



# Reducing Disparities:

## 10 Racial Equity Strategy Areas for Improving Outcomes for African American Children in Child Welfare

The Black Administrators in Child Welfare: A Guide to Practice and Policy Development



*“State and local governments, with federal support,  
must have strategies in place for achieving racial equity*

*to ensure sustained and positive outcomes for African*

*American children and families who come to the*

*attention of the child welfare system.”*

*- BACW Board of Directors*

## **Credits**

### **Authors**

Sondra Jackson, *BACW Executive Director, Former Child Welfare Director*

Ernestine Jones, *Professor at Howard University School of Social Work, Consultant, and Former Child Welfare Director*

### **Expert Review Committee**

Julia Danzy, *Consultant and Former Social Service Director*

Dr. Sharon McDaniel, *Founder and President of A Second Chance, Inc.*

Maxine Tucker, *Consultant and Former Child Welfare Commissioner*

Joan M. Reeves, *Consultant and Former Child Welfare Commissioner*

Yvonne Gilchrist, *Former Child Welfare Director*

Donald Clark, *BACW Director of Policy and Government Affairs*

## Introduction

The overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system has long been an issue that raises concern for child welfare administrators and advocates. Founded in 1971, the Black Administrators in Child Welfare, Inc. (BACW) is the only national child welfare advocacy organization focused on improving outcomes for African American children, youth, and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. We believe that this Guide contains ten Racial Equity Strategy Areas (RESA) that can positively influence healthy outcomes for African American children and families. Each strategy area requires that child welfare administrators, policy makers and practitioners have the will to change practices and policies that negatively affect clients; the knowledge of important characteristics of African Americans, families and communities; and the necessary skills to strengthen and support these characteristics in practice and policy development.

Disproportionality and treatment disparities of children of color can be found throughout the child welfare system. Starting with intake services, referrals for investigation of abuse and neglect, placement decisions, and children exiting foster care to those being adopted and waiting to be adopted, there is evidence of treatment disparities that lead to the overrepresentation of children of color in the child welfare system. Data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) shows that African American children not only stay longer in care, they are also represented at twice their proportion in the general population. While approximately 15 percent of the U.S. child population is African American, for federal fiscal year 2009, African American children represented 30 percent of the 423,000 children in foster care.<sup>1</sup> Of the number of children entering foster care in 2009, an estimated 26 percent of children were African American.<sup>2</sup>

In July of 2007, at the request of U.S. House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee Chairman, Charles Rangel, the U.S. Government Accountability Office produced the report, *African American Children in Foster Care: Additional HHS Assistance Needed to Help States Reduce the Proportion in Care (GAO 07-816)*. Detailing the reasons for the overrepresentation of children of color in care, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the issues and potential solutions to reduce this crisis. The report found that families living in poverty have greater difficulty accessing basic services; bias or cultural distrust between child welfare decision makers and families is a contributing factor to removal; and African American children stay in care longer because of difficulty in recruiting adoptive parents. Recommendations cited for change include the need for additional data, improved training, and a call on HHS to provide better technical assistance to states in analyzing data to devise strategies that address disproportionality. American Indians and Alaskan Natives, while a smaller proportion of the general population, also show high rates of overrepresentation in child welfare caseloads.<sup>3</sup>

Across this nation, state government agencies and child welfare organizations are building community support for addressing overrepresentation of African American and other minority children in the child welfare system. The BACW has developed ten racial equity strategies that support this important work in child welfare.

## Importance of Racial Equity Strategy Areas

The mission of the BACW is to advocate for culturally-appropriate services for African American children and families in the child welfare system and to promote the development and support of African American leaders in the field. Numerous efforts have been made to influence policy and practice, in addition to the hiring of African American administrators in child welfare agencies across the country to ensure inclusion of African American perspectives. Some child welfare organizations have acknowledged that to reduce the disproportionate number of children and youth of color, we must employ a service delivery system of practice that focuses on a strengths-based approach. In order to achieve this goal, many recognize that the process includes improving the organization's current programs and services by understanding the cultural nuances of the families and children they serve.

Best practices reviewed by BACW across the country have resulted in the identification of ten Racial Equity Strategy Areas (RESA) supported by conditions and experiences that should be present as a part of the system's ongoing operations. Policies, practices and procedures vary from state-to-state and often focus on different strategies to improve services in child welfare. However, the majority of agency administrators and other staff are aware of areas in their child welfare systems that need improvement to better serve children and families. Within each of the strategy areas identified, there are components that attempt to guide state and local agency policy makers and practitioners in ensuring sustained positive outcomes for African American children in the child welfare system.

## Utilization of the 10 Racial Equity Strategy Areas

RESA is a system of ensuring that best-practices are developed through a racial equity lens and embrace a conceptual framework for understanding and achieving anti-racist policies and practices in child welfare. There are ten strategy areas that BACW promotes, and when in place, can equip child welfare administrators, managers, supervisors and workers with critical factors that improve service outcomes for children and families of color and reduce treatment disparities and overrepresentation. For each strategy area, there is a *context* provided, offering a framework or perspective. There are specific *standards* outlined that state and local governments can implement to create a racially-equitable service system. There are also suggested *action steps* for practice and policy inclusion, and *highlights* that provide supporting research, promising practices, or models. These RESAs, as identified by the BACW are as follows:

1. Data: Innovative
2. Finance: Creative and Flexible
3. Engagement: Parent and Community
4. Kinship Services: Effective and Appropriate Use
5. Youth: Informed Practice
6. Education: Collaboration and Partnerships
7. Health: Thriving Children, Youth, and Families
8. Legal Services: Culturally Informed and Competent
9. Leadership: Culturally Competent
10. Program: Policies, Practice, Review, and Analysis

These RESAs are designed to be compatible with standards such as those established by the Council on Accreditation or the Child Welfare League of America. They may also be integrated with other practice or policy information that guides the service delivery system of a particular organization. When used consistently, they provide increased opportunity to utilize a racial equity lens in the development of policies, practices and procedures that are being used in agencies serving African American children.

# RESA-1

## Data: Innovative

### Context:

Data systems that collect critical information for making policy and practice decisions that improve prevention, placement and reunification outcomes are essential. Through the use of data, agencies can ensure measurable progress on behalf of all children toward improving service outcomes and equity across all programs.

### Standards:

- 1.1 Reporting system includes data specific to the race of families and children in all caseloads.
- 1.2 Agency database identifies gaps in services and racial and ethnic treatment disparities.
- 1.3 Data and qualitative measurements are used in program and practice improvements.
- 1.4 Data driven decision making assessment instruments are available.
- 1.5 Focused research and reviews are regularly conducted on services provided to children and families of color.

### Action Steps:

- Make informed decisions that reduce the number entering care.
- Track and reflect placements and reunification outcomes for children by race.
- Make measurements available for program and practice improvements.
- Track children's access to educational and health services.
- Track quality data driven decision making, including risk assessment instruments for children entering the foster care system.

### Highlights:

A few states are legislatively required to submit annual reports of progress in reducing disproportionality. Annual reports made available to the general community provide a form of public education and hold agencies accountable to the communities they serve.<sup>4</sup>





# RESA-2 Finance: Creative and Flexible

## Context:

Financial systems should focus on opportunities to achieve racial equity through culturally appropriate service contracting, monitoring and distribution of funding services. Many believe the child welfare system must do more to prevent child abuse and neglect; to provide specialized treatment to families struggling with problems of mental health, substance abuse or domestic violence; to support grandparents and other relatives who have stepped in to raise children when their parents cannot; and to provide adequate numbers of child welfare workers who are trained to deal with the complex needs of families in crisis. Child welfare funding that is creative and flexible is critical in reducing disparities.

## Standards:

- 2.1 Budget and funding resources must ensure adequacy of comprehensive services unique to diverse populations of children and families.
- 2.2 Resources should be developed and funded specifically to provide services that prevent children from entering the child welfare system.
- 2.3 Current financial investments should be utilized to support creative and reform initiatives.
- 2.4 Financial structures should create innovative demonstration projects that result in system reform.

### Action Steps:

- Ensure adequacy of support for prevention and comprehensive services for children.
- Fund non-traditional, faith-based, evidence-based, promising, and community programs.
- Ensure sustainability and acknowledge the inherent value of funding culturally appropriate services.
- Demonstrate a fiscally responsible program evaluation and monitoring system.
- Use a fiscal accountability system that documents outcomes for African American children at all levels of care.
- Creatively use Title IV-E funding to support a wide array of services to kinship families.

### Highlights:

According to the GAO report (GAO-07-816), “states reported that the ability to use federal funding for family support services was helpful in keeping African American children safely at home and those federal subsidies for adoptive parents helped move children out of foster care.”<sup>3</sup> Also, according to the Children’s Bureau, Waiver Demonstration Projects resulted in positive trends in improving outcomes for foster children. The ability to be flexible with federal funds allowed the waiver states, along with other states, to provide services that were unique to their jurisdiction.<sup>5</sup>



# RESA-3 Engagement: Parent and Community

## Context:

Engaging parents and community members effectively in the child welfare system is both complex and vital to the success of African American children and families who come to the attention of abuse and neglect agencies. Given this challenge and imperative, social work professionals must develop ways of engaging parents and community members successfully to ensure permanency and connectivity. A community-based child protection system should meaningfully involve parents including fathers, extended-family and other relevant community members in decision making and service planning.

## Standards:

- 3.1 Acknowledge and embrace black family child rearing practices that stress firmness, not abuse. Alternative child rearing practices should be recognized as healthy parenting.
- 3.2 Understand, acknowledge, and support the strength of the extended family.
- 3.3 Ensure and support non-traditional African American community support structures that can be used to fill service gaps and complement other services offered, such as churches and grassroots organizations.
- 3.4 Utilize culturally competent family assessment instruments and measures that speak to the nuances of African American family life, enhancing understanding of African American family needs.
- 3.5 Expand available resources for children and increase access to services through building community partners and relationships in the neighborhoods.
- 3.6 Address barriers to fully engaging parents and community participants in the development of resources and services for African American children.

### Action Steps:

- Promote knowledge and support of black child rearing practices that stress firmness and shared parenting.
- Implement policies and practices that ensure the support of non-traditional African American support structures that can be used to fill services gaps and complement other services.
- Maximize the use of Federal Title IV-E funding for support services.
- Create opportunities for establishing community partnerships and alliances.

### Highlights:

The community engagement model has been utilized to involve children and families in the foster care system, and community-based organizations in decisions made in child welfare cases.<sup>6</sup> Community engagement models are also “a multidisciplinary, family-centered approach that enlists the support of community from both providers and citizens, to prevent and address child abuse issues.”<sup>7</sup>

# RESA-4 Kinship Services: Effective and Appropriate Use

## Context:

Kinship care is an important resource for children who are removed from their parents and to the child welfare system. Kinship care programs should exist as a viable placement option for children needing out-of-home placements. Placements with relatives as caregivers affirm the importance of the extended family as the underlying foundational support for African American children.

## Standards:

- 4.1 Realize that kinship care is preferred for African American children when their parents are unable to provide for them.
- 4.2 Understand, acknowledge, and support the strength of kinship families.
- 4.3 Ensure that the kinship triad (child, birth parent, and caregiver) is fully engaged in a collaborative relationship.
- 4.4 Ensure that kinship care services are family-centered, strengths-based and needs-driven with culturally appropriate assessment tools to document the services provided.
- 4.5 Willingness to be creative in the delivery of kinship care services.
- 4.6 Examine and modify policy procedures and licensing standards that create barriers for the placement of African American children in kinship placements.
- 4.7 Provide kinship families with flexible family support services that may or may not be solely supported by the child welfare system.

### Action Steps:

- Ensure that community-based family preservation services are adequately funded and include wrap-around services.
- Implement family finding techniques that identify potential relatives as caregivers.
- Use family-based group decision making as the primary practice protocol.
- Use traditional foster care primarily for emergency and short-term care.
- Use in-home case management services as the preferred intervention.
- Support relative caregiver support groups that provide a safe place for sharing experiences and coping mechanisms.

### Highlights:

States differ in the way kinship care is utilized as a placement alternative, primarily because of the lack of agreement on the use of state and federal funding levels for programs. Subsidized guardianship programs in 42 states plus the District of Columbia, help children live permanently with a legal guardian (often a relative or close family friend) with ongoing payments to provide for the needs of the child. States with such programs may or may not opt to request federal Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payments for eligible children. Other states divert children to relatives for placement and provide few services and limited funds to kinship caregivers.<sup>8</sup>



# RESA-5 Youth: Informed Practice

## Context:

African American youth need to experience a support system on which they can rely and enables successful transition to adulthood.

## Standards:

- 5.1 Youth services should focus on readiness and preparation for independent living life skills.
- 5.2 Program and support services should address personal and emotional needs.
- 5.3 Specialized training for staff should be co-led by youth, and all communication should be culturally and generationally sensitive to the youth.
- 5.4 Highly structured and intensive interventions that emphasize skill development should focus on behavior change and attitude adjustments that address risk factors for youth.
- 5.5 Youth services that support emancipation should focus on lifelong connections and family engagement.
- 5.6 Youth who achieve permanence through returning home, guardianship, or adoption should be provided program services, if needed, through the age of 21.

## Action Steps:

- Have in place a formal program for emancipating youth that engages youth participation.
- Conduct Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment (EPSDT) on all youth in foster or kinship care.
- Extend health and mental health coverage for youth through the age of 21, completion of college, or approved training.
- Establish a “Rites of Passage” program for all youth who remain in care after the age of 16.
- Make available mentoring and tutoring programs for all youth upon request.
- Establish Independent Living Programs with each Youth, having a plan that addresses their educational and vocational goals along with supportive resources.

## Highlight:

According to a study conducted by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and BACW, support services for youth aging out of foster care decrease after leaving the system. These include assistance for identifying and establishing a relationship with a relative or interested adult (from 72.4% to 9.8%), physical health care (from 88.6% to 41.7%), mental health care (from 87.4% to 47.7%), and interpersonal skill building (from 83.2 to 59.8%).<sup>9</sup>



# RESA-6 Education: Collaboration and Partnership

## Context:

A strong educational foundation for African American children in the child welfare system is essential to achieve positive outcomes as adults leading to an improved quality of life. The intersection of race, poverty, and inadequate education affects educational outcomes of African American children unless mitigating actions are taken in the child welfare system.

## Standards:

- 6.1 Research and reports should indicate long-term educational benefits for children who need consistent support, accountability, teachers, and social workers that care about their performance.
- 6.2 Educationally competent children increase their potential for positive adult outcomes, socially and economically.
- 6.3 Formal and informal partnerships with Departments of Education, local school boards, child welfare agencies, juvenile justice systems, and family courts are critical for ensuring that all children have equal access to quality education.
- 6.4 Partnerships, informal and formal, should be based on shared values, vision, and agreements on outcomes for children in the child welfare system.
- 6.5 Systems should operate in a manner that does not create barriers to children in the child welfare system receiving quality education.
- 6.6 Federal and state confidential laws should be modified or changed to facilitate effective partnerships.

## Action Steps:

- Develop an educational plan for all children in foster and kinship care and in the juvenile justice system.
- Support the establishment of alternative schools for children and youth that have difficulty in regular school environments.
- Work to prevent “Special Education Programs” from warehousing children with behavioral problems.
- Develop mentoring and tutorial programs to support children and youth.
- Establish review and monitoring systems to ensure that accurate educational assessments are being implemented.
- Support retention in schools by providing transportation services.

## Highlights:

Improving educational stability for foster children has been an ongoing issue in child welfare. One local jurisdiction addressed this issue by dedicating a team of educational liaisons to identify system communication barriers and eliminate them. This is achieved by bringing relevant professionals to the table and developing intersystem protocols.<sup>10</sup>



# RESA-7 Health: Thriving Children, Youth, and Families

## Context:

Children, especially those in kinship or foster care, are at high risk for chronic and complex illnesses. Many of the health issues facing our children are the result of the inequities and disparities in the health care delivery system. Race and ethnicity are a part of one's culture and have an impact on how African American families utilize and benefit from health and mental health treatment and services. Addressing these issues is critical to improving the health care for children and their families.

## Standards:

- 7.1 Access to a menu of health and supportive services that promote wellness and encourage healthy behaviors and lifestyles for children and families.
- 7.2 Access health care through Medicaid, S-Chip, and other state programs for children and families.
- 7.3 Provide comprehensive health care evaluations to all children in order to reduce the onset of chronic illness that are prevalent in African American and other minority children (such as asthma, obesity, etc.)
- 7.4 Improve access to physical and mental health services through locating community health centers in neighborhoods with high density minority populations.
- 7.5 Ensure that mental health services are culturally competent and offered in the least restrictive environment, and includes the family as a full participant.
- 7.6 Establish a mental health system of care for children and families that reduces the "silo" approach and builds on the collaborative partnership services of all child-serving agencies.

## Action Steps:

- Collect and report data on availability and access to health and mental health services of underserved populations, by race, ethnicity, and language.
- Utilize GIS mapping to show inequities in access to health care for children and the resulting outcomes.
- Provide a mental health system of care that is culturally competent and utilizes resources of the multidisciplinary partners.
- Ensure that health and mental health professionals are culturally competent.
- Maintain electronic health care records for all foster care.
- Increase the neighborhood health center capacity to provide primary, preventive, and mental health services.

## Highlights:

According to a 2005 National Health Care Disparities Report, "Studies have documented that poor and racial and ethnic minority children with chronic conditions may experience lower quality care. Minorities are more likely than white children to be without health insurance coverage or a usual source of care."<sup>11</sup>

# RESA-8 Legal Services: Culturally Informed and Competent

## Context:

Quality legal services are required for African American children in the child welfare system to assure permanence.

## Standards:

- 8.1 All children in the child welfare system should have legal representation.
- 8.2 Legal staff that works with, and for, children in the child welfare system should have cultural competency training.
- 8.3 Ongoing cross system planning and training should be required for judges, lawyers, law enforcers, and child welfare staff to ensure the best interest of the child.
- 8.4 Child welfare legal services should be based on child welfare practices, policies, and procedures.

### Action Steps:

- Provide legal assistance to families and children with permanency options.
- Provide ongoing seminars and workshops to assist families with knowledge and resources around legal issues in child welfare.
- Ensure that all children and youth have legal representation involved with the judicial system.
- Provide training for law enforcers to recognize cultural and developmental differences in African American children and families.

### Highlights:

According to the U.S. Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, child abuse and neglect cases are often handled in family and juvenile court. In extreme instances, abuse and neglect cases are handled by criminal courts and in some cases, these incidences are handled by both courts. The court is responsible for making the final determination regarding whether a child should be removed from his/her home, where a child is to be placed, or whether to terminate parental rights.<sup>12</sup> Since the courts have such a powerful role in the outcomes of children in care, it is important for legal staff (judges, law enforcement, lawyers, etc.) to have a culturally sensitive perspective to ensure the best legal decisions for children in the system.



# RESA-9 Leadership: Culturally Competent

## **Context:**

Cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes. It also encompasses self awareness of one's biases, knowledge of others' cultural values, beliefs and behaviors, and the development of the skills needed to work with culturally diverse populations. A culturally competent leader exemplifies the following:

## **Standards:**

- 9.1 Exudes empathy, understanding and caring in all phases of service and leadership.
- 9.2 Participates and communicates with community members and consumers that enhance cultural sensitivity and awareness.
- 9.3 Establishes appropriate assessment techniques, acknowledges, respects and considers ethnic-related values and needs, including spiritual and medical beliefs.
- 9.4 Creates an organizational environment that respects, recognizes, and values cultural differences and works to reduce structural barriers.
- 9.5 Ensures that training is designed to provide high quality, culturally responsive and competency-based learning, essential for staff to work more effectively with families from different cultures.

## **Action Steps:**

- Value diversity and develop strategies that institute culturally competent practices.
- Use training techniques that support the understanding of the needs, values, and beliefs of diverse populations.
- Provide cultural competency training for all staff so that the workforce can better interact with people of different cultures.
- Provide an organizational culture that ensures accountability for equitable outcomes for all families.
- Support leadership development that enhances sensitivity to diversified staff.

## **Highlights:**

A 2011 report, published by Child Welfare Information Gateway, illustrated challenges of culturally relevant services offered by states, "For example, at least 25 State first-round Final Reports identified gaps in culturally appropriate services, and at least 24 State Final reports indicated that language differences are a barrier to services, case planning, investigations, or training. Only 38 percent of States received positive ratings on the Child and Family Service Reviews indicator regarding whether a State's recruitment efforts for foster and adoptive parents reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of children in out-of-home care."<sup>8</sup> Culturally competent child welfare leaders can set the stage for culturally appropriate child welfare services.



# RESA-10

Program: Policies, Practice, Review, and Analysis

## Context:

A key strategy for a governmental agency serving African American children and families should invest in the development and analysis of child welfare policies, practices, and programs. Effective policies are driven by sound research, consumer input, and strong objective evidence.

## Standards:

- 10.1 Policy that has been developed with the input of community representatives is more responsive to the needs of the consumers.
- 10.2 Child welfare policies and programs should be reviewed and analyzed to ensure that practices are responsive to the families served.
- 10.3 Corrective action plans should be implemented in a timely manner.
- 10.4 Ongoing monitoring and analysis of program outcomes should be implemented to ensure that there are no barriers to serving families.
- 10.5 A comprehensive and coordinated policy framework is necessary for leveraging funds.
- 10.6 Review and analysis staff must be trained in cultural competency.

## Action Steps:

- Implement policies and practices that use a child-centered and family-focused system of care.
- Develop formal relationships that represent different racial and ethnic communities and utilize their knowledge and experiences in developing policies, procedures, and practices.
- Ensure that internal processes for developing policies are built on the strengths within the communities.
- Ensure that case decision making is fact-based and is not easily influenced by personal bias or judgment.
- Ensure that front-line staff practice and demonstrate respect for diversity, values, and understanding of different cultures.
- Utilize consistent case reviews to document and assure equitable treatment of all children and families.

## Highlights:

Through the help of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Council on Accreditation and BACW are partnering to develop and integrate best practice strategies to minimize the factors that contribute to minority child overrepresentation of African Americans in the child welfare system.



## Summary

This document is meant to be a guide to those who are attempting to improve outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system. The content is designed to be adapted to the needs of state and local systems, to fill gaps in services, as well as make culturally appropriate policy and practice changes. Reviewing and utilizing these ten strategy areas are critical in our efforts toward achieving more positive outcomes for children of color and their families, reducing disparities and achieving racial equity.

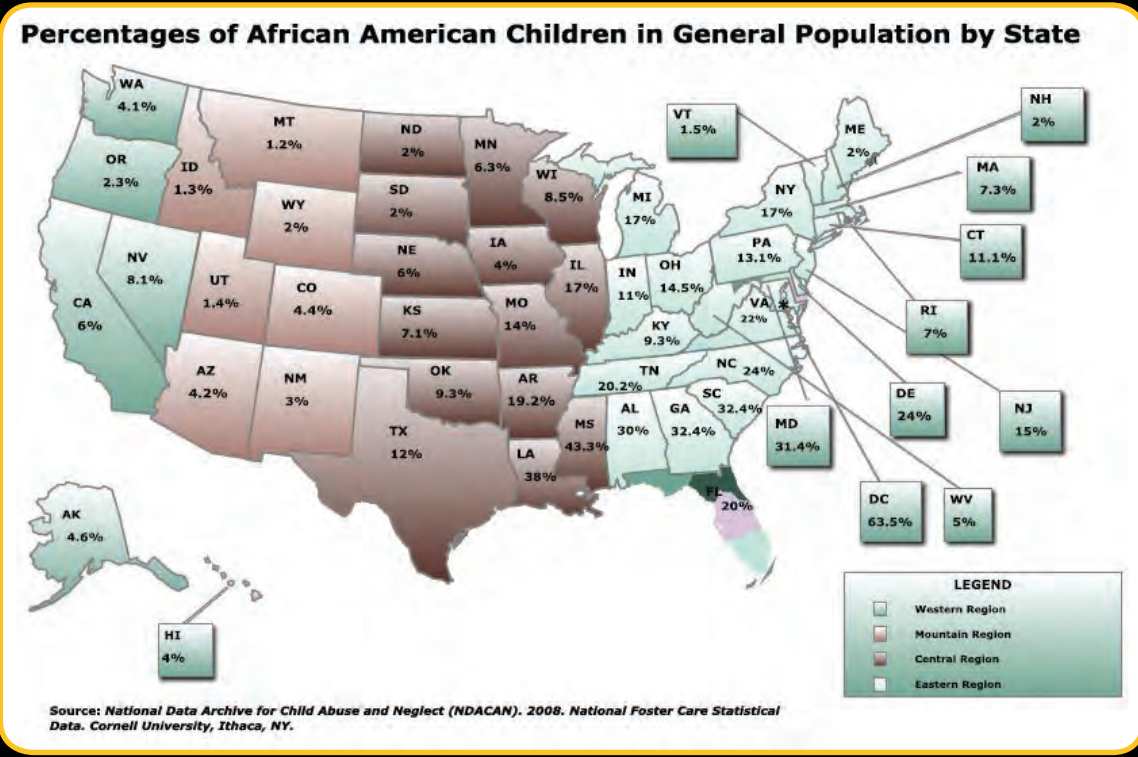
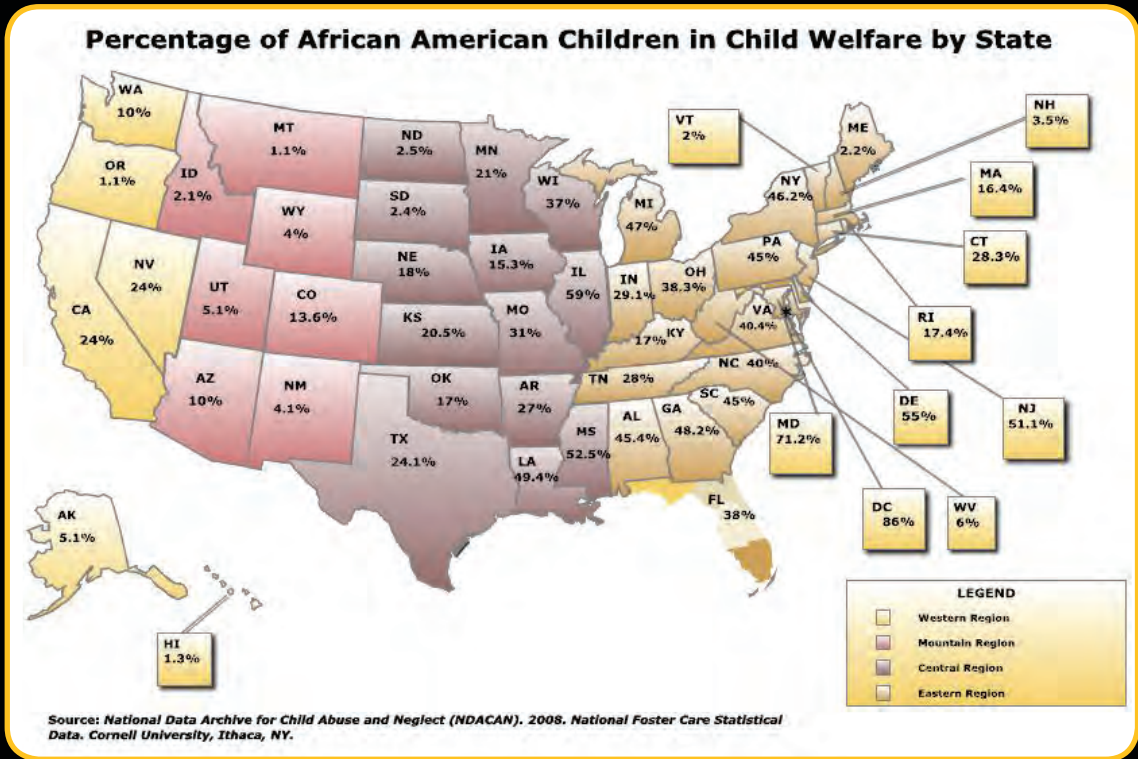
When we talk about child welfare services to African American children and families, there is an assumption that policy makers and practitioners understand the nuances of our cultural differences. Once acknowledged, these nuances should be viewed and valued as strengths and not as deficits by social work professionals. However, many of us have bought into social work concepts and principles that may or may not be applicable to people of color. Concepts like family and community often have different meanings for African Americans than for other cultures. Therefore, the development of the ten strategy areas is an attempt to highlight standards of practice that should be included as we work to improve outcomes for all children and families, but African Americans in particular.

Legislation, policies and practice are greatly influenced, developed and implemented based on a middle class value system with a little class(ism) thrown in for good measure, the dominant value system. All too often, this is the context in which services are delivered. There are some things we expect that child welfare staff would have a basic understanding of, or at least some familiarity with, what is best or most helpful to families. These include providing services at times and places convenient to them; respecting families' religious or other beliefs; identifying service needs and developing service plans based on families' reality, not what ought to be; and considering the issues families are dealing with in terms of where they live and the resources available or not available. Basic expectations such as these for child welfare workers will become even more critical in impacting service delivery as the job market continues to decline. More and more applicants with little-to-no background and/or experience in child welfare will be entering the child welfare system. As a result, there will be an even greater urgency for staff training and development.

*"From the bows of ships to the White House, African Americans have made many strides, yet, our children remain the most vulnerable. Our work is not done until every child of promise has the opportunity to realize his/her full potential."* Dr. Sharon McDaniel, Founder and President, A Second Chance, Inc.

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The Black Administrators in Child Welfare is the only national advocacy and membership organization focused entirely on child welfare and improving outcomes for African American children and families in this system. Founded in 1971, we work to change the child welfare system's response and eliminate treatment disparities through culturally appropriate policies and practices strategies.

**Contact us:**

BACW • 900 Second Street, NE, Suite 202 • Washington, DC 20002 • p: 202 783-3714 • f: 202 783-3716 • [www.blackadministrators.org](http://www.blackadministrators.org)