Dear Members of the National Wraparound Initiative,

As part of our quest to keep NWI members informed and involved about relevant national policy issues and advocacy opportunities, **we wish to alert you** to an opportunity to influence how the federal government allocates its resources to children and youth with complex behavioral health needs.


The guidelines for how the block grants work will set funding -- and service -- priorities for years to come at the national and state level. Thankfully, children and youth have been named as one of several populations the agency believes should be specifically addressed by states in their block grant applications. However, as discussed by members on the NWI’s Bulletin Board, there are some ways SAMHSA could improve the new Block Grant application guidelines to ensure youths with complex needs and their families -- the population upon which wraparound is typically focused -- are adequately prioritized.

Based on the comments from NWI advisors, here is a sample email to SAMHSA. Much of this is based on recommendations included in a thoughtful comment by our partners at the University of Maryland Innovations Institute. We encourage you to customize this to reflect your own priorities, and send to Summer King, SAMHSA Reports Clearance Officer (summer.king@samhsa.hhs.gov):

Dear Ms. King:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the SAMHSA block grants for community mental health services and substance abuse prevention and treatment.

I want to commend SAMHSA for its recognition in the *Unified Application* of the critical importance of focusing on the behavioral health needs of children, adolescents, and young adults. However, even as SAMHSA has recognized that this focus is critical to the Nation’s behavioral and physical health, I believe that the new guidance does not place sufficient emphasis on ensuring that the needs of children, adolescents, young adults and their families are met.

I strongly urge SAMHSA to revise the Unified Application to (1) emphasize community-based programming for children and youth with serious emotional disturbance (SED) and/or substance abuse problems and their families; and (2) recognize the importance of strategies such as the System of Care (SOC) framework, youth and family peer-to-peer support, and the wraparound care coordination process for meeting the needs of these youth and families and maintaining them in their homes and communities.

As SAMHSA knows well, children and youth with intensive needs and their families are not served by a single provider or a single agency. As SAMHSA has demonstrated for over 15 years through its Children’s Mental Health Initiative (CMHI) Grants, adopting the system of care framework and using the wraparound process recognizes the importance of coordinating multiple community-based services and supports and fully engaging youth and families to design the services and supports that will be most
effective for that particular youth and family. I am concerned that these critical cross-system mechanisms for maintaining youths with serious and complex behavioral health needs in the community are not adequately referenced or emphasized in this Block Grant Guidance or current SAMHSA priority documents.

I would also like to urge SAMHSA not to subsume the Children’s Mental Health Initiative (CMHI), which provides grants to states and communities to develop systems of care and wraparound care coordination initiatives, into this new approach to Block Grants. I encourage SAMHSA to keep the grant program in place, recognizing that it may be beneficial to re-engineer the program to strengthen the State role or even to make the States (along with tribes and territories) the grant recipients with county or other local participation.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, I am concerned that there is no requirement that a portion of the Block Grants are used to support community-based services and supports that address the needs of children, youth, and families. Research shows that one-fifth of children and youths have a diagnosable mental health or substance abuse disorder, and yet that only about one quarter of these youths get the help they need. Moreover, up to 75% of states’ Medicaid funds go to residential treatment and inpatient hospital services, modalities that are extremely disruptive to families and have poor evidence for effectiveness. It is critical that SAMHSA ensures that states allocate a minimum percentage of their block grant funding to support empirically supported community-based services for children and youth and their families.

By serving these children and youth adequately when they are young, we can prevent an escalation of problems that will cost society billions of dollars in future child welfare, justice, and health care spending. With this in mind, I urge you to:

1. Ensure that a certain minimum percentage of Block Grant resources be allocated to children and youth with behavioral health needs and their families;
2. Preserve the system of care (SOC) grant program and provide additional language highlighting the SOC approach as a best practice in serving children and youth with complex behavioral health needs and their families;
3. Include specific requirements on meeting the needs of children and youth with behavioral health needs and their families, and develop a special monitoring unit to ensure compliance; and
4. Ensure that states and other block grant recipients receive Technical Assistance and consultation on best practice approaches to serving children and youth with complex behavioral health needs and their families.

Thank you for your continuing efforts to provide for effective policies and treatments for these children, youth, young adults, and their families.

Sincerely,

[Your Name and contact information]
Whether or not you make the above points exactly, we hope you will send in a comment by June 9 to Summer King, SAMHSA Reports Clearance Officer (summer.king@samhsa.hhs.gov).

Why not do it right now?

Thanks very much for your consideration and for your support to the NWI.

Sincerely,

Eric Bruns and Janet Walker

National Wraparound Initiative