Neil D. Buckwalter’s article “The Potential for Public Empowerment through Government-Organized Participation” describes his research into the efforts of three states—Utah, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania—to create and maintain citizen-involved panels in the world of child welfare, required in each state by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as amended in 1996. His research involved 52 in-depth interviews with citizens and administrators involved with such panels.

Buckwalter notes that administrators “play a dual role in public empowerment, influencing both its processes and its outcomes.” The three states vary in their organization and operation of federally mandated citizen review panels. The Utah and Kentucky panels are state administered; Pennsylvania’s panels are supervised and administered by its counties. The difference in structure plays a critical role in determining the extent of influence that the citizen review panels exercise in each state, as well as the attitudes of the participants.

According to the author, the federal mandate lacks a gauge of administrative response to the recommendations made by the review panels. A change in 2003 required state agency administrators to respond to such recommendations within six months, but it did not require them to follow the recommendations. In the world of child welfare, six months is an inordinate amount of time and may render the recommendations useless, potentially demoralizing panels that may have invested strenuous efforts in crafting well-thought-out recommendations. With little to gauge their influence and effectiveness, panel members are likely to lose the motivation to donate their time and energy.

Utah, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania differ not only in their methods of child welfare administration but also in how and by whom their citizen groups are coordinated. In Kentucky, the citizen review panels are coordinated through a contract with the College of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. In Utah, the citizen review panels (dating back to 1999 and called Quality Improvement Committees, or QICs) were developed as a result of a class-action lawsuit that Utah successfully settled. Utah has a statewide QIC as well as one for each of its five regions. Pennsylvania, the last state to comply with the federal mandate, has a county-run system, and the review panels each represent up to a dozen counties.

Bureaucratic realities and participant expectations, the balance between passion and patience, and the “mystique” of complexity are the three characteristics the author explores in each of the three states he studies. Critical is the need for the participating public to have realistic expectations of the review process and possible outcomes. Committee members need to understand the constraints under which the government agency operates. Those who volunteer to participate on citizen boards do so because they have a passion for the welfare of children and families. Because of the multitude of policies and procedures governing child welfare agencies, change is often slower and less flexible than those from the outside can tolerate or understand.

Organizational complexity, Buckwalter notes, is one of the two key sources of child welfare agency power; the second is the agency’s mandate to provide child protective services and to allocate public resources. Buckwalter finds that panel participants’ efficacy depends significantly on their degree of working knowledge of child welfare and their willingness to learn more about the complexities of the child protection system.

Working with, not against, the agency produces the greatest opportunity for citizens to help shape administrative decisions. Effective panel participation results in an ongoing dialogue of recommendations and agency response. This provides the committee members with the feedback they need to maintain their interest and their sense of making a difference.
My experience with a regional QIC extends back to the initial formation of the committee in Utah’s Northern Region in August 1999. As part of the settlement agreement, each region was required to form a Quality Improvement Committee. During the following years, the support and direction of these regional committees has undergone many changes. For long periods of time, there was little support or direction from the state office. Regional committees were left to figure out their purpose and were given no monetary support, with varying levels even of administrative and clerical support. In more recent years, the state office has taken a more active role in providing not only some monetary support but also, more importantly, guidance and feedback to the committees. The state office, along with the state QIC, has sponsored yearly summits for the committees. This focus by the state office has dramatically improved the committees’ focus and commitment. The members now feel valued beyond the regional level.

Buckwalter’s research provides needed direction to child welfare administrators throughout the country who may not currently see the value of investing the time and effort that citizen review committees need in order to be educated and beneficial to the system. Local and state administration must be closely aligned with the committees. Providing guidance without attempting to control the committees is a challenge.

Change in child welfare is slow and difficult. We need all the help we can get. Many citizens truly want to help provide the best possible outcomes for children and families. Buckwalter’s research not only validates the citizen review committees but also provides some clear direction for implementing and structuring the CAPTA mandate so as to make the best use of the time and effort those citizens are willing to commit.

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