



STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

In launching a three-branch approach, states can use several strategies to build the infrastructure necessary for lasting success. Such an infrastructure includes developing a shared vision and common goals, diversifying team membership, staffing the three-branch approach, building relationships within and across branches, formalizing collaboration, defining and inventorying existing programs and initiatives, and identifying and seeking easy wins.

1. Develop a Shared Vision and Common Goals

State teams must commit to developing a shared vision, identifying desired outcomes for children and families in their state and developing common goals for their three-branch approach. Representatives from all three branches of government should be involved at the outset of this process to ensure that all are equally invested in the initiative. The importance of full involvement from all branches at this stage cannot be overstated. Investing time and attention early is critical to relationship-building efforts and will increase participation throughout the initiative. This also is an important opportunity for members to help identify and define their roles and responsibilities and make individual commitments to the initiative.

When the core team has developed a common vision for the effort, the strategic planning process can begin. All three branches must work together to identify concrete and specific roles in the strategic plan, with measurable goals, benchmarks for success and timelines. Leaning on one branch to lead and set directives could result in myopic goal-setting and timelines.

Be prepared to revise or expand goals and rethink factors that contribute to desired outcomes for children. A careful root cause analysis often reveals additional factors, system dynamics and other nuances.

“Set a strong, overarching vision that everyone agrees on. You can use that vision as a relaunching point to continuously build on as you encounter and work through challenges that will pop up through planning and implementation.”

—Legislative participant

2. Diversify the Team.

Develop a diverse team that includes staff from all levels of state government. Many positions are prone to staff turnover, leadership transition, rotating assignments or changes resulting from elections and term limits. It is important to involve leadership with the authority to make decisions in the core and implementation teams, but engaging more diverse personnel helps ensure sustainability. Teams can also consider creating written succession plans, with agreement on who will take over assigned roles and tasks within each branch when members leave.

3. Staff the Initiative.

Managing a three-branch approach is time intensive. Team members have competing priorities outside the initiative that may take precedence over three-branch work. Developing agendas, scheduling meetings, taking minutes, circulating notes and holding team members accountable to agreed-upon action items require time and effort. Hiring a project manager to assume these responsibilities can reduce pressures on others, but the financial implications are clear. Most states have drawn on executive branch staff to manage the initiative, but other strategies may divide the responsibility among staff from all three branches or pool funding from all three branches to hire a staff person. Co-funding staff may boost engagement and provide a sense of ownership. States can also seek support from philanthropies or anchor organizations. Building three-branch responsibilities into job descriptions promotes efficient use of existing resources.

Virginia

Virginia created a project manager position for its three-branch initiative by reassigning duties for an existing position in the Virginia Department of Social Services. This project manager was responsible for managing day-to-day operations, including developing meeting agendas, managing communication among branches and following up on action items.

“Including Court Improvement Program (CIP) directors and not just local judges helped foster continuity when judges rotated assignments. Additionally, CIP directors can bring court data to the discussions, resources for larger convenings to gather input or educate stakeholders on the initiative, as well as staff support for the collaborative.”

—Judicial participant

“It’s important to have the right people at the table. Our plan to start small and bring in more people later on did not work. I wish we would have planned for a larger, more diverse group at the beginning [of our project] and worked to get them committed from the get-go.”

—Legislative participant



4. Build Relationships Within and Across Branches.

Deepening relationships across branches and creating a sense of shared investment in the work are critical to a successful three-branch approach. Holding in-person meetings at the outset of the initiative helps build rapport and create a shared understanding of the issues state teams want to address. Building positive relationships is critical to addressing challenges before they arise.

Participants must also continually reach out to colleagues within their respective branches of government. Developing clear information and presentations on the work of the three-branch approach and how it advances better outcomes for children and families can help attract the support of additional leaders to participate on the implementation team. For example, legislators can educate their colleagues through committee hearings, child welfare-related task forces and other forums for engagement. Judges can present at judicial summits, statewide children's conferences, judicial commission meetings and similar judicial convenings.

"It was important to have the legislators at the table, learning with us, and getting an understanding of what it might mean on our end in terms of implementing a solution. As they were developing legislation, we were already at the table and were bought-in from the beginning."

—Child welfare agency leader

Wisconsin

Wisconsin lawmakers who participated on the core team of the 2016-2017 Three-Branch Institute on Improving Child Safety and Preventing Child Fatalities involved the bipartisan legislative Children's Caucus (itself created out of the 2013 Three-Branch Institute on Child Social and Emotional Well-Being) in holding five regional roundtables in 2017 to highlight local services and needs related to strategies to prevent child abuse and neglect. The goal of the roundtables was to increase the awareness of other legislators on children and family issues and to highlight successful initiatives for the legislature to consider as it developed public policies related to children and families.



5. Formalize Collaboration.

Collaboration across the three branches of government is both an important component of and successful outcome of a three-branch initiative. Several methods exist for achieving this collaboration, including establishing formal memoranda of understanding (MOUs) among agencies and across the three branches, holding regularly scheduled cross-branch meetings in person and over the phone and creating cross-system task forces. Schedule meetings far in advance to avoid conflict with judicial schedules and legislative calendars.

Tennessee

Tennessee developed a formal mutual accountability agreement that stipulates the collective and individual commitments of the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The three branches agreed to collaborate for a limited time and to adopt and support a common agenda. The agreement established the roles and responsibilities of each branch as well as mechanisms for internal and external communication. It also stated that the three branches share mutual accountability for individual and collective responsibilities through:

- Assumption of good-faith efforts to advance child welfare and juvenile justice systems.
- Maintaining open lines of communication.
- Engaging in proactive problem-solving, with an expectation for mutually beneficial solutions.
- Recognizing interdependence of efforts and the effects of policy decisions.

This 2013 agreement is available in Appendix M of this toolkit.

6. Clearly Understand the Role of Each Branch, and Make Cross-Branch Meetings Relevant to All Team Members.

Maintaining consistent engagement across all three branches throughout the initiative will be challenging. To ensure robust participation and encourage a sense of ownership among leaders across branches, consider the following strategies:

- Devote time to understanding each branch's current role in child welfare, policy development processes and limitations or restrictions in engaging in the initiative.
- Ensure that all participants understand the roles and responsibilities of each branch in advancing the goals of the collaboration.
- Involve each branch from the beginning stages of planning the collaboration, and encourage each branch's input into all aspects of the initiative, including:
 - Identifying the issues to address and the outcomes to achieve.
 - Recommending implementation and extended team members.
 - Developing the overarching goals and objectives, data indicators, interim benchmarks, implementation and oversight strategies, timelines and people/ departments responsible for tasks.
 - Monitoring, oversight and evaluation when implementation has begun.
- Write specific roles and responsibilities, with clear timelines, into the strategic plan.
- When developing agendas for core, implementation and extended team meetings or for public/constituent educational sessions, there should be an agreed-upon role for each branch. This is especially important for members of the legislative and judicial branches, who may not be as closely involved in the day-to-day work as the executive branch but can make critical contributions and need to feel central to the process.



7. Clearly Define and Inventory Existing Policies, Programs, Practices and Initiatives.

A comprehensive understanding of current programs and initiatives, including identifying which agencies are responsible for administering them and the initiatives, allows for better strategic planning for current work. Similarly, clearly defining existing policies, programs, practices and initiatives can help dispel misunderstanding and craft strategies for improvement and reduces duplication of effort. In fact, several states that have undertaken successful three-branch approaches did so by identifying an existing effort as the focus of their work. A cross-branch collaborative approach brought new life to the existing initiative, which was then expanded across the state.

8. Research the Identified Issue.

Cross-branch teams can hold formal listening sessions, joint hearings or public forums to involve experts and other community members in building a shared understanding of the identified issue. Bring in experts and those with lived experience, including including youth in foster care or formerly in care, foster parents, birth parents, and kinship caregivers, to help build shared understanding. Teams can also review relevant existing and prior studies, research, reports and plans (such as the state's Child and Family Service Review).

9. Build on Existing Cross-System Collaborative Structures.

Many states already have some form of cross-system collaborative structure — for example, children's cabinets, children's caucuses, statewide children's advisory groups or task forces and behavioral health children's task forces. Three-branch approaches should build on such structures to save time during planning and for participants. A thorough inventory of existing collaborations can prevent duplication of effort. Building on existing collaborative structures can help embed a three-branch approach into the way the state does business.

10. Identify Easy Wins.

Large-scale system reform of any kind requires a long-term commitment. Identifying easy wins early, even during the initial implementation period, and celebrating small victories boost morale and deepen cross-branch relationships. Often, process changes such as continuing to hold regularly scheduled cross-branch meetings and developing relationships and lines of communication among branches are not initially identified as initiative goals, but they are necessary to sustain engagement and should not be overlooked as measures of success. Celebrating easy wins is an important strategy to bolster morale while the team is tackling more difficult issues. In addition, convening and developing shared policy goals before a major win, such as the passage of legislation or the signing of an executive order, is integral to presenting a united front to constituents and advocates.

Wisconsin

The judicial members of a Wisconsin three-branch approach on youth transitioning out of foster care led to the development of a video featuring foster youth relaying their experiences in court. The video was used to educate judges about the importance of giving youth a voice in court proceedings.