

Reducing racial disproportionality in child welfare

In 2014, the Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) undertook the important task of improving racial equity in its child welfare services.

The process began after a review of data provided by the DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE) found disproportionality at all key decision points in the CYF continuum: A black child in Allegheny County was 3.7 times more likely to be referred to CYF, 4.3 times more likely to be investigated, 6.7 times more likely to have a case accepted for service, and 6 times more likely to be removed from their home than a white peer.

“This issue is not unique to Allegheny County – child welfare agencies around the country have displayed these trends,” said Angela Steele, CYF diversity and inclusion officer. “However, this level of disparity is not acceptable. We knew it was important to find ways to improve outcomes for local youth.”

The department’s efforts have focused on three components: training and coaching, planning and coordination, and data dissemination and outreach.

One aspect of training has been the use of a race equity workshop titled, “A Groundwater Analysis of Institutional and Structural Racism: ‘Turning the Mirror Inward,’” where participants learn factors that contribute to and sustain racial inequities; understand the ways that systems can exclude, exploit, underserve or oppress poor communities or communities of color; and recognize the importance of cross-system collaboration to eliminate barriers that contribute to racial inequities. CYF implemented this training with a top-down approach, beginning with administration, management and specialists in 2016. Now, the program is offered to direct service and support staff, as well as community-based foster care provider programs and behavioral health clinicians. In the last year, approximately 475 DHS staff members and providers have participated in the workshop.

“The workshop provides an environment of mutual respect that allows participants to learn about institutional and structural racism in a non-threatening, non-accusatory way. Participants have described the experience as inspirational and life changing,” Angela said.

Recognizing the importance of cross-system collaboration, CYF has also established community forums to share data regarding disproportionality and disparity within the child welfare system and to gather input regarding system response. Initial forums were held over the course of a year and included several community and system partners such as juvenile court attorneys, community based service providers, the University of Pittsburgh, and family members of CYF-involved youth. These partnerships will continue in the form of a community-based racial equity committee to help guide practice improvements.

Internally, DHS is encouraging collaboration by developing an “equity champions” program. Equity champions will be in the CYF regional offices to provide advice and advocacy around issues of race equity; Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE); and Immigrants and Internationals and the intersection of aspects of identity.

“With the changes we’ve implemented, we have begun to see promising results: The black/white disparity has decreased 7% at investigation, 33% in case acceptance and 28% at removal from the home.

We are eager to continue this work and look forward to providing equitable services to all of Allegheny County's residents," Angela concluded.