Nevada's University-State Partnership: A Comprehensive Alliance for Improved Services to Children and Families

by Thom Reilly and Nancy Petersen

In Nevada as in the nation, collaboration is the name of the game in educating child welfare workers.

There has been a truly remarkable explosion in the number of collaborative ventures in various fields over the past decade. More and more frequently, the traditionally hierarchical organizations that have dominated institutional arrangements in the past are being replaced by collaborative projects, partnerships, and consensus-building endeavors. Organizations are beginning to collaborate with one another in an attempt to maximize their resources and minimize program duplication. As part of this trend, there has been a well-documented emergence of collaboration in the education and training of public agency child welfare staff through the development of school-agency partnerships.[1]

Collaboration has been defined as "organizational and interorganizational structures where resources, power, and authority are shared and where people are brought together to achieve common goals that could not be accomplished by a single individual or organization independently."[2] The partnership between the university system and the public child welfare agencies in Nevada has evolved into this type of shared governing structure.

Members in the partnership include representatives from Nevada's three public child welfare agencies and two university schools of social work, staff from the state child and adolescent mental health divisions, staff from the early childhood and juvenile justice systems, foster parents, and nonprofit social service providers. Components of the partnership include in-service training for public agency staff and foster parents, educational programs that offer bachelor's and master's degrees in social work (BSW and MSW), stipends for graduate students willing to work with vulnerable families in the public sector, public agency field placements, valuable community service, and possibilities for evaluation and research. The current partnership developed because people and organizations involved in different aspects of the child welfare system recognized that each had the same responsibility for Nevada's population of vulnerable children and families.

This article discusses the 10-year history of Nevada's partnership and the critical factors that facilitated its initial development, the four areas of the partnership (in-service training, education, research, and community involvement) that have developed over the past 10 years, the factors that have proved essential in the growth and development of the partnership, the obstacles that the partnership has encountered in its collaborative arrangement, and future directions for Nevada's collaborative efforts.

Forging a Partnership

The partnership between Nevada's child welfare system and its university schools of social work has endured over 10 years. It began in 1986, when the Nevada Department of Human Resources (DHR) approached the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), for assistance with staff training and development. Nevada was facing a tremendous increase in population growth at that time coupled with a dramatic rise in the incidence rates of teen pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide, and child abuse and neglect. When the partnership began, few of the state's child welfare staff had academic preparation in a field related to their work, and less than 20 percent of staff had a degree in social work.[3]

At around this time, UNR invited DHR to join it in applying for a federal child welfare training grant. When the grant was awarded to them, they established a community advisory board (which has proved a critical factor in the broader partnership) to oversee the training program.

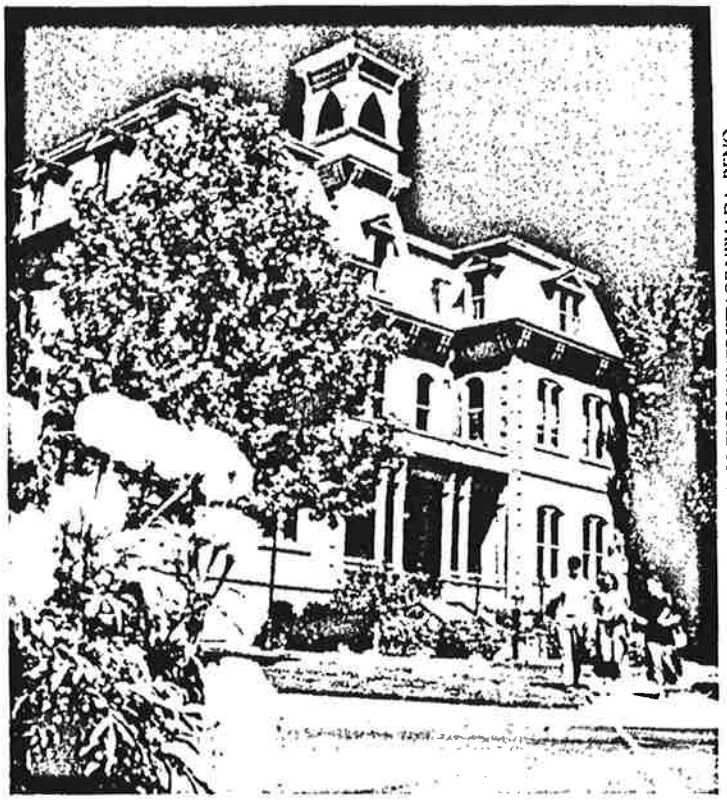
Before 1988, there were no MSW programs in Nevada. The community advisory board and various community focus groups made the decision to seek state licensing for social workers and to approach the Nevada Legislature with a request for funding for graduate social work education. DHR agreed to present the funding proposal to the legislature. A political and financial alliance subsequently emerged that was successful in obtaining state licensing and funding for MSW programs in Reno and Las Vegas.

DHR and the university schools of social work in Reno and Las Vegas agreed to create educational programs responsive to state needs, including a part-time program for state employees, with an emphasis on learning to work in public settings. Various barriers that prevented child welfare workers from participating in social work educational programs were then addressed by offering master's-level classes during work hours at a site convenient to workers. Employees were granted administrative leave with pay, could register on-site, and received books as part of the contract with the university. In the rural areas of the state, the university provided on-site instruction and offered classes in large blocks of time, instead of in a weekly class format. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), established a second BSW program to give existing public agency employees the opportunity to obtain degrees in social work.

Areas of Collaboration

Nevada's collaborative project today involves four primary areas: (1) in-service training, (2) professional education and teaching, (3) research and evaluation, and (4) community service.

In-Service Training. The most visible component of the partnership is the Nevada Child Welfare Training Partnership, an in-service training program located within the School of Social Work at UNR. The staff of this training program consists of a full-time training coordinator and a program assistant, both of whose salaries are paid with training funds authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The university provides the required 25 percent match through in-kind supports. Since its inception in 1991, all state and county child welfare workers have been required to complete the program's core competency-based curriculum, developed by the Institute for Human Services in Columbus, Ohio. In addition, the program offers training in a variety of topics that are of importance to the field of child welfare.



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The University of Nevada, Reno, is one of the state universities involved in collaborative efforts to educate child welfare workers.

The teachers who provide the core training, recruited from Nevada's child welfare staff, are offered intensive instruction on course content and training techniques for the adult learner. Trainers of the more advanced, specialized courses are recruited locally and nationally and contracted with through a variety of funding sources.

The program has expanded to include the distribution of training calendars and newsletters, the use of a training needs assessment instrument, the increased use of transfer-of-learning technology, the computer tracking of all workshop evaluations and training attendance, and the identification and implementation of programs focused on the specific training needs of member agencies and organizations. All three public child welfare agencies in Nevada have undergone individual re-

organizations in the past five years, which has presented those in service delivery with new challenges. Since the training partnership is affiliated with the university rather than with one of the specific member agencies, it has been able to provide a relatively unbiased opinion on best-practice principles and philosophies and has enabled child welfare staff members to network in a positive environment.

During the past two years, the training partnership has taken a particularly active role in the development of an expanded foster care training program. As is common in many states, Nevada is experiencing a crisis in the recruitment and retention of foster caregivers. Increasingly, children are being placed in costly levels of higher care due to a lack of trained foster parents.

To address this problem, and in recognition of the current national movement to professionalize foster caregivers and increase their active participation in the planning and delivery of services to children and families, Nevada's training partnership has brought in nationally recognized trainers to begin to transform its foster care system. A statewide foster care steering committee, with representatives from all affected parties, was established to craft policies and procedures related to the expanded role of foster parents. Regional and programmatic subcommittees gave additional input. The final recommendations from the statewide committee were adopted by the child welfare system and resulted in the development and implementation of policies and action plans that are now a major part of the state's training and recruitment efforts. After the planning and policy work were completed, the training partnership began to contract with specific trainers, identify curricula, and develop new trainers from among foster caregivers and social workers.

The impetus for changing how the state viewed its foster caregivers came from the training partnership. Since the program was located at the university, the change process did not get bogged down in the daily stresses and entrenched practices of the service-providing agencies.

A third component of the in-service training program involves the training provided by UNR and UNLV faculty. As Nevada's partnership evolved, the universities made a commitment to recruiting faculty members who had a practice background in public social service. It was important for faculty to be able to demonstrate to frontline staff that they were credible educators who had an understanding of the changing nature of practices in child welfare today. Topics for a series of workshops and seminars offered by university staff are now generated by child welfare staff and foster parents. Recent topics have included team building, foundations of supervision, developmental disability and child welfare, working with families for whom substance abuse is a problem, stress management, cultural competence, working with adolescents, and behavior management skills for residential treatment facilities.

Finally, university faculty have served as consultants and facilitators to state and county management and supervisory personnel who have been struggling with issues related to organizational changes and staff morale. These consultations have been effective primarily because of the long-standing relationships between university faculty members and agency personnel and the trust that has evolved during their 10-year partnership.

Professional Education and Teaching. The second area of partnership in Nevada concerns professional social work education and teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In addition to the universities' commitment to recruiting faculty with experience in the public sector; UNR and UNLV have made a concerted effort to increase the amount of child welfare content and public agency practice taught in university courses. In fact, as faculty have gained expertise in the area of child welfare, they have sometimes found themselves in the role of advocates for frontline workers coping with changing administrative policies and practices.

The partnership has had a positive effect on the supervision and placement of field practicums. At UNLV, for example, Title IV-E funds were used to hire a field placement coordinator to oversee students placed as interns in public child welfare agencies. Officials made sure that an individual with public agency experience was recruited for the position to ensure that there was an effective liaison between the university and the public agency. The field placement coordinator conducts field seminars in which students are required to participate. Likewise, the training coordinator at UNR conducts a field placement seminar for students placed in public child welfare and child and adolescent mental health agencies in the northern and rural parts of the state.

Additionally, through the use of Title IV-E funds at UNR and a federal child welfare training grant awarded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families at UNLV, stipends are now awarded to state employees accepted into the MSW program and to students willing to commit to public child welfare employment after graduation. The partnership is dedicated to ensuring that a stipend (in the form of a cash award or paid tuition, books, and administrative leave) is awarded to every public child welfare worker accepted into the graduate program at the school of social work at UNR or UNLV. Thus far, the state has been successful in honoring this commitment. All public child welfare employees and students who accept a stipend are required to sign an agreement to work one year for a public child welfare agency for every year they receive funding in the graduate program. As a result of these endeavors and incentives, 68 percent of the child welfare workers employed by the state Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) now have degrees in social work, a significant increase from the 20 percent who had degrees in the field in 1986.

Research and Evaluation. Nevada's partnership has also resulted in numerous research and evaluation opportunities for its public child welfare system. DCFS and

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UNR have agreed to conduct joint research in several important areas, and faculty have teamed up with agency personnel to do so. For example, studies of factors affecting permanency planning in Washoe County (Reno) and Clark County (Las Vegas) have produced needed insight into program and policy direction in the state's foster care program.[4] One study found that degrees in social work were among the factors shared by workers who were more effective in achieving permanency plans for foster children.[5] This finding reaffirmed the work and mission of the child welfare education and training partnership.

Several studies have been conducted to provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of family preservation services in Nevada.[6] Researchers have also surveyed the state's mental health, child welfare, early childhood, and juvenile parole workers to determine base-line information concerning multicultural competence for use in planning diversity programs.[7] Additionally, university faculty have served as evaluators for numerous federal and state grants and continue to engage graduate students in research projects involving the public child welfare system.

University faculty and public agency staff are currently involved in research on the following topics: the state's implementation of the federal Family Preservation and Support Services Provisions (FP/FS) of the Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-66), the impact of the new citizen–judicial-agency foster care review system in southern Nevada, and the two-year-old juvenile drug court in Las Vegas.

Overall, these research efforts have proved invaluable for policy and planning activities in the child welfare system and have provided important documentation during county commission and state legislative program and budget hearings.

Community Service. Due to the social work faculty's extensive involvement in the various areas of child welfare practice, there have been numerous opportunities for participation in community projects geared to work with vulnerable children and families. Structured membership on advisory and policy committees has proved valuable for both sides. Representatives from the public child welfare system serve on university committees (e.g., the curriculum advisory committee and the faculty search committee). Several university faculty members are serving on child welfare committees (e.g., the Children's Trust Fund, the Child Protective Services Citizens' Advisory Committee, the Children's Justice Grant Steering Committee, the Adoption Task Force, the Child Abuse and Neglect Core Committee, and the Foster Care Review Board). In addition, faculty serve on a host of private nonprofit boards and committees that deal with the issues faced by vulnerable children and their families.

University faculty have been intimately involved in the community-based reform efforts resulting from the federal FP/FS program, which was created in an effort to respond to many of the problems faced by public child welfare agencies. Currently, three community-based consortia, located in the northern, southern, and rural regions of Nevada, are receiving funding to plan for the implementation of more integrated and consumer-based systems to serve families better. Leadership positions in these consortia are held by university personnel. University staff also have been instrumental in the implementation of the 21 family resource centers established during the past two years.

Factors Essential for Growth and Development

In studying collaborations, theorists have cautioned against adhering to a single model in analyzing them. The factors that can impact collaborative efforts are varied and are often site or project specific.[8] However, several factors have emerged as important to the successful growth and development of Nevada's collaboration. These include the development of a trusting relationship, the historical commitment of the university to serving vulnerable populations in the public sector, shared leadership, flexible funding, committed participants, and an established method for monitoring progress.

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Trusting Relationship. At the beginning of Nevada's partnership, both the public agencies and the universities involved had their share of examples of failed collaborative efforts from the past. At first, agency staff expressed concerns about the expertise of faculty members, and faculty expressed reservations about devoting an increased amount of time to public agency activities. Overcoming the distrust that existed in the two systems became a major focus of the partnership. Both systems spent considerable time bringing players to the table who were willing to work to develop an atmosphere in which they could collaborate and cooperate.

Nevada has been fortunate to have stable people in key positions in its child welfare and university systems. The solid, trusting relationships between people in these two systems, built on a history of mutual success, has enabled each of the parties to address difficult issues openly, resolve conflicts quickly, and experiment with new ideas.

Historical Commitment. The degree to which schools and agencies develop effective partnerships is often tied to their shared history—their perceptions of each other and the pattern of their interactions that has developed over time.[9] Unlike many other universities involved in partnerships, UNR has demonstrated a consistent and long-standing commitment to serving the public sector.

both state MSW programs were established with a focus on education for public-sector practice, including the requirement of field placements in the public sector. Graduate social work education in Nevada, which began with the assignment of a state agency staff member to the university as a faculty member, used federal Title IV-E money to fund several faculty positions.

Shared Leadership. Rather than assuming their traditional leadership role, government officials assisted in the facilitation of program efforts and hired credible conveners to help with the process. Nevada's educational initiatives have been developed from the bottom up rather than controlled from the top down. Involvement has been broad based, and various strategies have been employed to include a range of interested parties (i.e., consumers, social workers, foster parents, adoptive parents, legislators, and agency administrators) in the design of educational programs and policies. In fact, initial leadership on several issues has emerged from front-line staff, foster parents, and individual faculty. Decisions are made by consensus of the steering committee. Positioning the training coordinator at the university has increased the autonomy of the training program and allowed it more flexibility in coordinating its multiple players.

Flexible Funding. One of the cornerstones of the partnership has proved to be its ability to design and implement flexible-funding contracts. Although Title IV-E funds are a primary source of these contracts, several other federal, state, and local programs are relied upon to finance the state's training and educational programs. These include funds authorized under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, Social Services Block Grant funds, federal independent living funds, grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, state drug and alcohol funds, federal child abuse and neglect state grants (authorized under the Child Abuse and Prevention Act), state adoption training dollars, and state and county general funds. The training coordinator has been given the authority to access these funding sources creatively and to craft contracts with a variety of entities without seeking cumbersome approvals.

Committed Participants. The commitment of dynamic participants, however, has perhaps been the principal factor contributing to the success of Nevada's collaboration. Individuals who did not have a real interest in the outcome of the effort or who disrupted the collaborative process were asked to leave; it was essential to ensure that the people at the table wanted to be there. A consensus-based model of decision-making, in which people attending the meetings make decisions regarding the direction of projects, has been instrumental in accomplishing the goals of the partnership.

Established Method for Monitoring Progress. Establishing an effective mechanism to monitor the progress of the collaboration has been another key factor in the partnership's success. As one strategy, the partnership has talked with interested and involved parties through focus groups, surveys, and open meetings. Individual training needs are assessed annually as another part of the agency's strategic planning process. Additionally, the partnership has employed faculty and graduate students to evaluate various child welfare programs (i.e., family preservation, risk assessment, independent-living services, foster care services, family resource centers, and early childhood services), as well as to evaluate the effects of the in-service training.

Obstacles Encountered During the Collaborative Process

Several obstacles have emerged during Nevada's collaborative process. These include issues related to the differing organizational cultures of partnership members, uncertainties about continued funding, multiple-agency partnerships, and the effects of a lack of career ladders on retention of MSW graduates in the public agency.

> ***It has been important to remember that differences between the organizational cultures of public social service agencies and universities can lead to conflicts.***

Bringing together people from a number of organizations has been one of the partnership's greatest strengths; however, the organizational cultures of public social service agencies and universities are quite different, and this has sometimes proved problematic. The highly collegial and diffuse form of resolving issues at the university level, for example, has at times conflicted with the hierarchical style traditionally practiced in governmental entities.[10] Numerous times throughout the partnership, the involved parties have had to take the time to educate each other on these differences. The ability to listen to each other and the commitment to spending the necessary time to work through disagreements have been essential elements in the collaboration's success.

Similarly, the large number of partners involved in Nevada's partnership has sometimes proved complicated. The political and financial priorities of the various agencies, for example, have from time to time differed and thus complicated the collaborative process; there has often been a need for extensive planning and negotiations as a result. To overcome these obstacles, it has been necessary to rely on the past relationships between partners, to review the shared vision of collaborators, and to recall the partnership's mission statement. Needless to say, the multiple partners have at times had to direct significant time and effort toward the resolution of these problems.

The partnership has also faced uncertainties related to funding. Nevada, like other states, has been subject to inconsistent interpretations of the funding guidelines for

the Title IV-E training program. Although attempts have been made to diversify the funding base to support Nevada's training and educational needs, Title IV-E funds remain the partnership's main funding source. This has led to delays in contracting and confusion as to whether the state can attempt to implement various new programs. The continuing fiscal pressure on public agencies and universities may be an inescapable fact of the times, but attempts to clarify the funding regulations must continue.

Finally, although preliminary data thus far have shown that most MSW graduates remain in the field of child welfare, a number of graduates have left their public child welfare jobs in Nevada after their time agreement with the agency has expired. Additional time is needed to fully assess the implications of this trend; there has been some grumbling from public agencies, however, that many of the MSW employees do not want to provide case management services and perhaps feel that this type of casework is "beneath them." For their part, some graduates have complained that the public agencies lack career ladders that recognize their additional education. Currently, there is no differential between the salaries of child welfare case managers with undergraduate or graduate degrees in social work and case managers with degrees in other fields. Positions in clinical case management and mental health services that require MSWs are available; the public agencies, however, have not yet decided on issues regarding compensation and the effective use of MSW education for child welfare case managers.

Future Directions

The collaborative model used in Nevada to obtain an effective university-agency partnership has taken years to reach fruition. Consensus building can be a long and tedious process; success is possible, however, given the right mixture of committed and dynamic participants, a focus on the future, and a feeling that things can and must change. Indeed, if services to at-risk populations are to be improved, the active involvement of all players is essential.

Like other states in the nation, Nevada is struggling to enact reforms in the areas of child welfare and income maintenance. The state is implementing family-focused and consumer-driven services. New legislation is being introduced and debated in the 1997 legislative session that, if passed, would allow for multiple responses to reports of abuse and neglect. The changes to existing statutes would allow for varied levels of intervention and services in the investigation and treatment of child abuse or neglect. For example, some services for families in need of assistance but without substantial abuse or neglect would be directly provided by community rather than state agencies. Significant efforts will be directed towards building the capacity for a local, coordinated response.

Nevada recognizes that the community's current capacity to meet the demands of this paradigm shift in protecting and caring for children and families is not at the appropriate level. Considerable new training for frontline, supervisory, and management staff in public agencies, the judicial system, and the community will be necessary. The implementation of these reforms and the need for expanded skill and knowledge requirements for child welfare workers will be a unique challenge for Nevada's partnership.

A recent evaluation of the child protection system in Reno, which called for placing more emphasis on the development of a skills-based child welfare training program, brings additional challenges for the future.[11] Although the evaluation concerned Reno specifically, the need for such training has been recognized by agency representatives of all three child protective service (CPS) agencies in the state. The report on Reno identified concerns that the CPS system in Nevada tends to be reactive (incident driven) rather than proactive (looking at the overall safety and risk of a child within his or her environment). To broaden the scope of CPS investigations, state laws mandating the protection of children will need modification and will need to require an expansion of assessment skills training.

Finally, the largest child welfare agency in Nevada, DCFS, is preparing for an extensive reorganization in July 1997. This will shift the agency away from a programmatic organizational structure (i.e., child welfare, child mental health, and juvenile justice) to a regional structure, in which the three regional directors will supervise the three programs. The child welfare partnership will face the new challenge of maintaining the continued special skills training for child welfare workers while assisting with the provision of family-based, consumer-driven, divisionwide training applicable to all social service staff working with children and families. The reorganization will also raise some of the multiagency partnership issues addressed above, such as differing agency priorities, and will require even greater planning and collaboration.

These issues will require significant attention and planning by the training partnership and its member agencies. The partnership strengths that have evolved over the past 10 years—including a shared mission, long-standing relationships, shared and collaborative leadership, flexible funding, and commitment to the partnership—will be very important in facing the challenges ahead. ***PW***

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