



Addressing Racial Inequities in Child Welfare Systems: Lutheran Services in America's Collaborative Learning Model

Summary of Evaluation by Wilder Research of LSA's Family Stabilization Initiative (2021–2023)

INTRODUCTION

What impact might a learning-collaborative approach—LSA's signature model that brings together peers and experts to learn together and apply improvements—have on addressing racial disparities in child welfare systems?

That is what LSA asked Wilder Research, a nationally respected nonprofit evaluation group, to assess in order to better understand how the Family Stabilization Initiative's collaborative learning environment advanced its objectives, with an emphasis on strengthening organizations' capacity to sustain wrap-around support and services. The summary below highlights the positive impacts of the approach that can inform further scale.



KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- 1. The collaborative learning environment led by Lutheran Services in America to address disparities in the child welfare system is making positive impacts across five key areas: 1. Equity, 2. Leadership, 3. Connection, 4. Sustainability and 5. Commitment.**
- 2. An independent evaluation by Wilder Research demonstrates the efficacy of LSA's work in advancing improvements by strengthening partnerships and collaboration.**

LSA's Results Innovation Lab includes more than 100 organizations across 43 states.

ABOUT LUTHERAN SERVICES IN AMERICA

Lutheran Services in America is one of the nation's largest and most trusted national networks of health and human service providers with a mission to cultivate caring communities that advance health and opportunity for all. With 300 nonprofit organizations across 1,400 U.S. communities, and over \$26 billion in combined annual services, LSA's network advances equitable outcomes for children, youth and families; improves independence and choice for older adults; champions meaningful services and support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities; and strengthens stability and purpose for veterans, refugees, New Americans and other special populations. Formed in 1997, LSA brings together a network of leaders, partners and funders to catalyze innovation, strengthen organizational capacity and advance public policy.



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ABOUT LSA'S RESULTS INNOVATION LAB AND THE FAMILY STABILIZATION INITIATIVE

Lutheran Services in America established and leads the Results Innovation Lab (RIL), a multi-year, collaborative learning community of change leaders committed to improving equity for 25,000+ children and their families. With more than 100 organizations across 43 states, the RIL network engages and empowers families before they are in crisis to create pathways for them to stay together.

Pathways include crisis intervention, access to stable and safe housing, behavioral health, food and nutrition and other proactive interventions to improve equitable outcomes.

Improving equity for 25,000 children and their families

As part of the RIL, the Family Stabilization Initiative (FSI), an ongoing initiative launched by LSA in 2021, focuses on proactively reaching families to address disparities in child welfare systems and preventing a disproportionate number of black and brown children being removed from their families and homes. LSA invited four leading organizations in their network across six sites to participate in the initiative, providing grant funding and fostering collaborative learning that included technical assistance, coaching and a tailored curriculum.

As of October 2023, the FSI has surpassed its original goal, reaching 595 families across six communities.

POSITIVE IMPACTS IN FIVE KEY AREAS

The positive impacts highlighted in Wilder's evaluation confirm a core belief of Lutheran Services in America: that bringing people and resources together to solve problems can impact communities in ways that go beyond what any one organization can achieve on its own. Specifically, Wilder noted the learning collaborative's **positive impacts in five key areas**: 1. Equity, 2. Leadership, 3. Connection, 4. Sustainability and 5. Commitment.

1. EQUITY

Participants further developed a racial equity perspective. While participants entered the project with some experience assuming a fair and inclusive perspective on race, both the data and narratives show the teams deepened their understanding and practices around racial equity. As a result of the LSA collaborative learning initiative, all participants reported understanding how systemic racism impacts families of color. Ninety-two percent (92%) said that team members now challenge bias when they encounter it and that they analyze how implicit bias is embedded in their policies or decision making—more than twice the number responding so in pre-test responses.

Ninety-two percent (92%) of participants said they now take time to examine their own implicit biases.

“It has operationalized ways in which we look at equity. It shows that equity shows up in the work we do and that it is really critical to examine those voices and integrate them into the work.”

Eighty-five percent (85%) of participants said that participation in the LSA initiative helped them grow professionally.

“Through the cohort, I've learned how to utilize research-focused data to demonstrate need.”

2. LEADERSHIP

Participants deepened their practice of results-based leadership. Survey results and interviews underscored how participants increased leadership skills over the course of the FSI, not only intellectually (for example, identifying the difference between adaptive and technical challenges), but also in terms of behavior, such as separating out data by race, ethnicity and other important characteristics when making decisions or, when difficulties emerge at work, stepping back, de-personalizing and reflecting on patterns and forces at play.

3. CONNECTION

The learning collaborative strengthened connections between the four sites and with external agencies. Participants cited increased collaboration across the FSI sites and welcomed the opportunities to share ideas, compare work, problem-solve and build relationships in and outside formal meetings. The experience strengthened their work, and team members noted how the FSI is also helping build stronger connections with external agencies, providing “opportunity to build on relationships...and to see how those relationships can be transformed.”

In 2023, Lutheran Services in America and Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago partnered on a sustainability toolkit to support program leaders in reimagining how a focus on race equity can drive long-term success.

“Sustainability was more than just money; that was something that we hadn’t heard of before.”

Sites partnered with 80 organizations over the initiative’s three years, far surpassing the initial FSI goal of 12.

“Because staff were able to share their resources and expertise, they are much further along than if they had been doing it without others.”

4. SUSTAINABILITY

The learning collaborative increased internal support and capacity to implement the wraparound model. In interviews, participants shared that the Lutheran Services in America learning collaborative provided them the funding to build (or expand) their wraparound programs and create new positions, and that participation in the FSI increased internal organizational support for the model which, in turn, enhanced its implementation. Staff also observed capacity improvements and requested further technical assistance from staff to sustain their program.

5. COMMITMENT

The learning collaborative reinforced participants’ efforts and beliefs in prevention-based, family-centric services. Finally, participants shared that the FSI experience affirmed their organization’s existing efforts to provide preventative and family-centric services, and provided additional legitimacy to honor and acknowledge the strength of families and communities.

Nearly all participants agreed strongly with questions about family empowerment, flexibility of services to meet family needs, the value of family wisdom and the wraparound models.

Access Wilder Research’s full evaluation report of the Family Stabilization Initiative at lutheranservices.org.



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