

Lessons learned from evaluating a complex, multi-tiered T/TA system focused on CCDF grantees

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Purpose of this brief

The purpose of this brief is to share with researchers and evaluators insights and lessons learned from the Office of Child Care (OCC)-focused evaluation activities conducted throughout the Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Cross-System Evaluation project. This project included two primary OCC-focused evaluation activities: 1) evaluating Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)-oriented peer learning opportunities and 2) evaluating T/TA related to CCDF lead agencies' Corrective Action Plans. Both activities aimed to examine the relationship between forms of T/TA and specific outcomes of interest. In this brief, we first outline our evaluation questions, review the T/TA system (Child Care TA Network) and key system actors, and describe the administrative data sources and methods used. The evaluation efforts yielded several takeaways that may be useful for others seeking to evaluate T/TA: Collaborate with Program Partners, Consult with Key T/TA System Actors, Capitalize on Administrative Data Sources, Obtain Multiple Perspectives from T/TA Recipients, Define Appropriate Outcomes to Measure, and Focus on Depth over Breadth

The two evaluation activities undertaken focused on the effects of T/TA for state lead agencies; therefore, states are the locus of this brief. These learnings may not be generalizable to the contexts of territories and tribes.

Background

ACF T/TA CROSS-SYSTEM EVALUATION PROJECT

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) established the Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Cross-System Evaluation Project to answer questions about the processes and effectiveness of T/TA provided to Office of Child Care (OCC) and Office of Head Start (OHS) grantees. The project is designed to support the use of data and evaluation tools for continuous quality improvement of T/TA resources and methods. Through various utilization-focused evaluation activities¹, the project conducts research and develops resources to inform ACF and partners about how to improve T/TA services to support policy, practice, and organizational change among grantees at state and local levels. The project is carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago, in partnership with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), OCC and OHS. This Methods Brief summarizes learnings from the OCC-focused activities of the project.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

Evaluation efforts under the T/TA Cross-System Evaluation Project were guided by several overarching evaluation questions. These questions focused on three broad themes: 1) the process of providing T/TA to grantees, 2) the relation between T/TA and outcomes at the state and local levels, and 3) continuous quality improvement of T/TA.

Below, we state the project-wide evaluation questions and in italics feature specific questions about T/TA aimed at Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) grantees that were we use to inform this brief.

¹ At the center of utilization-focused evaluation is "how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and experience the evaluation process. Therefore, the focus in utilization-focused evaluation is on intended use by intended users" (<https://www.utilization-focusedevaluation.org/events/2021/9/27/utilization-focused-evaluation>, accessed 9/20/2022). The entire evaluation process, from design to dissemination, is grounded in actual use.

Process-oriented questions

1. What T/TA resources and methods are currently used in OCC's Child Care TA Network (CCTAN)?

Outcome-oriented questions

1. What are the outcomes CCTAN achieved regarding changing practices at the state and local levels?
 - *CCDF-focused: What can we learn about outcomes of the Office of Child Care's peer learning opportunities by looking across different models used by T/TA providers?*
 - *CCDF-focused: What is the relationship between the T/TA the National Centers provide to CCDF lead agencies and lead agencies' successful implementation of corrective action plans?*

Continuous Quality Improvement-oriented questions

1. How can ACF's Early Childhood T/TA resources and methods be improved?
 - *CCDF-focused: How can we maximize the success of OCC peer learning opportunities by supporting both facilitators and participants?*
2. How can information dissemination across CCTAN be improved?
3. How can ACF better use data about CCTAN to help the system achieve its goals?

Organization of this Brief

First, we explain the elements and structure of the CCDF program before describing the T/TA that is offered to CCDF grantees through CCTAN.

In the CCTAN description, we illustrate the main actors in the network and relate the nature of the T/TA that is offered to CCDF grantees through the network.

Next, we list the administrative data sources we used to support evaluation efforts. For each data source, we describe the data and its purpose, including applicable federal reporting requirements.

Finally, we present five key takeaways summarizing the lessons we learned from evaluating the complex, multi-tiered T/TA system focused on CCDF grantees.

Understanding the CCDF Program

The **Office of Child Care** supports low-income working families through child care financial assistance and promotes children's learning by improving the quality of early care and education and afterschool programs. This support comes in the form of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), a block grant administered to the fifty states and the District of Columbia, five territories, and more than 500 federally recognized Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages. These block grants are dispersed by the

respective governments in ways that support families in paying for child care and improve the overall quality of care in those jurisdictions

The CCDF program provides allows states, territories, and tribes the flexibility to spend the money in ways that best address their needs and priorities. Each state, territory, and tribe has a unique system, tailored to best serve children and families within their jurisdictions that differ by contextual factors, unique legislative requirements, government structure, population demographics, distribution of funds, T/TA needs, and barriers and limitations faced.

States, territories, and tribes identify an agency or joint inter-agency office that is authorized to administer and implement the block grant. This **Lead Agency** has the authority to administer the program and the **CCDF Administrator** is the primary child care contact within the state, territory, or tribe.

Central to the administration of the CCDF program is the **CCDF plan**. The plan is a Lead Agency's application for CCDF funds and provides a description of how the program will be administered at the state, territory, or tribal level in accordance with CCDF law and regulations.

CCDF plans are currently submitted for 3-year cycles and undergo a review and approval process by federal staff at OCC. During the approval process lead agencies receive formal feedback on met and unmet CCDF requirements. During the 3-year cycle in fiscal years 2019-2022,² unmet requirements required lead agencies to develop a **corrective action plan (CAP)**, outlining the steps they will take over a specified period of time to meet outstanding requirements.

Lead agencies receive support from OCC in their development of the CCDF plan and its implementation. Ten **regional offices** within OCC provide guidance to lead agencies and facilitate the lead agency's engagements with **CCTAN**.

Understanding the Child Care TA Network (CCTAN)

CCTAN provides training and technical assistance to lead agencies addressing needs such as licensing requirements, consumer education, family child care, and health and safety.

OCC administers contracts and grants to operate term-limited **National TA Centers** that provide T/TA in the following CCDF-focused areas: Afterschool and Summer Enrichment, Child Care Data and Reporting, Early Childhood Quality Assurance, Subsidy Innovation and Accountability, and State and Tribal Child Care Capacity Building. OCC also provides funding to Office of Head Start TA centers, such as the National Center on Development, Teaching, and Learning, to develop and amend resources for a child care audience. **TA Providers** from the National TA Centers support **lead agencies and their staff** in their development and implementation of CCDF plans and resulting CAPs.

² OCC has since changed this process.

OCC SYSTEM ACTORS: PROGRAM STAFF, T/TA PROVIDERS, AND CCDF RECIPIENTS

OCC, as a part of the Administration for Children and Families, administers CCDF to the lead agencies. The lead agencies disperse the funds to support child care and after school programming, subsidies for families, and administrative structures.

The **National TA Centers** listed above provide T/TA to states, territories, and tribes under the direction of a Contracting Officer’s Representative (COR) or federal project officer (FPO) from ACF. National TA Centers are renewed or recompeted after a period of time. National TA Centers serve as a conduit between the states, territories, and tribes, and OCC, providing them with T/TA and informing OCC about the states’, territories’, and tribes’ activities, progress, and T/TA needs. Some centers also have evaluators on staff to assess the quality and effectiveness of T/TA provided.

NATURE OF THE TA

The National TA Centers provide both "Training" and "Technical Assistance." While often lumped together and referred to as T/TA, training activities are often top-down meetings or webinars that focus on teaching a topic or skill to a broad audience. In contrast, technical assistance in the OCC context is targeted and tailored to the needs of the state, territory, or tribal recipient with the goal of building capacity in a specific area. TA may include site visits, strategic planning, assessments, or peer learning groups.

T/TA needs are driven by new and amended federal priorities and CCDF policies, which in turn set priorities and highlight areas of need for lead agencies in states, territories, and tribes. T/TA activities target higher-level state employees and their partners for participation, who are the ones that implement CCDF policies as T/TA is not designed to be administered directly to programs.

Understanding OCC Administrative Data Sources

We used two types of administrative data sources to support evaluation efforts. The first type of data sources, shown in Exhibit 1, included data associated with the CCDF plan process and the monitoring of CCDF implementation by lead agencies. The second type of data sources, shown in Exhibit 2, included data collected by T/TA planners and providers in CCTAN.

EXHIBIT 1. CCDF PROGRAM STATE DATA SOURCES

Data Sources	
ACF-118	ACF’s electronic submission site and data storage site for all materials related to form ACF-118 (CCDF Plan).
CCDF Plans (FY2019-21)	Lead agencies are required to submit application (Form ACF-118 “CCDF plan”) to OCC for funding on a triennial basis. Lead agencies submitted CCDF plans expected to be in alignment with CCDBG act requirements in September of 2018, describing implemented state policies and practices in response to all CCDF requirements. CCDF plans were accessible on the ACF-118 submission site as interactive documents.

Data Sources	
OCC Approval Letters	OCC authored and posted (via ACF-118) approval letters for the initial CCDF plan submissions, as well as any subsequent plan amendments. The initial OCC approval letters indicated which requirements a lead agency did not meet, if any. Follow-up approval letters acknowledged each amendment submitted by lead agencies, as well as which amendments were or were not sufficient to meet initially unmet requirements.
Corrective Action Plans (CAPs)	Lead agencies submitted Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) outlining concrete steps to meet any unmet requirements in response to OCC's first plan approval letter, which stated the CCDF provisions that lead agencies did not meet. Accessible via ACF-118.
CCDF Plan Amendments	CCDF plan amendments took the form of a full plan resubmission containing amended sections and revisions as applicable to each state. Amendments included revisions relevant to CAPs as well as other revisions. Each amendment contained a summary of changes. Amendments were accessible on the ACF-118 submission site.
Quality Progress Reports (QPR)	QPRs are lead agency authored documents based on a template provided by OCC. QPRs must be submitted annually and detail lead agency progress on how CCDF quality funds were used, measures used to evaluate progress in improving the quality of child care programs and services for children. Lead agencies submitted updates for each of the unmet requirements listed in their original OCC approval letters. These descriptions primarily outlined the steps each lead agency took and planned to take to meet unmet requirements. Accessible via ACF-118.

EXHIBIT 2. CCTAN DATA SOURCES

Data Sources	
TAT	The Legacy TAT ³ included information on the various TA supports lead agencies received from the National TA Centers, with references to interactions with regional offices, as far back as 2012. Information in the Legacy TAT was provided by T/TA providers engaged in the T/TA events, primarily State Systems Specialists and other T/TA specialists. All TAT data was downloaded via Excel prior to Legacy TAT closure at the end of June 2021. TAT information was organized by TA type (goal-oriented, multi-state, regional). Multi-state and regional T/TA activities detailed a specific event or series of connected events. Goal-driven T/TA record's included multiple activities, sometimes spanning years, that a lead agency received or participated in, towards a goal associated with CCDF requirements. Each activity listed requesters as well as T/TA providers from National TA Centers and partners (e.g., OCC Regional Office).
OCC TA Site	The OCC TA Site is the public-facing web presence of CCTAN. It provides resources for both CCDF lead agencies and child care providers (primarily information, tools, and trainings) on topics relevant to CCDF implementation and other topics related to child care.
National TA Center materials	Internal documents pertaining to lead agencies' T/TA engagement (e.g., sign up documents, participant rosters).

³ The version of the TAT we used for this project was discontinued at the end of June 2021 and the new TAT went live in the following month. The discontinued version is now called "Legacy TAT" and the new version is called "Modernized TAT." All Legacy TAT entries remain accessible in Modernized TAT.

Overview of Evaluation Activities that Informed this Brief

The evaluation efforts of the Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance Cross-System Evaluation project yielded several takeaways that may be useful for others seeking to evaluate T/TA. These takeaways are based on two OCC focused evaluation activities, which we describe below.

A STUDY OF PEER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CCDF GRANTEEES

This study aimed to address the overarching question: What can we learn about the outcomes of peer learning opportunities by looking across different models? The National TA Centers use peer learning opportunities as a TA strategy. Peer learning engages groups of individuals in the exchange of knowledge and experience with each other with the potential to diffuse this learning within their organizations to ensure an impact at scale. Peer learning opportunities for CCDF grantees bring together state, territory, and tribal employees who drive practice changes and policy reforms in child care. To date, there has been no systematic examination in the research literature on the use of peer learning as a technical assistance strategy in the field of early care and education. Little is known about what contributes to its effectiveness.

We conducted an environmental scan to describe, define, and classify 24 peer learning opportunities offered to CCDF grantees between January 2015 and December 2018. Through the scan we identified key characteristics of these opportunities that allowed us to select four peer learning opportunities for further examination through case studies. The case studies included document reviews and in-depth interviews with National TA Center planners and facilitators of these peer learning opportunities as well as state-level participants.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NATIONAL TA CENTER SUPPORTS AND LEAD AGENCIES' IMPLEMENTATION OF CORRECTIVE ACTION PLANS (CAPS)

With this study, we aimed to answer the following question: What is the relationship between the T/TA the National TA Centers provided to CCDF lead agencies and the successful implementation of CAPS? OCC was interested in better understanding how the T/TA provided by the National TA Centers contributed to whether CCDF lead agencies of states, territories, and tribes were able to develop and successfully address CAPs for unmet requirements OCC had identified during the initial review and approval of the lead agencies' CCDF plans.

We analyzed existing administrative data to explore the relationships between National TA Center supports and lead agencies' implementation of CAPs. First, we reviewed lead agencies' unmet and met requirements at the beginning and end of the FY19-22 CCDF Plan Cycle and examined state context variables that might account for the variation observed in lead agencies' ability to meet CCDF requirements. Second, we conducted an in-depth review of the T/TA requested and received by four lead agencies representing four states to better understand their CAP implementation and illustrate the relationship between T/TA supports and CAP implementation.

Takeaway 1: Collaborate with Program Partners

Utilization-focused evaluations are driven by and adapt to program needs and priorities. Therefore, when preparing for a utilization-focused evaluation of a federal T/TA system, it is critical to assemble a project team that includes representatives from the program office (e.g., OCC), the federal research

office (e.g., OPRE), and the evaluators. Formalizing this project team in the project's statement of work (SOW) will enable regular communication, timely joint decision making, continual learning and iteration, ensured relevance and applicability to client needs, and meaningful co-interpretation of findings.

Through OCC and OPRE's intentional outreach with agency staff, TA providers, and TA recipients, the project team worked collaboratively to develop evaluation methods and processes that reflected a shared language and understanding by staff with both program and evaluation backgrounds. Strong, trusting relationships across and within ACF offices enabled these collaborations, which provided the foundation to the successful co-design of the evaluation. The project team co-developed the questions to explore and determined the specific framing of the questions emphasizing the utilization focus. The development of the evaluation questions was iterative and reflected multiple perspectives across the project team.

OCC's engagement in the evaluation process was essential. The OCC program staff member on the project team was an intermediary for OCC perspectives and often reached out to OCC colleagues to confirm that the evaluation work aligned with the office's interests and priorities. With OCC input, we identified and verified implicit and explicit theories of change driving the system's inputs, activities, and desired outcomes. OCC program staff helped build the team's understanding of the OCC T/TA system processes and available data sources, such as how the TAT is used to identify T/TA needs. The OCC program staff also provided a contextual understanding for interpreting findings, understanding potential areas for improvement, and addressing needs for additional information.

The evaluation process, like T/TA delivery and receipt, is not linear; it is fluid and dynamic. To enable consensus building, the project team welcomed OCC's input and adapted workflows and products throughout the project. Evaluation questions evolved, and the scope of the study shifted and expanded over time. The project team developed evaluation questions and created a study design that would meet OCC's needs and interests. This process was iterative, and the original design was adapted as the evaluation was carried out. These design changes reflected our deeper understanding of CCTAN and the ways in which T/TA providers and recipients operate within the T/TA system. The project team actively listened to OCC program staff and T/TA providers during the evaluation's implementation to improve alignment between the evaluation activities and the needs of CCTAN. These processes required time and flexibility, but resulted in products (frameworks, interview protocols, and tools) that all members of the project team found useful. It is important to note that while utilization-focused evaluations are centered on utility and actual use, all evaluation activities observed OPRE research principles and were carried out independently by the evaluator.

Takeaway 2: Consult with Key T/TA System Actors

It is crucial for federal T/TA evaluations to involve the perspectives of system actors to be responsive to needs, to execute the plan, and to interpret the results. There are actors involved in the planning, delivery, and receipt of T/TA, each of whom has a unique perspective on the system.

Throughout the evaluation, the project team actively engaged with system actors to:

1. understand the components of the system and the needs of its actors,

2. identify relevant data and evaluation activities, as well as understand actors' data and evaluation needs and questions,
3. identify relevant documents and obtain internal materials,
4. access, use, and understand existing data sources,
5. support the refinement of evaluation questions,
6. successfully engage key informants and collect primary data, and
7. share and co-interpret findings.

At the beginning of the EC T/TA Evaluation Project, we conducted key informant interviews with Federal Project Officers, Regional Program Managers, and State System Specialists to understand the system, its actors, and TA-related evaluation goals and activities. Within OCC, the project team engaged with Federal Project Officers (FPOs), who provided agency guidance and direction to the National TA Centers, as well as with Regional Program Managers (RPMs) representing OCC's Regional Offices. FPOs provided information on the National T/TA Centers' T/TA planning and provision. RPMs provided information on T/TA efforts in their regions in response to federal priorities and state and regional needs and how these may have shifted over time. Both RPMs and FPOs directed the project team to key informants within the system to refine study plans, conduct primary data collection and support the interpretation of findings.

Within CCTAN, the project team worked closely with T/TA leaders, planners, and facilitators at the National TA Centers. The Centers' T/TA planners and providers have extensive historical and institutional knowledge of CCTAN and the context, needs, and program implementation trajectories of the different CCDF lead agencies.

By focusing on the relationships between National TA Center staff and lead agencies we learned that CCTAN T/TA to CCDF lead agencies was ongoing and highly tailored to the needs of each lead agency. When designing the study to evaluate the effectiveness of CCTAN TA, the project team had to consider the fact that T/TA recipient goals, and therefore potential, measurable outcomes, can and frequently change. Therefore, the processes and implementation of T/TA became the outcomes of interest (e.g., what CCDF agencies implemented, why activities were undertaken, and what barriers they faced), with the longer-term outcomes (e.g., knowledge, practice change, data capacity) more difficult to evaluate. These short-term outcomes are used to understand T/TA uptake and how T/TA content and delivery can be improved.

We interviewed National TA Center staff for both the peer learning and CAPs/TA studies. The National TA Center staff provided us with historical and institutional context of the CCDF lead agencies and the lead agencies' evolving needs in response to legal requirements, shifting priorities, and policy contexts. Turnover is a common issue among the administrators in lead agencies and can affect T/TA needs and goals. T/TA providers are a critical informant to understand state context and turnover.

Because of their position in the system, National TA Center staff were a valuable resource and a conduit between CCDF lead agencies and administrators and OCC program staff. They confirmed that the project team's work was accurate and made sense in the context of the system and provided feedback on how to make evaluation findings accessible and actionable.

Takeaway 3: Capitalize on Administrative Data Sources

Existing administrative data sources can provide valuable information on the T/TA system to be evaluated, even though they are built for a different purpose and use. It is important to consider the purpose of the data sources to best match them to the evaluation question of interest.

Working with these data sources requires significant time for evaluators to gain permission to access and to build familiarity with the data so they understand their purpose, use, and documentation conventions. We engaged with agency staff and relevant contractors to obtain an overview of the data systems, and receive answers to questions during early exploration of the data and their utility.

Different administrative data sources may not be easily linked across existing data systems, and some may not be suitable to answer evaluation questions. However, different administrative data sources within and across programs offer opportunities to answer evaluation questions of interest. Particularly regarding CCTAN processes and relevant lead agency context, the triangulation of several data sources may yield a more comprehensive understanding of the potential effects of T/TA.

Due to the record keeping nature of the available data sources, they are qualitative, such as descriptions of T/TA activities; TAT narratives of T/TA requested and received by lead agency staff (TAT); lead agencies' action plans outlining steps towards meeting requirements, or OCC's approval letters of CCDF plans. Some data allowed for quantification (e.g., how many T/TA engagements occurred between a lead agency and CCTAN on a given topic and over what period of time; how many lead agencies had unmet CCDF requirements). We systematically extracted information, constructed, and cleaned the quantified datasets, created summary statistics, and developed figures and graphs. The quantification and analysis of qualitative data from the TAT was time intensive.

Triangulation across the multiple data sources allowed us to shed light on questions focused on the effects of T/TA. For example, by triangulating data associated with specific lead agencies (i.e., CAPs, OCC approval letters, TAT entries dating back a decade), we were able to describe individual agencies' T/TA needs, their engagement with the T/TA system, the implementation of their CAPs and whether or not the lead agency met CCDF requirements.

Takeaway 4: Obtain Multiple Perspectives from T/TA Recipients

The perspectives of T/TA recipients at the state, territory, or tribal levels are key to understanding the reach, effectiveness, and the limitations of the T/TA CCTAN offered. This includes lead agency staff, staff from other state, territory, or tribal government agencies, other non-government organizations who collaborate with the lead agency, as well as contractors. While the CCDF administrator is the key decision-maker and responsible for the implementation of CCDF requirements, the T/TA provided through CCTAN is broadly designed for lead agencies and their government and non-government partners at the local, state, tribal, or territory to support the implementation of the CCDF block grant. Evaluating T/TA in this context therefore requires acknowledging the variety of recipients at the state, territory, and tribal levels and planning evaluation activities with flexible parameters designed to identify relevant informants.

Understanding the constraints on CCDF administrators' time and OCC's concerns about overburdening them, we conducted evaluation activities only with other lead agency representatives and T/TA recipients. This enabled us to better understand how lead agencies may differ from one another and how the organization of the agency and the policy context within it operates can influence CCDF plan implementation. However, the lack of lead administrator perspectives presented a limitation to the utilization-focus of the evaluation efforts. Delegates and representatives from other government agencies or organizations have different perspectives on the T/TA opportunities they participated in, and these may not reflect the lead agency's view, or align with the lead agency's objectives. While their viewpoints can provide a multi-faceted view of CCDF implementation in the state, territory, or tribe, they cannot comprehensively speak to the effects of T/TA on CCDF planning and implementation at the lead agency level. Thus, whenever possible, feedback should be obtained from the CCDF administrator, in addition to other recipients. If not possible, it is important to consider the lack of this perspective when interpreting findings or drawing conclusions.

Takeaway 5: Define Appropriate Outcomes to Measure

Evaluating federal T/TA effectiveness and the associated implementation of CCDF requirements leading to systems change at the state, territory, or tribal levels benefits from a clear definition of expected short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. Under typical evaluation contracting timeframes, assessing short-term outcomes (at the T/TA level) may be more feasible than long-term outcomes (at the state/territory/tribe level).

The T/TA strategies that CCTAN employs target changes in CCDF policy, systems, and service delivery, such as building a state-wide afterschool system across state and non-state organizations or rolling out a training curriculum for infant-toddler educators. Knowledge gathering, planning, and implementation of these changes is a multi-year process. Systems changes, in particular, may only be observable well beyond the 3-year CCDF funding cycle and the outcomes achieved may not necessarily be the outcomes that were originally intended. For example, T/TA provided in support of developing new regulations in alignment with a CCDF requirement is quicker to evaluate than assessing the impact of those regulations on access to and quality of child care.

However, short-term outcomes likely vary by lead agency. Lead agency efforts to change existing policy or practices may be at the knowledge gathering stage in one state, territory, or tribe, or they may be at the action planning or implementation stage in others. The identification of outcomes to evaluate should occur based on the status of the work in each state, territory, or tribe.

Takeaway 6. Focus on Depth over Breadth

The project team considered evaluating the use and effects of federal T/TA comparatively across different lead agencies. However, the individualized nature of T/TA (i.e., tailored to lead agencies), the differing trajectories of the work states, territories, and tribes were engaged in, and the different outcomes of interest made such comparisons challenging. Instead, we used approaches such as case studies of specific T/TA activities or longitudinal investigation of CCDF lead agencies T/TA engagement, which favored depth over breadth. These approaches also lent themselves to thematic analyses across CCDF requirements.

CCDF lead agencies operate in varied policy contexts and institutional environments. Contextual factors such as funding allocation and legislative requirements can differ greatly between states, territories, and tribes, and so do desired outcomes and priorities. Identifying lead agencies' needs related to these priorities is an ongoing process. Often, T/TA planners and providers uncover underlying needs that are related to the T/TA they are providing to the lead agency but require adjustments to the originally planned approach. T/TA providers respond flexibly, as necessary, to provide tailored solutions to these known and emerging needs. Due to the adaptable nature of the T/TA in response to changing needs, the project team focused evaluation efforts on fewer cases which we investigated in depth across CCDF topics and requirements.

Summary

In this brief, we shared the lessons we learned through our evaluations of T/TA offered to CCDF grantees by OCC as part of the Early Childhood T/TA Cross-System Evaluation project. We described these lessons in six takeaways.

First, since utilization-focused evaluations are centered on actual use, a key element of our evaluation efforts was collaborating with program staff. Second, consultations with the multiple system actors across OCC and CCTAN who participate in the planning, delivery, and receipt of T/TA was central to planning evaluation efforts and situating findings within the CCDF context. Third, we learned that existing administrative data sources can be triangulated for a more comprehensive understanding of the breadth, depth, delivery, and effects of T/TA. Our fourth takeaway concerned the fact that multiple lead agency perspectives may be needed to understand the effects of T/TA on their CCDF implementation. Fifth, we identified a need to clearly define outcomes of interest that can be expected as a function of T/TA over the short-, medium-, and long-term to better understand the effects of CCTAN. Finally, within a complex system like CCTAN, evaluation approaches that favor depth over breadth may yield nuanced insights into what works for whom, how, and when in the CCDF context.

Appendix: Glossary

Administration for Children and Families – The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and promotes the economic and social well-being of children, families, individuals and communities with leadership and resources for compassionate, effective delivery of human services.

Child Care Technical Assistance Network – The Child Care Technical Assistance Network (CCTAN) promotes excellence through high-quality, practical resources and approaches. OCC’s training and technical assistance system offers CCDF administrators information, tools, training, and other supports. The system focuses on ensuring that all early care and education systems and programs, for children from birth through age 12, have access to the highest quality materials.

Child Care and Development Fund – The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federal and state partnership program authorized under the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) that provides state, territory, and tribal governments with funds to support children and their families with paying for child care that will fit their needs and that will prepare children to succeed in school.

Child Care and Development Block Grant Act – The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG) provides federal funding to states, territories, and tribes for child care subsidies for low-income working families with children under age 13. It also funds quality improvement, consumer education and engagement, and health and safety initiatives.

CCDF Lead Agency – The CCDF Lead Agency administers and implements the CCDF program. The Lead Agency determines the basic use of CCDF funds and the priorities for spending CCDF funds, and is designated by the chief executive of a state (often, this is the governor) or by the tribal leader or applicant.

CCDF Plan – The CCDF Plan serves as the Lead Agency's application for CCDF funds by providing a description of how the program will be administered in accordance with CCDF law and regulations to provide high-quality child care services to eligible families. The CCDF Plan also presents an opportunity for states, territories, and tribes to demonstrate the activities and services they are providing to meet the needs of low-income children and families.

Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System – The Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System (EC T/TA System) serves Head Start grantees and delegates and CCDF grantees, including states, territories, and tribes. The system brings together resources from the Office of Child Care, the Office of Head Start (OHS), and their federal health partners to offer CCDF Administrators and their partners information, tools, training, and other supports across the national network of T/TA providers.

National TA Centers – The Early Childhood National Centers for Training and Technical Assistance promote excellence through high-quality, practical resources and approaches. They are designed to build early childhood and school-age program capacity and promote consistent practices across communities, states, territories, and tribes. These National Centers bring together the knowledge and skills from the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care, and their health partners across HHS.

Regional Offices – The ACF Office of Regional Operations has ten regional offices that serve states, territories, tribes, and other grantees in their geographical area.

Peer Learning Opportunity – Specific technical assistance opportunity offered to CCDF grantees. Groups of individuals exchanging knowledge and experience with each other, and potentially diffusing this learning back to their organizations to ensure an impact—at scale—on reform initiatives.

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The Administration for Children and Families established the Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Cross-System Evaluation Project to answer questions about the processes and effectiveness of [the Early Childhood T/TA System](#) (ECTTAS). The project is designed to support the use of data and evaluation tools for continuous quality improvement of ECTTAS’ resources and methods. Through various utilization-focused research activities, the project conducts research and develops resources to inform ACF and partners about how to improve T/TA services to support policy, practice, and organizational change among grantees at state and local levels. The project is carried out by NORC at the University of Chicago, in partnership with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), the Office of Head Start (OHS), and the Office of Child Care (OCC).