

Connecticut Uses RWJF's Family Support Services Program Funding to Expand Parenting Education Agenda

Family Support Services Program--the Connecticut States Initiative

SUMMARY

From 1999 through 2003, Family Support Connecticut, an effort initiated by the governor and convened by the directors of the state's health, education and human services agencies, worked to expand the infrastructure of Connecticut's family support program and fund parent leadership training through grants to communities.

The goal was to strengthen individual and family functioning by empowering families to manage life's events effectively.

This project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) national program, *Family Support Services Program*.

Key Results

- Connecticut agencies serving children and families began to adopt the principles of family support. For example, the Department of Children and Families made family support a guiding principle in its mission.
- Family Support Connecticut coordinated the creation of the Family Development Training and Credentialing Program, a 90-hour skill-building course in family development for front-line workers.
- The Parent Trust, a training fund initiated under the project, made two rounds of awards:
 - In 2002, the fund awarded \$214,000 to 17 organizations that trained approximately 340 parent leaders.
 - In 2003, the fund awarded \$197,000 to 14 organizations.

Funding

RWJF provided \$250,000 for this project to the Governor's Partnership to Protect Connecticut's Workforce.

THE PROBLEM

Connecticut began work related to family support services—which emphasize strengthening individual and family functioning by empowering families to manage life's events effectively—in the late 1980s, when the state legislature authorized the development of school-based family resource centers to provide comprehensive, integrated community-based family support and child development services (e.g., child care, adult education, positive youth development services and referral services).

By 1996, the Department of Children and Families had launched a family support program for families with children at risk of child abuse and neglect. Connecticut's Commission on Children was operating leadership training institutes statewide for parents consisting of a 20-week course designed to build parents' skills to advocate for positive health and educational outcomes for their children.

The commission is a nonpartisan arm of the state legislature comprised of representatives from government and the private sector. Parent engagement and leadership was key elements of all of Connecticut's family support services and programs.

CONTEXT

Because of the demographic and economic trends affecting children and families in the 1980s and 1990s, especially increases in the number of single-parent families and working mothers, many state agencies serving children and families had showed interest in the family support concept to help families deal with increasing strains. States began to establish programs and policies to enhance parenting and strengthen families and communities.

In 1993, the federal government enacted the Family Preservation and Family Support Act to provide states with funds to expand local family support projects and to start new family support projects. The legislation, however, lacked money for research, technical assistance or training for new and expanded programs, and no funds were specifically allotted for statewide network programs.

RWJF believed that creating state networks of family support programs would help the family support concept emerge as a comprehensive system of services featuring a public-private partnership of community sites working in concert with multiple state agencies. In 1994, RWJF established a national program, the *Family Support Services Program*, to help selected states establish these statewide networks. However, funding a national

program that focused on family and child welfare issues rather than health or health care was a departure for RWJF.

THE PROJECT

Connecticut began working with the *Family Support Services Program* and its national program office, Family Support America, in 1996. Over the next few years, Family Support America provided funding from RWJF (under a subcontract) and other assistance to help Family Support Connecticut (an effort initiated by the governor and convened by the directors of health, education and human services agencies to create a common statewide family support agenda and coordinate state family support efforts) build a core team to develop and implement the state's family support agenda. This team—called the Leadership Council—consisted of representatives of all state agencies responsible for services to children and families as well as family members.

Senior managers from the Commission on Children and the Connecticut Department of Children and Families co-chaired Family Support Connecticut and worked with the Leadership Council. The activities of Family Support Connecticut included:

- Developing a common definition of family support.
- Providing training on family support to parents and providers.
- Establishing a linkage group among state agencies serving children and families to coordinate family support services.
- Organizing an annual Family Day celebration to build public will for family support.
- Beginning planning to develop a statewide network of family service providers.

In 1999, RWJF awarded the Governor's Partnership to Protect Connecticut's Workforce a direct grant under the *Family Support Services Program* (ID# 036670) to fund the work of Family Support Connecticut. The Governor's Partnership is a nonprofit public-private partnership that aims to prevent alcohol and drug abuse and other problems in Connecticut's youth. It served as the fiduciary agent for the RWJF grant.

From 1999 to 2003, RWJF grant funds helped expand Connecticut's family support infrastructure and fund parent leadership training through community-level grants. The project was housed at the partnership.

Staff from the Commission on Children coordinated and administered a training fund—the Parent Trust—which in turn gave grants to community-based organizations for leadership training programs for parents. Established by the state legislature in 2001, the Parent Trust supports parent leadership training to improve the health, safety and

education of children. Such training gives parents opportunities and skills to get involved in their communities, especially in developing and implementing programs for children.

RWJF funds were used to implement Parent Trust activities, but not to lobby for the passage of this legislation.

Other Funding

Local communities that received grants from the Parent Trust were required to match the grant funds by 50 percent. The Governor's Partnership received \$440,000 in additional funding for the Parent Trust: \$340,000 from state agencies (children and families, mental retardation, social services, mental health and addiction services, education and services for the blind), and \$100,000 from the William Caspar Graustein Fund.

RESULTS

The project accomplished the following, according to project staff:

- **Connecticut agencies serving children and families began to adopt the principles of family support.** For example, the Department of Children and Families made family support a guiding principle in its mission. The department's mission statement includes: "Principle One—Families as Allies. The integrity of families and each individual family member is respected, and the importance of the attachments between family members is accepted as critical. All families have strengths and the goal is to build on these strengths. Family involvement and self-determination in the planning and service delivery process is essential."
- **Family Support Connecticut coordinated the creation of the Family Development Training and Credentialing Program, a 90-hour skill-building course in family development for front-line workers.** This interagency state program is comprised of classroom instruction, a practicum experience and portfolio development (the portfolio includes the student's plans for providing family development services, and materials for families such as handouts, fliers and brochures). Connecticut employees who completed the program received a Family Development Credential Certification. Those who completed a portfolio and passed a standardized exam could also earn a family development credential from the University of Connecticut.
- **The Parent Trust made two rounds of awards. In 2002, the fund awarded \$214,000 to 17 organizations that trained approximately 340 parent leaders. In 2003, the fund awarded \$197,000 to 14 organizations. Examples of initiatives funded are:**
 - The Meriden Parenting Leadership Institute helped parents lead a community campaign for a school breakfast program in all eight of the town's elementary

schools. According to project staff, the campaign resulted in the school breakfast program's implementation.

- The family support network of ARC of Quinebaug Valley, a support group for parents of children with disabilities, provided six sessions of leadership development training.
- Prevent Child Abuse CT and the Wheeler Clinic in Hartford provided 10 after-school training sessions for young parents at the A.I. Prince Regional Technical School. The parents also conducted a feasibility study for an on-site day care center at the school.

Communications

Project staff issued one report about the project. Local newspapers published approximately 50 articles about the project. See [Bibliography](#) for information on the report.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. **Partnerships with nontraditional partners are essential to the long-term success of family support services.** Shared decision-making with nontraditional partners such as parents was a key to the project's success. Parent involvement helped raise awareness of family support services among policy-makers and legislators, and helped secure funds for these programs. (Project Director)
2. **Building the capacity of community organizations to raise funds and implement programs is critical in building a statewide constituency.** Local community organizations that received grants from the Parent Trust were required to match the grant funds by 50 percent. According to the project director, these groups are still developing their expertise in budgetary matters. Building their capacity by bringing experts from businesses and universities into their membership can help alleviate the anxiety community organizations feel about approaching the business community for financial support. (Project Director)

AFTERWARD

The Parent Trust continues to operate, and Connecticut continues to fund other family support initiatives. The General Assembly established the State Prevention Council, composed of the leadership of state agencies. It is responsible for developing a comprehensive, coordinated statewide plan for promoting positive outcomes for children, youth and families. It is also responsible for addressing the causes of crime and violence and reducing the opportunities for crime to occur. It has assumed the responsibilities of the Leadership Council, which disbanded.

People from communities that had received Parent Trust Fund grants established Connecticut Parent Power, a cross-community parent advocacy organization.

The Department of Mental Retardation adopted family support principles and included them in quality job performance standards for case managers.

Prepared by: Robert Crum and Lori De Milto

Reviewed by: Janet Heroux and Molly McKaughan

Program Officers: Terrance Keenan and Judith Stavisky

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

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