



# Culturally Responsive Whole Family Approach



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As part of the evaluation of the application of Pascale Sykes' Whole Family Approach (WFA), the Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) explored the flexibility of the WFA by zooming in on the cultural responsiveness of the social service agency collectives (Collaboratives) working with **Hispanic, immigrant families in Southern New Jersey.**

WRI coordinated with **Families in Motion, Stronger Families, Unidos Para la Familia,** and **Families to College,** to identify Hispanic, immigrant families to participate in semi-structured phone interviews about their experiences with barriers, supports, and goal achievement. Staff from each Collaborative also participated in interviews about their service delivery, goal-setting strategies, systemic barriers, and supporting families on their journey. All participants were compensated with a gift card. Participants had the option to speak English, Spanish, or a combination of both during interviews. WRI staff translated all transcripts to English and identified themes through open-theme coding and team discussion.

WRI conducted 21 family interviews and 15 staff interviews in the summer of 2021. All family participants identified as the mother of the household and completed the interviews in Spanish. All staff participants were service providers either as operational leadership or case managers and instructors who directly communicate, navigate, and advocate for families. Participants resided in the **counties of Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem** at the time of the study. Cumberland County had the most representation, which aligned with these Collaboratives' service areas.



## WHOLE FAMILY APPROACH

### CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

The Collaboratives' reputation and quality of service often spread via word-of-mouth.

“Other people trusting us with things makes them trust us. Sometimes our families tell others how we took them somewhere, and then those people ask for that.” — COLLABORATIVE STAFF

Staff gained families' trust through consistent communication, responsiveness to families' concerns and interests, and respect for their priorities. Collaboratives hired case managers who could relate to families through similar language, backgrounds, and lived experiences. Rapport-building occurred during intake, check-ins with families, and at community events, the latter of which allowed families to engage with staff in socially driven activities.

Communication changed with the pandemic. Collaboratives responded to the need for remote contact by implementing surveys to track families' evolving needs, text and WhatsApp groups to share important information and resources, and technology tutorials. Phone calls and Zoom meetings became the most frequent and safest way to conduct check-ins and programming, although family and staff expressed a preference for connecting in person.

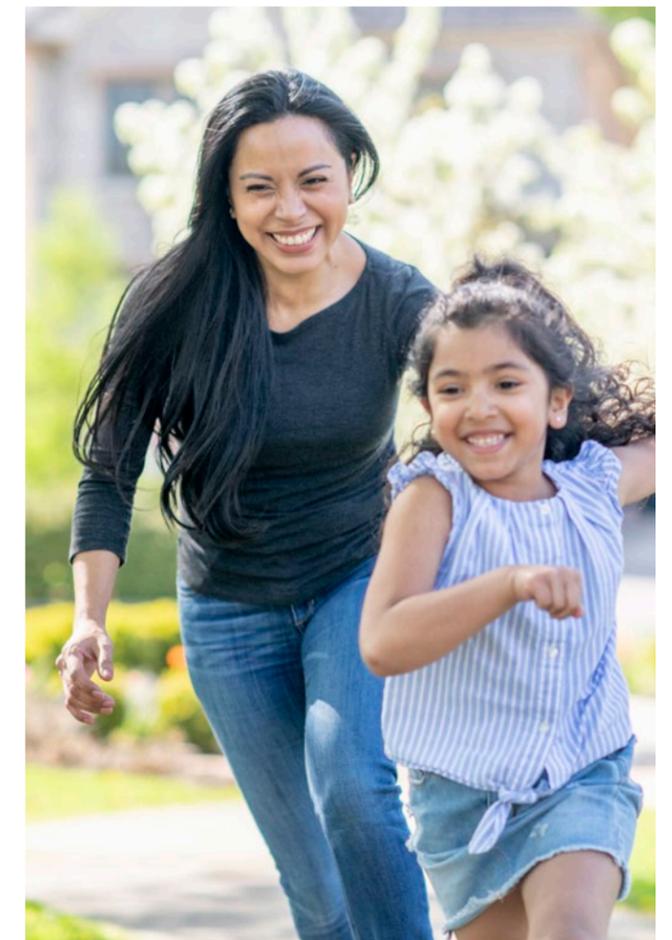
### FAMILY GOALS

The most common goals reported were learning English, completing secondary education, increasing income, starting a business, owning a home, and providing children with opportunities for education and socioeconomic advancement. Goal setting was led by families, but staff often structured the process by asking more about their motivation, helping them connect short-term goals to long-term goals, or prompting specific goals based on general family interests and programming available. Although Collaborative staff often framed autonomy for families as a final aim,

families viewed it as a means to achieve future goals. Families often focused on a certain goal (e.g. learning English) because of the independence it would grant them (e.g. not relying on others for translation). Staff emphasized that the family must be invested in the goal and understand the desired outcome. In turn, staff had to respond with flexibility to reframe a goal's timeline with changing circumstances and priorities.

### FAMILY ACTION

Families were more likely to act independently once they gained familiarity with a process or system. Staff introduced families to resources and encouraged them to make phone calls and initiate processes on their own, and many families expressed pride when they handled communications with providers or paperwork on their own. Some parents also fostered independence in their children by setting expectations around school



and assigning them age-appropriate responsibilities.

Resourcefulness was key to overcoming challenges. Some families capitalized on their cooking and craft skills to supplement their family income. During lockdown, parents used virtual library books to entertain their children and consulted YouTube and Google to navigate new technology for virtual schooling and programming. Given that families did not qualify for many formal resources, staff leveraged their connections to the community to find alternative forms of assistance and services.

While working on personal goals, families also observed family obligations that had them prioritizing their children or their family back in their native country. Several families sent part of their income to family back home, covered medical expenses, or had to pay off loans that funded their immigration. Parents also valued investing their time and money to provide their children with recreational opportunities and family activities. This impacted their ability to save money and delayed the timeline of large goals such as buying a house.

## SUCCESS

Some goals had a clear outcome such as obtaining a GED certificate or buying a house. Other successes were marked by continued progress rather than any final achievement, such as learning English and self-advocacy. Many families decreased contact with Collaboratives as they gained stability and confidence in their ability to navigate systems, and staff viewed this as a sign of families achieving independence. Staff celebrated success by holding graduation parties or issuing certificates, but they also viewed their service as ongoing, that is, they would assist families as new challenges and goals arose. This philosophy was rooted in the belief that their work impacted not only families but the communities in which they live. In some cases, families gave back by volunteering with the Collaborative or simply being more mindful and caring of their neighbors.

Lastly, families showed resilience when they reflected on challenges, focusing on what they had gained for themselves and for their children rather than hardships, such as work opportunities, education, and safer environments. Trust in their work and abilities, patience during trying times, gratitude for what they have, and acceptance of the things they cannot change were some of the coping mindsets that have helped them navigate tough situations.

### AGENCY COLLABORATION

The agencies that made up each Collaborative worked together to organize programming and community events such as food and nutrition workshops, financial planning courses, and information sessions on new policies and resources. Collaboratives also were known to partner with other PSF Collaboratives and external organizations to bolster and streamline their resource network, referrals, and larger activities like cultural celebrations in the community.

At the individual staff level, case workers exchanged materials, resources, and strategies to help families.

“...We are trying to build a community. Building those relationships and connecting. When people really trust you and know you well.”

— COLLABORATIVE STAFF

“I am very thankful to them... I love this service, and I'm very thankful because of that type of service for the community. I say if I can provide my small grain of salt so I can keep being in these services... I have always admired everything they do because I know they work for the community.”

— FAMILY MEMBER

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS AND SUPPORTS

The family circle was identified as the primary source of support and pride for participants. Specifically, many participants were thankful to their partners for emotional and financial contributions, and they expressed excitement for their children's accomplishments and futures.

Families were also thankful to the Collaborative staff and other service agencies in the area for their service to the community. Families praised case workers for their dedication and resourcefulness while helping them navigate services and solve problems. Other agencies mentioned were WIC, Catholic Charities, and Un Paso hacia Adelante in Bridgeton.

Families who reported religious beliefs expressed that their faith provided them with comfort and hope

for the future even through challenging times. Church communities were also mentioned as providing practical assistance such as food drives, assistance with bills, and connections to resources through other church members.

Lastly, families reported positive experiences with effective supports at school and work. Parents were grateful for in-school therapy services available and when their children's schools had Spanish-speaking staff or sent extra food home with the school's meal program, especially during the height of the pandemic. Working adults were also thankful for the availability of jobs, and noted some employers' fairness around the assignment of work hours and flexibility around work leave when they had medical needs in the family.



## PERSISTING NEEDS



**AVAILABILITY OF AFFORDABLE AND RELIABLE CHILDCARE:** Childcare was both a priority among participants and a challenge to their participation in education, training, and job searching. Childcare alternatives with relatives or at daycare centers were scarce due to participants' limited personal connections in the area and distrust of leaving their young children with strangers.



**MENTAL HEALTH CARE SERVICE PROVIDERS:** Staff was aware of the stigma around mental health discussion and treatment among Hispanic families. Several participants, however, recognized symptoms of depression and anxiety within themselves and their children and expressed a desire to talk to someone. They noted the general lack of services in the area and particularly of Spanish speaking mental health care providers.



**CLARITY AROUND SERVICE ELIGIBILITY AND PROCESSES:** Due to each family's unique situation, some families had more access to services and resources than others. Staff had to research and navigate service criteria and requirements while mediating families' concerns and distrust of the system during processes such as opening a bank account, obtaining a driver's license, seeking legal advice on immigration status, enrolling in food assistance programs, applying to buy a home, and obtaining appropriate medical care.



**RELIABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION:** Many families counted with only one car if any at all, used primarily for work commute. Inability to drive and valid documentation were barriers. Most participants reported walking to run nearby errands, and relying on taxis for school or medical appointments. When using the car for appointments, families reported that the working adult would have to request time off from work.



**SAFER COMMUNITIES:** Child safety was a significant concern particularly among residents of Bridgeton, Cumberland County, who have experienced incidents of child kidnapping and gun violence in recent years. Parents with young children asked for more security at public spaces such as fences around parks and playgrounds.



**SOURCES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL FUNDING:** Social service organizations that are committed to helping community members regardless of their immigration status often rely on private funder awards or specialized government grants. This makes organizational sustainability more challenging as these funding opportunities are not available as frequently.



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