

Journey to Family-Driven Policy

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The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health has a vision to share with you. Picture a car. The traveling companions in this car, who are paying for the ride, are experts in child development, education, health, family support, psychology, literacy, housing, employment, and so on. The passenger in the front seat is a child who has an emotional or behavioral disorder. Sometimes there are also members of other families that have taken a trip like this before. The driver is the child's parents and family. The driver and front seat passenger know where they want to go but need help getting there. There are many routes to this destination. They consult the traveling companions in the back seat. Each offers the route they prefer along with the reasons they think it is THE BEST! Serious drawbacks and dangers to any choice are pointed out. The driver and front seat passenger also use maps and traveling tips provided by an information exchange run by other families that have taken similar journeys.

The entire carload respectfully discusses the merits of the alternatives and carefully plans a safe route they all agree on. If they are likely to cover dangerous terrain unfamiliar to the driver (like an icy road) additional equipment or special training is provided (like anti-lock brakes or how to handle skids). Stops to attend to basic needs (like getting food, fuel, or rest) are carefully and deliberately planned into the route. Time to enjoy the scenery is scheduled and landmarks are identified so they can be sure they are on the right track. Mileage is recorded to monitor progress and know when they are approaching the end of each leg of the journey. If they encounter a roadblock, they regroup and find a way around it. If they have an emergency or disaster, they get off the road and attend to it immediately - resuming the original route as quickly as possible.

GREAT CARE is taken to be sure the vehicle is in good condition and is well maintained. GREAT CARE is taken to make sure the driver is awake and alert. One of the traveling companions is always looking ahead for the next turn in the road or unexpected change in road conditions ready to warn the driver as they approach it. At the journey's end, they celebrate together and congratulate each other on the success of the trip.

The family tells the story of their journey to others - including to the information exchange that supplied the maps and tips. They help other families plan similar trips. They recommend good traveling companions, nice places to see and stay along the way, and strategies to get through the traffic jams.

As their child grows, families may make many different journeys, with different destinations, and different traveling companions - some with no one in the back seat at all. One day, their child will learn to drive - with their family as passenger in the front seat at first and eventually on their own. When this child - now a young adult - needs to take another journey, childhood memories of how their family planned such trips will help them know how to find the right companions to arrive safely at their destination.

This journey illustrates putting the rhetoric of family involvement into action. The people who care for and know children the most and the best - their parents and families - must have a substantial role in making decisions about how their individual children are treated. And they, and their children, must have a significant voice in determining how the resources in their communities will be allocated. This is the best way to insure all systems and agencies take collective responsibility, COLLECTIVE responsibility, collective RESPONSIBILITY, for promoting the mental health of all children and providing the array of specialized services needed by children with serious emotional or behavioral disturbances. Each system has only its own mandates and perspective as a frame of reference. Only families and the children they are raising who are served by multiple systems have the full view and can see through the barriers erected to protect existing system or agency "turf."

The Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health is devoted to helping communities develop and deliver services to children and families. Our technical assistance to you must help the families and system partners in your community identify policies that affect our children and families. Our technical assistance to you must help your community decide which policies to abandon or amend and when to develop new policies to fill in the gaps. Then we must help you strategize about making these policies reality.

Policy is the platform that supports effective practice. Sustaining family involvement your community or system of care will depend, in some part, on effective policy work in your community and state. Make no mistake about it - it is families in your communities, speaking with a collective voice through their independent family-run organizations, who will be key players in policy change. Families will be educating your city and county councils, state agencies,

legislatures, and governors so they understand and support policies that sustain into the future the systems of care you are building today.

The journey is a metaphor for both an effective, family-driven system of care and a metaphor for how sound children's behavioral health policy develops. As you build your cars and plan your journeys, remember to KEEP FAMILIES IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT and the best interest of children in your heart. With helpful traveling companions, even the roughest journey can end in a safe haven and celebration.