participants would like for agencies to be more open in sharing information.

- Several participants reported barriers to accessing information even with signed releases and paid fees.
- Participants suggested that it should be common practice for agencies to widely disseminate information about new programs and services that might be of use to the children and families they serve.
- Participants also reported that they were not routinely informed of changes in services for families they work with.

Participants expressed pride in a number of recent developments in child and family services in the county including the expansion of services available through the county's Family Life Center. Participants would like to see more publicity about the successes and strengths of their community.

Participants report a strong sense of pride in Cherokee County.

- Participants wish that more news coverage focused on success in

Cherokee County, rather than problems.

When discussing accountability in child welfare services, participants often made reference to the importance of broad community involvement to achieving accountability.

Participants suggest that it would be helpful to involve parents and families in the assessment of services and the assessment of success in child welfare.

Participants believe that there is not a single, widely held definition of child maltreatment in Cherokee County.

- Some participants reported that middle class families don't 'see' the abuse and neglect experienced by poor families.
- Other participants reported that families living in the "Culture of Poverty" have very different ideas than the rest of the community about what constitutes proper care or maltreatment for children.

Several participants discussed the importance of leadership from community leaders and agency directors in promoting and sustaining accountability in child welfare services.

Participants suggest that accountability comes from good leadership from agency directors and elected officials.

- It is important to have good people in leadership positions both in the agencies that help children and families and elected positions such as the county attorney, judges, and legislators.

Each interview and focus group concluded with the same question. All participants were asked to describe their definition of success in child welfare services. Some participants saw success in terms of their own efforts as helping professionals; others saw success in terms of positive outcomes for children and families; and still other participants saw success in terms of the availability of a wide range of community resources to support children and families.

Definitions of success in child welfare services.

- Participants reported a number of concerns related to caseloads and the amount of time they have to work directly with families.

- Participants reported the feeling that every time they gave one family the time they needed, they were shorting other families the time they needed.
- One participant reported that to her success would be: More social work; less paperwork.
- Participants reported that success requires long term solutions to family problems, primarily job training and secure employment with adequate wages and benefits.
- Participants reported the belief that success in child welfare could be enhanced by having both parents involved in the care of a child, even if the parents don't live together.
- Participants often suggested that the long term success of children and families were the best measures of success of child welfare services.
- Several participants reported that they would feel child welfare services were successful if more emphasis was placed on prevention.
- Families and children get the services they want and need.
- Participants suggest that successful child welfare services include a broader vision of what constitutes child welfare services.
  - A common understanding of what is in the child's best interest and working together to advocate for the best interests of children and their families.
  - A shared set of principles and guidelines.
- Participants report that for them the best measure of how well they are doing comes from the families they have worked with.
- Only a few participants defined success in child welfare in terms of improving the rates of referral, substantiation, placement, reunification, re-entry, and recurrence of child maltreatment.

#### **IV. Summary of Major Themes**

This report should serve at least one important purpose: to portray the expertise, energy, and commitment to helping Cherokee County children and families demonstrated by the participants in these focus groups and interviews.

This final section follows the same outline of systems of care principles that organized the findings section of the report. Major themes are identified for each principle.

## **A. Interagency Collaboration and Communication**

Focus group and interview participants readily identified several examples of interagency communication and collaboration among Cherokee County agencies. Participants noted that communication and collaboration worked best among agencies that regularly participate in PACCC meetings. Informal efforts to enhance communication and collaboration were seen to be dependent on personal relationships, and consequently vulnerable to agency personnel changes. Participants also noted that lapses in interagency communication and collaboration affect their ability to effectively serve the children and families with whom they work.

## **B. Family Involvement**

Participant observations indicate that families involved with Cherokee County child welfare services routinely attend case planning conferences. Professional participants reported that family participation might be more meaningful to families if community resources could be more responsive to families' needs as perceived by the members of each family. Family participants' comments suggested that families could be better informed about the purposes of case planning as well as the roles and responsibilities of the participants. Participants also noted that child welfare services should be family focused and should be of sufficient duration to support sustainable change within families.

## **C. Individualized and Strengths-Based Services**

Participants reported that 'cookie-cutter' case plans are more common than individualized case plans in Cherokee County in part because of limitations

imposed by available resources. In particular, participants noted that transportation and housing presented significant barriers for many Cherokee County families. Participants supported the importance of providing more family focused services and more in-home services. While some participants described using strengths-based assessments, most participants concluded that Cherokee County child welfare services tend to be problem focused because problems are the reason their agency is involved with the family.

#### **D. Cultural Competence**

Participants reported that there are very few representatives of ethnic or racial minorities living in Cherokee County. A growing Micronesian immigrant population in Baxter Springs has presented challenges to some agencies because of the difficulty in finding translation resources for their Chuk language. Participants' most frequently identified cultural competence concern was the challenges they face in working with families who live in a "culture of poverty." They perceive these families as socially and culturally isolated, poorly educated, and reluctant to engage with child and family service providers.

#### **E. Community Based Services**

Participants expressed pride in recent accomplishments in Cherokee County and hope for continued improvement in child welfare services. The geographic challenges of four communities of similar size in one rural county and the county's proximity to three other states were often noted by participants. The inconsistencies in comments about the county's child and family serving agencies may indicate the absence of a common understanding of the roles and

responsibilities of each agency in relation to the others. Participants advocated for a number of additional resources for their community such as a parent resource center, literacy and adult education, local family based drug and alcohol treatment programs, and early intervention or prevention resources. Participants also noted the success of the new Juvenile Intake worker in preventing out of home placements for Cherokee County children. However, participants are still concerned about the number of teenagers entering foster care in the county.

#### **F. Accountability**

Participants noted that they are far more likely to hear about problems than successes in child welfare services in their county. They would like to see an effort to share information about the successes. A few participants suggested that sharing information about child welfare successes could increase visibility and support for child welfare services in the community. Participants would like for agencies to be more open and consistent in the ways they share information with the public, with other agencies, and with the families they serve.

Participants suggested including children and families in the assessment of services. They also noted the importance of good leadership from agency directors and elected officials in achieving accountability in child welfare services. Participants defined 'success' in child welfare services more in terms of child and family experiences than in terms of quantifiable outcome measures.

#### **Note from the researcher**

Misty Snider of the Cherokee County PACCC was instrumental in scheduling participants and locations for the focus groups. The research team

wishes to acknowledge the broad base of participation in this project. Many people gave freely of their time in focus groups and interviews ranging from one to two hours in length to help provide this community portrait.

Readers of this report are encouraged to contact the Kansas Systems of Care grant staff or the KU evaluation team with questions or feedback about the report. It has been a challenging task to summarize so much information in a way that is both accessible and comprehensive. The grant staff and the research team truly appreciate the contributions of the Cherokee County participants and hope they find this document informative and useful.