

Building Effective Community Partnerships With Public Child Welfare Agencies: Lessons From the Field

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Hint that evaluating context might be challenging...

David Crampton wrote:

Did anything ever happen with the community partnership data? Is anyone on the team planning to review it? If not, I would be interested in getting it and perhaps summarizing it along with the site by site F2F coordinator summaries.

Lynn Usher replied:

I'll take you up on that offer!



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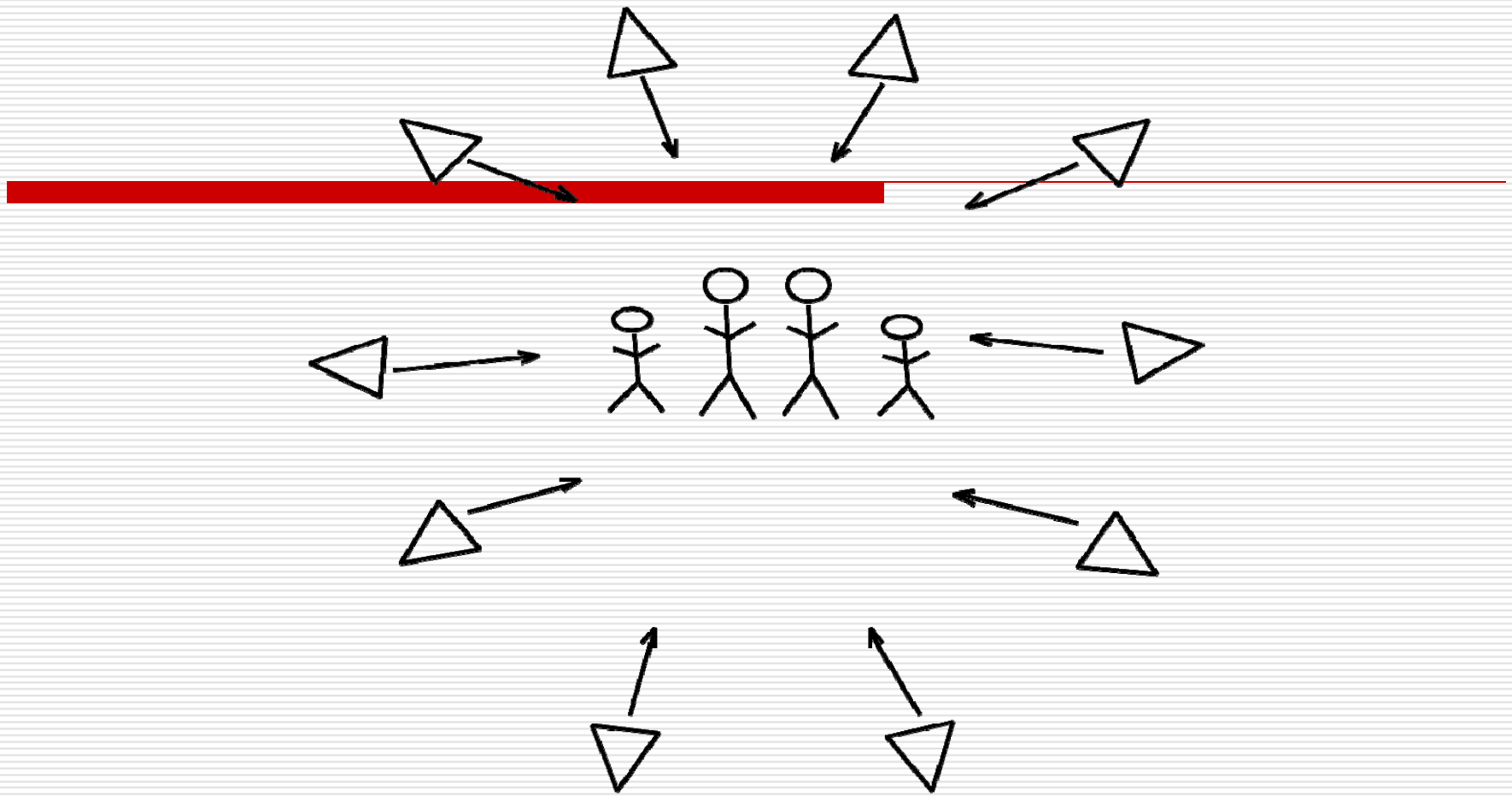
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Hints that Building Community Partnerships might be challenging...

In their assessment of person-environment practice, Kemp, Whittaker and Tracy (1997) note that throughout the history of social work, the profession has struggled with balancing person-centered and environmental interventions. A consequence of this struggle is that social workers often focus on interpersonal methods while overlooking environmental influences on well being. Among the potential explanations for why social work is more directed towards individuals and families rather than communities, Kemp et al. suggest that practitioners lack sufficient knowledge about why environment matters and how to improve it.





McKnight, J. (1997). A 21-st century map for healthy communities and families. *Families in Society*. Mar/Apr, 117-127.

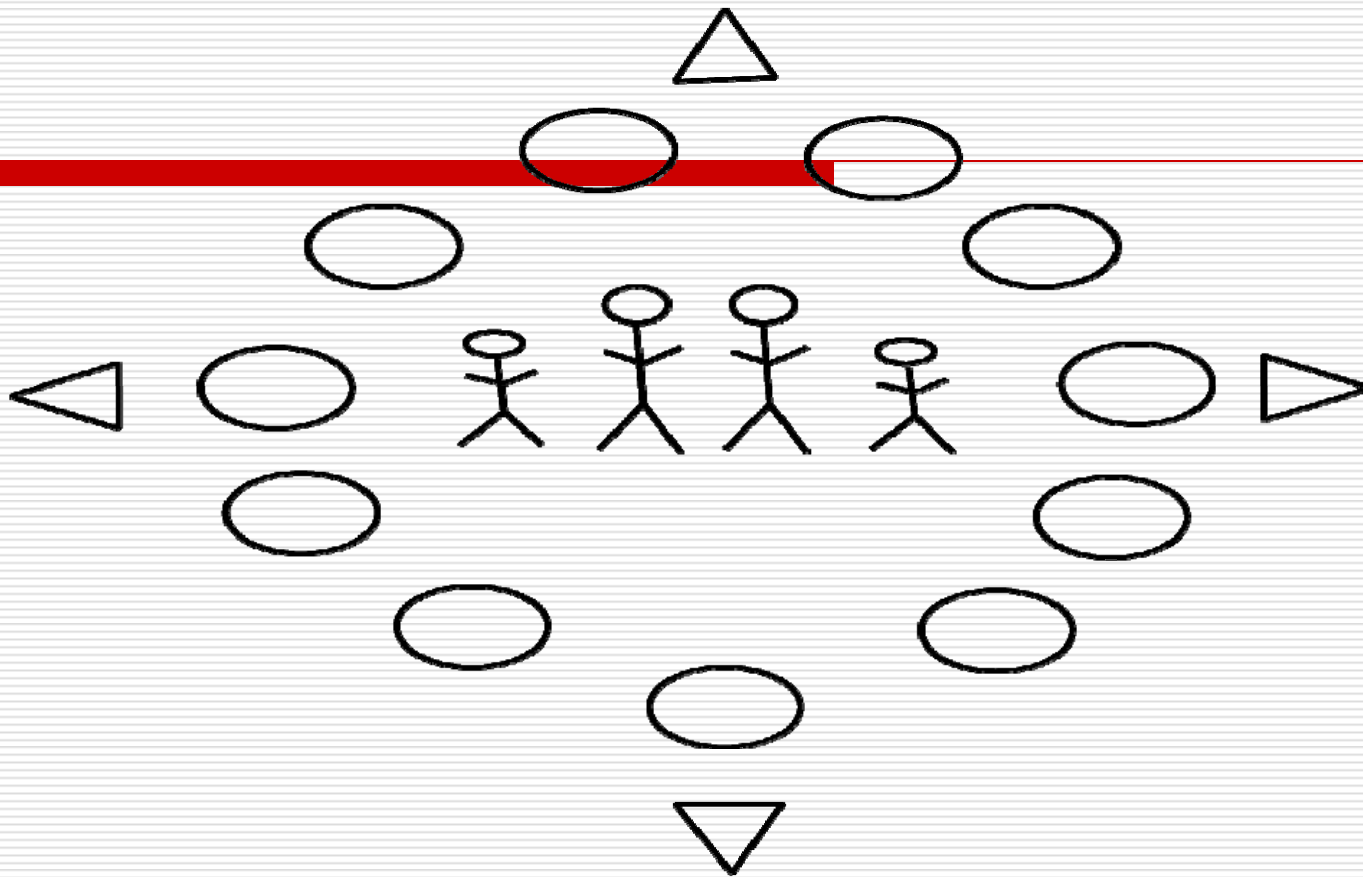


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Hints that Building Community Partnerships might be challenging...

“Social work professionals understand community involvement very well; it is astonishing that this knowledge has been applied so little. Perhaps child welfare administrators or the officials to whom they report are too busy or too defensive to engage laypeople in a true partnership. It is a mistake. Laypeople need to be drawn in—given authority and candid information—if child welfare is not to be isolated in the face of what is coming.”

Alvin Schorr (2000). The Bleak Prospect for Public Child Welfare. *Social Service Review*, 74(1), 124-36



Hints that Building Community Partnerships might be challenging...

In his critique of the ecological perspective in social work, Wakefield (1996a), argued that there was no empirical support for the perspective and that “the lack of substantive assertions about the nature, strength, or changeability of specific causes” in eco-systems made this approach unhelpful for social work (p. 27).

He further suggested that there is no evidence that re-direction of clinical efforts toward macro-level intervention would make clinical intervention more effective (Wakefield, 1996b).



Values: Public child welfare agencies need community partners

A key premise of the Building Community Partnerships (BCP) strategy is that all communities have history, strengths, and traditions that should be acknowledged and respected by public child welfare agencies (PCWAs).

A commitment to BCP helps the PCWA draw upon these community assets.

The values of BCP include the beliefs that every family needs the support of their community and that PCWAs need community partners to strengthen relationships between families and their communities.



Explicit key elements for each strategy reinforced by “tools,” training, and regular visits by TA

By developing community partnerships, the PCWA can:

1. Identify and enhance community-based services and supports that are accessible financially, culturally, and geographically for all families where they live.
2. Strengthen the other Family to Family strategies by supporting the development of a strong network of neighborhood based resource families (RDS), ensuring that community representatives are present at every TDM meeting, engaging community members in analyzing and responding to child welfare data (SE) and promoting efforts to reduce the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system (ERDD).



Explicit key elements for each strategy reinforced by “tools,” training, and regular visits by TA

While recognizing that every community is unique, the BCP key elements are presented as a series of necessary steps in the process of developing working partnerships between communities and PCWAs that are based upon successful experiences around the country:

- *Develop an infrastructure within the PCWA for Community Partnerships*
- *Reach out to the community through community forums*
- *Join together and systematically decide how the PCWA and the community will support the activities that will produce the best results*
- *Roll out formalized community partnership mechanisms such as contracts with community-based organizations and geographic assignment of child welfare staff*



Evaluation of BCP for Anchor Sites more prescriptive

The 2005 self-assessment included rating each site's progress in implementing the four core strategies using a description of "key ingredients" the TA team in each strategy area had developed as a technical assistance tool. At this point, a site was not considered to be moving towards full implementation of BCP unless they had neighborhood contracting and collaboratives in place, community representatives attending TDM removal meetings, and data provided to community members on a regular basis.

Four years later, well into the anchor phase of Family to Family, many of the anchor sites still do not have these key ingredients in place which raises a question as to whether these sites are 'correctly' implementing the BCP strategy.



Evaluation of BCP for Anchor Sites more prescriptive

BCP Technical Assistants developed three definitions in variations in the anchor sites: collaborative or coalition, network of agencies or individuals, and comparable strategy.

Of the eleven sites included in this study, Cuyahoga County, Denver County, Fresno County, Jefferson County, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Wake County were placed in the first group by the BCP TAs. This would suggest that only seven of the eleven would be rated as a four or better in implementing BCP.



Evaluation of BCP for Anchor Sites more prescriptive

Only one anchor site has all agency staff geographically assigned, although many sites have some geographic assignment of cases or staff.

Most of the anchor sites contract for some Family to Family activities, but few have coalitions of community-based organizations that collectively contract with the PCWA to provide several of these activities.



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Challenges of Building Community Partnerships

There are at least two areas in which the anchor site experiences point to the challenges of a “one size fits all” approach to BCP:

using geography to define communities

contracting for BCP services

Perhaps BCP guidelines are too prescriptive for some anchor sites.

Some sites had the impression that they were expected to implement the “Cleveland” model of BCP.



Challenges of Building Community Partnerships

The experience of BCP in the anchor sites echoes longstanding themes in the challenges of developing community-based child welfare practice, but also identifies new challenges related to making community partnerships a key part of **changing public systems**.

When reform is targeted in a specific neighborhood, the activities can be tailored to the specific needs of that neighborhood, but how does this approach apply to changing entire systems?

If every community is unique and every public agency is unique, is it possible to develop a uniform approach to developing community partnerships in all communities?



Challenges of Building Community Partnerships

We very much wanted your article to be included in this issue, because we fundamentally agree that community-connections are the missing ingredient in child welfare. Many child welfare workers are looking for examples of community engagement – how to structure it, how to fund it, how to maintain it over time, etc.

Unfortunately, we feel that, while making the point that child welfare ought to include communities, the article still fails to offer solid actionable examples of how child welfare agency practitioners, leaders, or advocates could get the system there. **If steps such as “leadership vision,” “sustain resources,” and “collect data” were easy to accomplish, most places would have done them already. Most places WANT to do these things, but need real world solutions to real world barriers.**



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Potential Next Steps in Evaluating BCP

In the anchor-site phase of Family to Family, there was a compelling rationale for focusing on the core strategies and specific key elements for implementing those strategies.

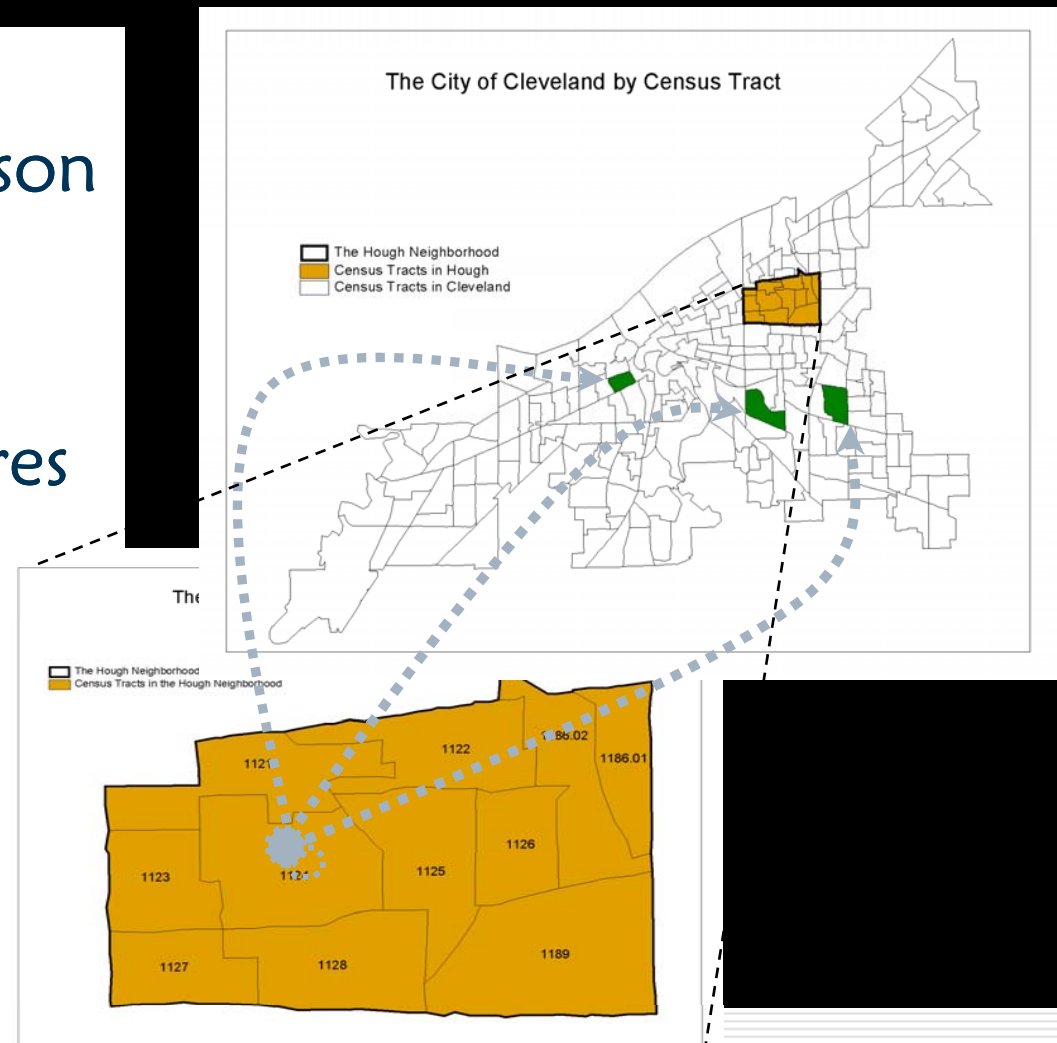
This approach helped the anchor sites understand what their commitment to being an anchor site required and it helped establish some model fidelity for the national evaluation.

With this phase complete, it may be appropriate to introduce more flexibility into approaches to building community partnerships. Sites could even be given the opportunity to experiment, systematically, with alternative implementation of the BCP strategies.

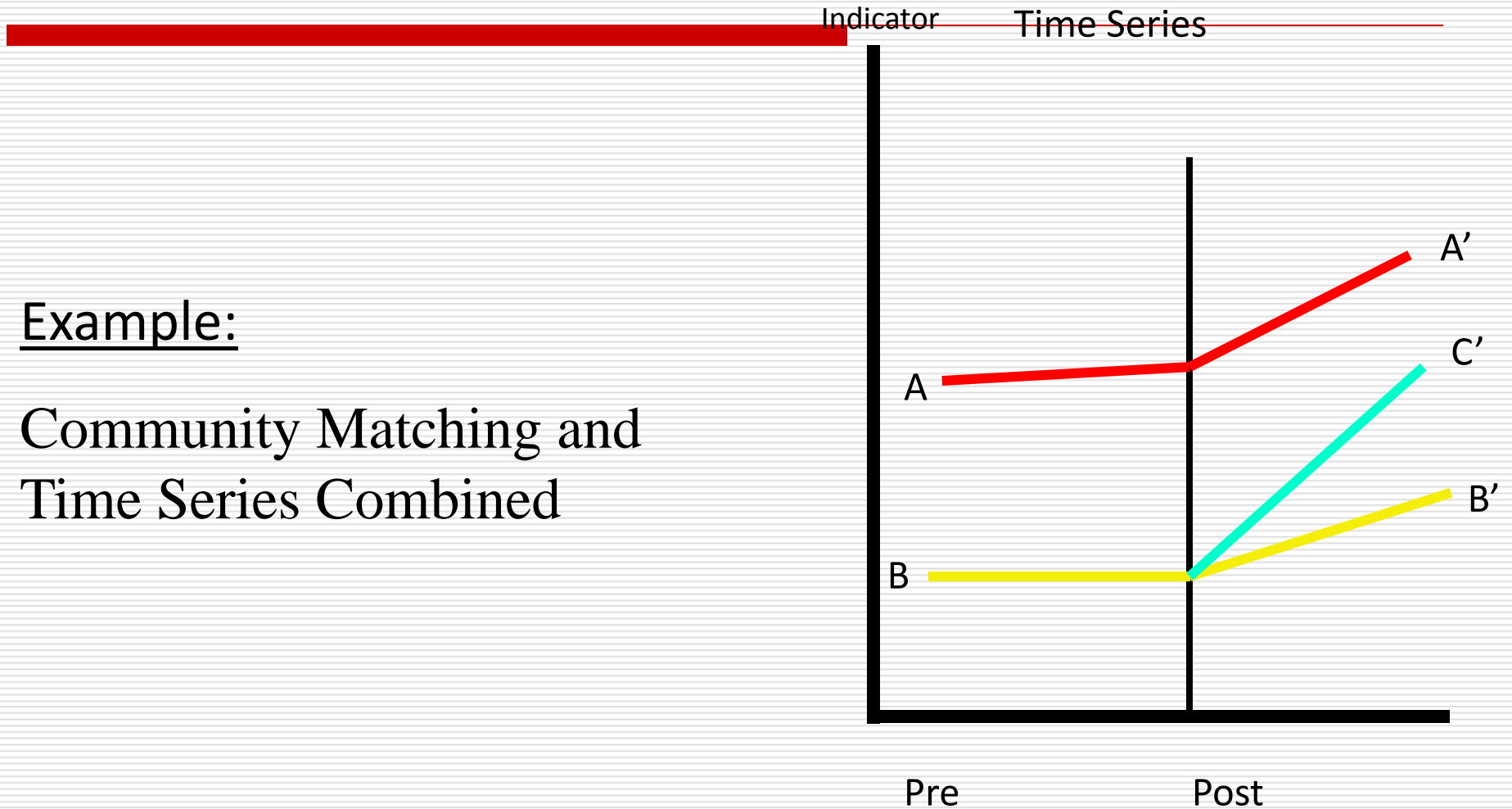


Establishing the Counterfactual

- Matched comparison communities
- Profiles
- Propensity scores
- Block groups



Establishing the Counterfactual



Potential Next Steps in Evaluating BCP

Sites could, for example, implement a “Cleveland model” approach to BCP in part of their service area and use other BCP strategies in others. Specific contracting strategies for RDS could be developed and implemented in different communities in an agency’s service area and then the different contracts could be compared to see which approaches are most effective in resource family recruitment and retention.



Potential Next Steps in Evaluating BCP

Both Cuyahoga County and Denver County have federal diligent recruitment grants which include targeting Family to Family work in some communities while using others for a comparison group.

Such innovation and experimentation could be very beneficial to the field and help other communities to determine whether or how they should adopt the Cleveland model of BCP or some of the other key aspects of BCP implementation.



EBP, EBPs and Family to Family

- Evidence-Based Practice (no s) includes combining the best available evidence with your practice expertise to develop your intervention or policy.
- EBP “...requires the integration of the best research evidence with our clinical expertise and our patient’s unique values and circumstance” (Strauss et al., 2005, p. 1)



EBP, EBPs and Family to Family

- Family to Family is a set of values and tools developed by people who have worked in public child welfare for people who work in public child welfare
- Family to Family should review the results of the evaluation and ongoing self evaluation, modify the tools, continue to develop child-focused, family-centered, and community-based practices and not worry about EBPs.



EBP, EBPs and Family to Family

- For most of us, this is the aim
Never here to be realised;
Who are only undefeated
Because we have gone on trying- T.S. Eliot
- There is only the work: building a large
public agency with all of its weaknesses that
will focus on making the right decision for
each and every family, time after time after
time. – John B. Mattingly

