



WINTER 2006 SPOTLIGHT:

Refugee Resettlement and Child Welfare: Collaboration for Child Protection

BRYCS Interview with Ilze Earner, Ph.D., L.C.S.W.

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BRYCS: What prompted this collaboration?

Ilze Earner: Two things stand out. First, there were several high-profile child welfare cases involving immigrants, including the placement of children into foster care despite the presence of undocumented local relatives willing and able to care for the children. I became involved in one case at the request of the Mexican consulate, prompting me to initiate the "Immigrants and Child Welfare Project"^[1] at the Hunter School of Social Work. Sometime after that, I organized the conference, "Struggling in Silence: Immigrants and Child Welfare System," in which a representative of the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) participated as a panel member. During her presentation the level of tension in the room was very high, such that she could not finish her talk. Immigrant parents, in particular, were very hostile to the agency. It went so badly that I thought I might lose my job. Instead, to her credit, the ACS representative contacted me several days later and agreed that ACS and immigrant advocates needed to talk. That was the beginning of our task force, which laid out a roadmap for change.^[2]

BRYCS: Describe the evolution of the relationship between child welfare and refugee [immigrant] services in your area? What steps have been taken to develop/nurture this collaboration?

Ilze Earner: The relationship between ACS and immigrant advocates was very polarized in the late 1990's-early 2000. Our taskforce first met in September 2001 with eight representatives from various ethnic groups, and we continued meeting regularly every couple of months after that. This relationship was aided by some other changes going on at the same time. ACS was undergoing huge changes, evolving to a more community based model that fostered more sensitivity and openness to dialogue with advisory groups. In addition, the passage of the New York City Local Law 73 mandated that certain City agencies develop a plan for making services available to non-English speakers. This timing was very helpful.

BRYCS: What successes/progress have you seen?

Ilze Earner: From the beginning, our goals have been to develop an advisory committee, a caseworker handbook and training curriculum, and to improve language access, and that is what we've done.

1. Advisory committee and Director of Immigrant Services: Our task force was formalized in April 2003 as the ACS Immigrant Advisory Subcommittee. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, ACS created a new position in 2005 for a Director of Immigrant Services, to whom the Immigrant Advisory Subcommittee reports.
2. Training: The advisory committee worked with ACS to develop the handbook and training guide, "Immigrant and Language Guidelines for Child Welfare Staff"^[3] which is given out to all incoming caseworkers as part of their 10-week training. It is also distributed to staff through ACS field offices. So far, it is not given out to contract agencies providing prevention and foster care services, but it should be.
3. Language access: The passage in 2004 of NYC Local Law 73 was very significant. It applies to other city services, not just child welfare, and requires that city agencies phase in language services. ACS caseworkers now have access to 143 languages through 24-hour interpreter services. This is far better than the previous practice of finding a child or a neighbor to translate.
4. Improved data collection: Initially when immigrant advocates started asking ACS to improve services for newcomer families, the response was "Where are the numbers?" At that time there was no data category on Asian families in the child welfare system, only Caucasians, African Americans and Native Americans. There

was no differentiation between various ethnic groups (such as Vietnamese and Chinese.) Now data collection has been vastly improved. The number of ethnic group categories has been greatly expanded.

BRYCS: What challenges/bumps in the road have there been?

Ilze Earner:

1. This has been a significant time commitment for people who are overworked already.
2. Continuity of relationships is sometimes an issue, with regular staff turnover both at ACS and the community based organizations.
3. Communication between the public and private sector is a challenge. ACS contracts with many private agencies to provide prevention and foster care services, but they can be left out of the information loop. This is an issue of how systems communicate and maintain accountability. If we depend on the trickle down of knowledge, it will evaporate before it gets to the bottom.
4. Determining priorities can be a challenge, such as differentiating between short-term and long-term goals.

BRYCS: What advice would you have for other agencies embarking on a similar collaboration?

Ilze Earner:

1. The creation of a task force to look at immigrant issues is critical, including representatives from both public child welfare and the community.
2. Getting the two sides together—from public child welfare and the immigrant services agencies—and involving people who can talk to each other is critical. I have heard many people say, “When I have a problem, I just want to know who to call.” We need to start a dialogue between child welfare workers and immigrant service providers.
3. Statewide recognition makes a significant difference. Some local communities, particularly those near the border, have developed child welfare responses to newcomer populations. But the tipping point comes when these needs are recognized as a systems issue and implemented statewide.

BRYCS: What future developments would you like to see?

Ilze Earner:

1. Regarding data collection, we are capturing language services used, but we are not yet capturing data on the ethnicities of families coming into the system. We would like to see “drop-down fields” on the computerized intake forms that capture either place of birth or language spoken in the home.
2. Regarding training, we would like to see improved communication and training on immigrant issues with the private service providers, particularly those providing foster care and prevention services. They should receive the same handbook and training as the ACS staff.
3. It would be great to have refugee representation on the Advisory Subcommittee, but so far, immigrant groups have been more active in this effort than refugee groups. Perhaps this is because there are more immigrants in New York City than refugees; however the refugee voice has been missing.

BRYCS: Do you have case examples that illustrate this collaboration’s benefits that you can share with me?

Ilze Earner:

1. A report of educational neglect was made regarding a foreign-born child. An ACS investigation found that a school-age daughter was staying at home to care for her younger siblings and that the family of six was living in one room. The children were removed from the home and placed into foster care. Within days of the removal, the Immigrant Advisory Subcommittee was contacted by another parent from the children’s school, concerned about the children’s separation from their parents. The father had been hospitalized and unable to work, so the mother was out of the home seeking employment while the eldest daughter stayed home to care for the pre-school age children. The children’s school was organizing a fundraiser to help the family financially until the father could return to work. The Advisory Committee advocated on the family’s behalf that the family needed emergency shelter. The children were ultimately returned to their parents’ care, and the family was moved into emergency housing.

2. An immigrant family became involved with ACS and it was soon discovered that the family spoke an indigenous, relatively uncommon, language. The new Director of Immigrant Affairs put out a call through the network of community based organizations for an interpreter. An interpreter was located, which enabled ACS to begin putting services in place for the family. Before this collaboration, such a network did not exist for ACS, which shows that the process is working.

FOOTNOTES:

1 - Read about the Immigrants and Child Welfare Project at http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/immigration-and-child-welfare.html . [BACK](#)

2 - For a recent PowerPoint presentation by Dr. Earner on these issues, see Lessons Learned: Best Practices with Immigrant and Refugee Families, Children, and Youth, at <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1668>, part of the BRYCS-USCCB/MRS discussion, "Brighter Futures for Migrating Children: An Overview of Current Trends and Promising Practices in Child Welfare", held at the Child Welfare League of America National Conference, Washington, D.C. on February 27, 2006. The full report is available from BRYCS at <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1700>.

3 - New York City Administration for Children's Services (February 2005). Immigrant and Language Guidelines for Child Welfare Staff, 2nd Edition. Available for free download from <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/clearinghouse-resource.cfm?docnum=1353>.