



Discussion

Citizen review panels in child protection: Misunderstood, neglected, and underutilized



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ABSTRACT

More than 340 Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) continue to engage thousands of volunteers across the United States to improve their state and local child protection services (CPS) systems. Despite sharing a common federal mandate, they differ widely across states in their structure and function. Very little is known about their effectiveness. Available evidence points to persistent challenges of capacity to fulfill their mandate, and difficult relationships with their respective CPS systems. This paper outlines the actions at the federal level in the development of CRPs, and argues that the mandate is largely misunderstood, the panels are neglected as institutions, and consequently, severely underutilized. Recommendations to improve their relevance and effectiveness are suggested.

Child protection services (CPS) in the US are governed and administered by state or county-level agencies. Congress and the federal government have considerable influence through legislation, regulations, and funding (McGowan, 2014). Owing to the reach of a government agency into individual and family lives, at a most personal level potentially leading to loss of one's children, public's interest in child protection policy and practice has always been high (Gormley, 2012). For the same reasons, child protection is one of the more contentious and challenging areas of policy making and implementation. There were many calls for reform over the last four decades, ranging from minor fixes to a total overhaul (Cohen, 2005). More extensive or improved citizen participation and community involvement in child protection policy and practice was one of those reforms, and Citizen Review Panels (CRPs) are the latest of innovations in response (Jones, Litzelfelner, & Ford, 2003).

Citizen participation in design, implementation, and evaluation of public policy is not a novel idea (Innes & Booher, 2004), and many formal and informal mechanisms evolved over the last century (Callahan, 2007). However, the idea of involving community partners and other citizens in design and implementation of CPS services is relatively new (Litzelfelner, 2003). Three mechanisms evolved in the last two decades of the 20th century – Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Foster Care Review Boards (FCRB), and Citizen Review Panels (CRPs). While citizen participation in all three mechanisms is voluntary, intended purpose of each of these mechanisms, and thus the roles of volunteers, are very different.

Table 1 presents a comparison between the three mechanisms. FCRBs are the oldest among the three. Many states in the 1970s experienced what was termed 'foster care drift' where children in out-of-home care were lingering in the system for too long, and moving between numerous placements without clear path for permanency. Many of these states experimented with case review systems to address this drift. Congress responded with the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 96–272) requiring a case plan for every child in out-of-home care, and a review of those case plans every six months. While one review each year had to be in court, the other during that year can be a judicial (in court), administrative (by the CPS agency), or a citizen review. Many states began citizen review boards or FCRBs. The CASA program started in 1977 as a Washington state judge's initiative in response to overburdened court-appointed attorneys as guardians of children in state custody. Individual CASA volunteers usually have one case at a time, and advocate for the child's needs in a court proceeding. The program grew into a national enterprise, with hundreds of local CASA programs, and a national association of CASA programs.

While all three mechanisms face challenges, and much about their operations and impact remains to be known and understood, CRPs seem to have been most misunderstood, neglected, and underutilized. This paper traces the development of CRPs through congressional record, federal statutes, clarifications from the Children's Bureau, scant peer-reviewed literature, and minimal technical assistance documents. Two major sources – reports and other documents produced by individual panels; and individual state statutes and budgets – were not reviewed

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Table 1
Comparison between CRPs, FCRBs, and CASA.

	CRPs	FCRBs	CASAs
Authorizing federal law	P.L. 104-235	P.L. 96-272	P.L. 101-647
Subsequent federal amendments	Pub. L. 108-36 Pub. L. 111-320	P.L. 105-89	P.L. 113-4
Federal appropriations	None	P.L. 96-272; Partially reimbursable by Title IV-E funds based on a formula	P.L. 101-647; annual congressional appropriations
Role	Systems-level review by examining policy, procedure, and practice	Systems-level and case-level review by examining individual cases	Case-level review
Primary reviewers	Citizen volunteers	Technical experts, agency personnel, or trained citizens	Citizen volunteers
Reports to	State and public	Varies – to court, or a state agency	Court
National Organization	National CRP Advisory Board	None	National CASA Association
Technical Assistance	National Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination Center	National Center for Child Welfare Excellence	National CASA Association

here. I establish that CRPs were primarily meant to serve as mechanisms for public participation in child protection policy and practice at state and local levels. With very limited engagement from the Children's Bureau in terms of oversight or technical assistance, the three-part congressional mandate for the panels seems to have confounded CPS administrators and CRP volunteers alike, and the mandate is implemented in diverse ways across the country. Public participation is rarely the central purpose of CRPs in practice, and contention is a defining attribute of CRP enterprise in most states. I argue that CRPs are misunderstood, neglected, underutilized, and are at risk. For comparable reviews of FCRBs, see Whitaker (Whitaker, 2011), and for a review of CASA programs, see (Lawson, Maynard, & Berrick, 2015).

1. Legislative history and intent of CRPs

CRP's origins can be traced back to independent but complimentary efforts in individual states to improve accountability of their respective CPS systems through citizen oversight (Scott & Bruner, 1996). By 1995, language almost identical to the current CRP statute was included in H.R. 1157, the Welfare Transformation Act of 1995 (vetoed by President Clinton). Parts of H.R. 1157, along with the language of CRPs, were included in H.R. 4, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1995 (again vetoed by President Clinton). Both bills were failed proposals to replace the network of federal regulations and sanctions with a block grant mechanism, along the lines of overall welfare reform enacted in 1996. At the same time, since Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) needed to be reauthorized, Senate Bill 919 was introduced in June 1995. The original draft of the bill did not include the CRP provision. House amendments in September 1996 to the Senate version of S. 919 added the CRP provision that was in H.R. 1157. The fact that the original language of the CRP statute as expressed in H.R. 1157 was left intact in the final version of the Senate Bill S 919, and was passed into law as Pub. L. 104-235, amendments to CAPTA enacted by the 104th Congress in 1996, shows the unanimous agreement in both the House and the Senate on the CRP statute.

1.1. Congressional intent of the 1996 amendments

House Report 104-81 (1995) accompanying HR 1157 states that “the federal role in the protection of children is to ensure that: a) States have clear standards for child protection; b) Citizen Review Panels examine controversial cases and publicize their views of how the State social service department handled the cases; and c) States report information on the characteristics of their child protection program and data on its performance” (p.37). All three components were included in S. 919. Expressing support for the House amendments to S 919, during congressional deliberations on September 25, 1996, Congressman Gooding (R-PA) stated (142 Cong. Rec. H11140-H11153, 1996a): “The changes made in the House will provide new opportunities for citizens–

not just child protection bureaucrats—to play an integral role in ensuring that States are meeting their goals of protecting children from abuse and neglect.”

Senator Coats (R-IN) clearly identified the CRP review function as a primary vehicle for public participation (142 Cong. Rec. S11573-S11582, 1996): “In order to ensure citizen participation and public accountability of State and local child protection agencies, we have required [...] citizen review panels to evaluate the extent to which child protection agencies are effectively discharging their child protection responsibilities.” In addition to the review function, CRPs were envisioned as both a vehicle for public outreach as clearly mentioned in the statute, and also as advocacy agents. Congressman Dale Kildee (D-MI) hoped that the CRPs will (142 Cong. Rec. H11140-H11153, 1996b): “help increase public awareness that even the most heroic caseworkers cannot possibly serve the needs of the children and families in their communities [...]. I sincerely hope that the Citizen Review Panels [...] will help build a case for additional resources to child protection agencies.”

House Report 104-81 (1995) further expands on the role of CRPs: “By allowing the panels to have complete access to child protection cases, by requiring panels to publicize their findings, and by requiring states to respond to criticisms and recommendations of the panels, the Committee intends to subject states to public criticism and political repercussions if they fail to protect children.” (p. 34). Some have interpreted this to be “incendiary” and “adversarial” (Collins-Camargo, Buckwalter, & Jones, 2016), identifying CRPs as “watchdog committees” (p. 84). However, it is clear from other statements cited above, that CRPs are intended primarily to be mechanisms for citizen participation, and not just a watchdog. In addition to ensuring that CPS agencies are meeting their goals of protecting children from abuse and neglect, CRPs are expected to increase awareness among the public about the challenges faced by CPS workers, and advocate for more resources for CPS agencies. CRPs are to provide new opportunities for “citizens to play an integral role” in child protection.

1.2. Further amendments

In 2003, through Keeping Children and Families Safe Act (P.L. 108-36) Congress made five specific changes to the CRP mandate. First, while the 1996 amendments required CRPs to review ‘policies and procedures’, the 2003 amendments added ‘practices’ to be reviewed. Conceivably, reviewing practices of a CPS agency requires interacting with frontline workers or service recipients, or both. Second, CRPs were required to provide for public outreach and comment to assess the impacts of CPS policies, procedures, and practices on children and families in the community, and for such assessment to inform their review. This ties the outreach function to the review function. Third, a CRP's annual report is expected to include specific recommendations to improve the CPS system in addition to a summary of its activities

through the year. Fourth, CPS agencies are required to respond to CRP recommendations, including whether and how CPS agencies would incorporate the recommendations to make measurable progress. Fifth, it formalized the dissemination process, requiring CRPs and CPS agencies to submit their annual report and response respectively, to both the “public” and the “state”. The first two – reviewing ‘practices’ and conducting outreach – require that perspectives of general citizens, frontline workers, service recipients, and other service providers are considered in a CRP review. The later three changes – recommendations, response, and formal public reporting – suggest an instrumental role for CRPs, and a responsive and transparent conversation between CRPs and CPS agencies.

In 2010, (P.L. 111–320) the only significant change made to the CRP statute was a suggestion to include former victims of child abuse and neglect as members of a CRP, broadening the diversity in perspectives within a CRP. While membership is expected to be broadly representative of the community from which the CRP is drawn, specific requirements of representation were not included in the statute. The 2010 amendments only remove an objection, presumably raised in the course of implementing the statute.

2. Mandate and functions of a CRP

From the congressional record and federal statute, it is clear that CRPs are mechanisms for citizen participation, intended to provide an “integral role” for citizens in child protection policy and practice. Three specific functions can be identified for a CRP (42 U.S.C. § 5106a(c)):

- Evaluate (specified in statute): CRPs are to evaluate if local and state CPS systems are effectively discharging their responsibilities. Congress identified three distinct sets of criteria against which CRPs should evaluate that effectiveness – CAPTA State Plan (different from the Child and Family Services Plan); a set of child protection standards; and any other criteria that the panel may find important. The last criterion was left open and vague with two suggestions: a review of the extent to which the state child protective services system is coordinated with the foster care and adoption programs established under part E of title IV of the Social Security Act; and a review of child fatalities and near fatalities.
- Public outreach (specified in statute): CRPs are to provide for public outreach and collect comment to assess the impact of CPS’ policies, procedures, and practices on children and families in the communities from which CRPs are drawn. Such public input should inform the panel’s evaluation. In addition, panels in collaboration with CPS agencies, should work towards improving public awareness of child protection services, challenges, and opportunities.
- Advocate (from congressional record): Advocacy is not specifically mentioned in the statute, but certainly intended. CRPs should advocate for relevant changes in support of things such as community-focused CPS services, and improved support of child protection workers. CRPs and their respective CPS agencies engage in a formal and public conversation to improve CPS services, advocate for resources as needed, and support CPS workers.

This expansive mandate sets CRPs apart from other review or public participation mechanisms relevant to child protection in multiple ways. First, CRPs are mechanisms that should provide diverse opportunities for citizens to participate in child protection policy and practice as opposed to a narrow and well defined role prescribed for a CASA or FCRBs. Second, CRPs offer a broad set of active roles for citizens as opposed to a passive role in traditional mechanisms of public participation where citizens are asked to provide comment or react to a policy initiative. Third, while CRPs have a substantial evaluative function, they are different from an external independent review process such as judicial review, Guardian-ad-Litem, or the office of the ombudsman. Instead, a CRPs’ review should be in partnership with CPS agencies,

focused on areas of improvement identified in collaboration with the CPS agency. It is a participatory evaluation process with opportunities for both those who design and implement policies (CPS personnel) and for those that are impacted by those policies (regular citizens). This allows individual citizens and communities to take responsibility and share accountability for provision and success of child protection services in their communities.

Recognizing potential overlap with other established entities that review CPS agencies, Congress allowed states to designate existing entities as CRPs, and many states did so. North Carolina and New Mexico designated existing county-level community panels to be CRPs. Michigan and Georgia identified existing entities such as Child Fatality Review Team and Children’s Justice Act Task Force respectively, as CRPs. Therefore, CRPs as intended by Congress, do not duplicate any other review mechanism as claimed by [Blome and Steib \(2008\)](#).

3. Federal role in implementing the CRP mandate

The 1996 Amendments to CAPTA also established the Office of Child Abuse and Neglect (OCAN) within the federal Children’s Bureau (the Bureau), and entrusted it the responsibility for implementing CAPTA. Through a series of Information Memoranda (IM) and Program Instructions (PI) to state CPS agencies, the Bureau clarified the CRP statute over the years. This series of documents demonstrates the evolution of federal involvement in the CRP enterprise in three phases. [Table 2](#) presents all congressional actions and clarifications issued by the Children’s Bureau in chronological order.

3.1. Development of CRPs

Three Program Instructions (PI 98-01 [Children’s Bureau, 1998a](#) dated January 7, 1998, PI 98-12 [Children’s Bureau, 1998b](#) dated July 15, 1998, and PI 99-09 dated June 2, 1999) clarified the CRP statute, specified various requirements and functions of CRPs, suggested constitution of CRPs, and clarified the required number of such panels in each state. The Bureau through its PI 98-01 encouraged diverse membership on the panels and CPS personnel were not prohibited from being on the panels. Beginning with PI 99-07 dated March 25, 1999, and each year since, each state was required to submit both the annual report produced by the state’s CRP, and the state’s corresponding response. While Congress did not mandate the states to respond in writing until the 2003 amendments, it is interesting to note that the Bureau asked states from the very beginning to submit “information on the progress States are making in implementing the recommendations of the panels” ([Children’s Bureau, 1999a, p. 4](#)). Additionally, while the Bureau informed states that CRPs should be established by June 30, 1999 (PI 98-01), the first three PIs (PI 99-07, PI 00-03, PI 01-03) required only states with “established citizen review panels” to submit the CRP annual report and the state’s response. This is a clear recognition of the challenges states were having in establishing their panels. Overall, the Bureau was promoting the congressional intent by being proactive while allowing states the necessary time to establish the panels.

3.2. Compliance

Each year since 1999, the Bureau continued to require states to submit both the state CRP annual report and the state’s response. The phrase “established citizen review panels” was dropped from PIs since 2002. Presumably, all states had functioning CRPs by this time. With a presumed 100% compliance since 2002, the Bureau must have accumulated more than a decade’s worth of CRP annual reports and state responses from across the country – a wealth of information that can provide insights into the effectiveness of CRPs. However, it is unclear if and how these reports are reviewed, and to what effect. Beyond requiring the submission of CRP reports and CPS responses, there is no further documented communication from the Bureau with respect to

Table 2

Federal actions relevant to the citizen review panels.

Year	Bill/law/program instruction (PI)	Actions
1995	H.R. 1157 The Welfare Transformation Act (Vetoed)	First appearance of the language currently in federal statute for CRPs.
1995	H.R. 4 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (Vetoed)	CRP statutory language was not changed.
1996	P.L. 104-235 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Amendments	CRP Statutory language was added during amendments by the House of Representatives.
1998*	ACYF-PI-CB-98-01, Establishment of the CRP requirement under the CAPTA	The first of a series of Program Instructions with suggestions for states in establishing CRPs.
1998*	ACYF-CB-PI-98-12, Amendment to 98-01, with respect to number of CRPs required under CAPTA	Clarified that states with minimum allotment under the Community-Based Family Resource and Support (CBFRS) program may have one CRP.
1999*	ACYF-CB-PI-99-07, Title IV-B Child and Family Services Plan; CAPTA State Plan; ILP	The first instance of Children's Bureau requiring states to submit CRP annual reports. States were also required to submit progress made on CRP recommendations.
1999*	ACYF-CB-PI-99-09, Amendment to 98-01, with respect to functions each CRP must perform	Reversed the initial policy (PI-98-01) and allowed states more flexibility in establishing tasks to be performed by CRPs.
2001*	ACYF-CB-PI-01-03, Title IV-B CFSP Plan, CAPTA State Plan, Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, APSR	This is the last PI with the phrase "states with established citizen review panels". Presumably, all states were in compliance by 2002.
2003	P.L. 108-36 Keeping Children and Families Safe Act,	Added five amendments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Added 'practices' to be reviewed by CRPs ● Added 'outreach' function to the CRP mandate ● CRPs are required to issue recommendations for change ● CPS agencies are required to respond to CRP recommendations ● Both CRP annual report and the CPS response were required to be submitted to the 'public' and the 'state'.
2010	P.L. 111-320 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) Reauthorization Act	Suggested including former victims of child abuse and neglect as members of a CRP.

* Program Instructions (PIs) are issued by federal agencies to clarify congressional statute.

the CRP enterprise.

3.3. A lost opportunity

While the Bureau's Program Instructions continue to remind state CPS agencies to submit CRP annual reports and state responses each year, there is no other expectation for state CPS agencies to demonstrate effective functioning of CRPs. Nor was there any attempt by the bureau to identify instrumental roles for CRPs in any other program initiatives. The Bureau's extensive Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) of state CPS systems serve as an illustration. CFSR is a periodic comprehensive review of state CPS agencies, and is the central mechanism used by the Bureau to monitor state CPS' performance. The review's primary purposes are to assess compliance with federal child welfare requirements, assessing the status of children served by the CPS system, and to assist states in their improvement of CPS services. "Ultimately, the goal of the reviews is to help states improve child welfare services" (Children's Bureau, 2014, p. 1). The review results in a Program Improvement Plan (PIP), with specific plans for every area of a CPS agency's work that was identified as needing improvement. Community responsiveness of a CPS system – arguably the central concern of a CRP – is one of seven systemic areas assessed during a CFSR. This is assessed using two items (Children's Bureau, 2014, pp. 19–21):

Item 31: How well is the agency responsiveness to the community system functioning statewide to ensure that, in implementing the provisions of the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) and developing related Annual Progress and Services Reports (APSRs), the state engages in ongoing consultation with Tribal representatives, consumers, service providers, foster care providers, the juvenile court, and other public and private child- and family-serving agencies and includes the major concerns of these representatives in the goals, objectives, and annual updates of the CFSP?

Item 32: How well is the agency responsiveness to the community system functioning statewide to ensure that the state's services under the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP) are coordinated with services or benefits of other federal or federally assisted programs serving the same population?

With two items directly relevant to the CRP's central purpose, there is but one mention of CRPs as "CFSR Collaborative Partners" in the

CFSR Procedures Manual (Children's Bureau, 2015a, pp. B-2). By allowing CRPs complete access to cases, requiring the panels to review any aspect of a CPS agency's work, and expecting a CRP to hold its corresponding CPS agency accountable, Congress instituted the only statutory extra-governmental review of a CPS agency with the explicit purpose to allow regular citizens to play an integral role in shaping CPS policies and practices. While congressional intent seems to assign a central role for CRPs in a CPS agency's engagement with the community it serves, the Bureau's CFSR process almost completely neglects CRPs.

Further confusing the situation, the Bureau's officials advise the panels to find ways to be informed of, and be involved in the CFSR process. CRP members are advised to serve on CFSR review planning teams in their state, be a case reviewer, participate in focus groups and interviews during the CFSR process, participate in the development of the CFSR statewide assessment, and partner with the CPS agency in preparing the state PIP (Children's Bureau, 2015a, 2015b). Effectively, while the Bureau signals to the state CPS agencies that CRPs are a relatively less important part of the CFSR process, it implores the panels that CFSR is a significantly important process that warrants their participation.

This neglect by the Bureau directly translates to the importance state CPS agencies assign the CRPs in the CFSR process or otherwise. In identifying partners to improve program areas using federal grant funds under CAPTA, only 5 states chose CRPs as valuable partners, and even fewer states were interested in strengthening the panels through training and staff support. Only one out of 30 state CPS agencies chose a program area for improvement because of a recommendation from their state CRP. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). After initial clarifications from the Bureau that seemed to reflect and sometimes even enhance the congressional intent, the Bureau's interest waned and was limited to just ensuring states meet the minimum requirements of having CRPs and producing an annual report and response sequence each year.

4. Status of CRPs across the nation

CRPs across the nation are organized very differently by state. Some states had pre-existing boards/teams/panels (ex: New Mexico, Delaware) that were assigned the responsibilities of a CRP. Some states

created one or more CRPs from scratch in response to the 1996 amendments (ex: Alaska, Hawaii). Some states have county-level CRPs (ex: Alabama, California, North Carolina) and others have state-wide CRPs (ex: Michigan, Colorado). Some CRPs are comprehensive in their assigned duties (Alaska, Delaware), and others are focused only on some aspects (ex: Michigan, Georgia). While most states have few more CRPs than the minimum required, three states (North Carolina, Alabama, and New Mexico) account for more than half of the more than 340 panels across the country.

4.1. Reports from the Children's Bureau

Congress requested twice, a report on the effectiveness of CRPs, first in 2003 and again in 2010. In response to the 2003 request, the Bureau submitted a report on CRPs ([Administration for Children and Families, 2016](#)), but the report could not be located. Another report by the Bureau in 2013, in response to the 2010 congressional request for “a detailed summary of the extent to which collaboration and information-sharing occurs between CRPs and State CPS agencies or any other entities or State agencies, including a description of the outcomes that result from collaboration and information sharing” (emphasis added) (42 U.S.C. § 5106f) provides the only available nation-wide perspective of CRPs ([Children's Bureau, 2013](#)). While this report provides the most comprehensive overview of the national CRP enterprise, it failed to assess their effectiveness. In addition to this report, scant peer-reviewed literature documenting perspectives from the CRP frontlines – CRP volunteers, staff, and CPS personnel; and a minimal set of technical assistance documents provide a window into the current status of CRPs.

The Bureau's 2013 report identified 348 active panels across 48 states between January 2008 and April 2012, more than half of them in three states – Alabama, New Mexico, and North Carolina. Many states designated existing boards and panels to assume the responsibility of a CRP. Approximately 40% (137 of the 348) of the panels reported meeting frequently, with only 87 meeting at least once each quarter as required by statute. While two out of every three panels (221 of the 348) were reviewing their respective state or local CPS policies, procedures, and practices each year, none were reviewing their CPS agencies' adherence to all parts of their CAPTA plans. Most panels (337 of the 348) completed an annual report with recommendations that generally addressed prevention, investigation, prosecution, or treatment of child maltreatment. The 2013 report found no indication that the panels were reporting their findings to any person or office. Only 33 state CPS agencies responded to their corresponding CRPs in writing. A very small percentage of CRP recommendations seems to have been implemented. The 2013 report provides many details of the CRP enterprise during the years 2008 through 2012. However, despite the detailed instructions and methodological suggestions from Congress, this report falls well short of assessing the effectiveness of CRPs, and does not address collaboration between CRPs and CPS systems, nor any outcomes ([Children's Bureau, 2013](#)).

Another missing piece of critical information from the 2013 report is the funding available to each state's CRPs. The federal statute requires states to provide “the panel, upon its request, staff assistance for the performance of the duties of the panel” (42 U.S.C. § 5106a(c)(5)(B)). No specific federal funding is available for states to implement the CRP mandate. Therefore, panels in each state are dependent on state allocations. The 2013 report from the Bureau only states that thirty (30) states provided direct staff assistance, and 36 states provided financial assistance to their CRPs. Anecdotal data reported by several CRPs from across the country identify two primary sources of funding – state general fund, or funding received by states from the federal government under CAPTA. The amount of staff support and funding states make available to their respective CRPs vary widely among states. Many states assign existing CPS staff to serve the staffing needs of their CRPs (eg. Wisconsin, Hawaii). Many others provide support through a contract (eg. Alaska, Arizona) ([Jones, 2017](#)).

The actual costs of operating a functional CRP will likely differ by state, but will include some common components such as volunteer management, clerical support, policy and research support, and communications. Several factors complicate computing the actual costs of a CRP's operation. Some states fund CRPs from a combination of funding sources, including agency's staff time. Some of the tasks may be performed by CRP volunteers. Some CRPs leverage available funding to seek additional resources. Finally, tasks performed by panels are not consistent across panels, or over time.

There was no attempt at assessing the cost of operating a functional CRP. For a CRP to organize and perform, to provide technical assistance to meet the needs of this national enterprise, to conduct research and evaluation studies on the effectiveness of CRPs, all require financial resources. Unfortunately, there was no appropriation accompanying the congressional authorization of CRPs. Instead, Congress required states to provide adequate staff support as requested by the panels. States provide this support in varying ways. While some states provide direct staff support by assigning one or more CPS employees as staff support for the panels (ex: Idaho and California), many other states secure staff support through a contract with an external entity (ex: Georgia, Alaska, Arizona). Wyoming is the only state with a CRP that incorporated itself as an independent non-profit entity. Many states use part of the funds they receive under CAPTA to support their panels, and others use state general funds, or a combination of both. Levels of funding vary widely with more than \$140,000 for three panels in Arizona, \$100,000 for the single panel in Alaska, to \$10,000 per panel in Wisconsin and \$25,000 per panel in California. Adequacy of funding was never assessed ([Jones, 2017](#)).

4.2. Peer-reviewed literature

The scant peer-reviewed research publications provide perspectives from the frontlines of CRPs – CRP volunteers and staff, and CPS liaisons and employees. While hundreds of volunteers and staff across many states were surveyed for some of these studies, none of them match the geographic scope of the above 2013 study, and thus may not provide a true national picture. In addition, most of this literature documents the challenges of the CRP enterprise, but rarely uses any strong theoretical framework for examining the enterprise. While the inherent virtues of public participation in child protection are universally acknowledged among the groups on the frontlines, two major challenges seem to persist – capacity of CRPs; and difficulties in CRP-CPS relationship.

Capacity seems to be a persistent challenge for most CRPs across the country. CRP members report that their panels lack representativeness, do not often have enough members to conduct panel's work, lack funds to conduct business and meet face-to-face with CPS personnel at various levels, face severe recruitment challenges ([Bryan, Jones, Allen, & Collins-Camargo, 2007](#)), do not have bylaws or other policies ([Jones & Royse, 2008](#)), and often have limited awareness of CPS functions ([Jones, 2004](#)). Panels in Kentucky identified securing resources for the panel's work as least feasible ([Miller & Jones, 2015](#)). Many CRPs do not have an active public outreach program, and many others do not review CPS policies ([Bryan, Jones, & Lawson, 2010](#)). This lack of capacity to perform basic functions, combined with the perspectives of CPS agency personnel that CRPs often lack knowledge and awareness of CPS systems and their functions ([Collins-Camargo et al., 2016](#); [Jones, 2004](#); [Jones et al., 2003](#)) puts CRPs at a severe disadvantage.

In addition, severe gaps in communication with their CPS agency, and a perceived lack of intentionality from the CPS agency ([Jones, 2004](#)) are continuing concerns. CRP members claim that CPS personnel are often defensive; do not respond adequately and thoughtfully; and are not committed to the CRP's success ([Bryan et al., 2007](#)). On the other hand, CPS personnel report that CRP members often have hidden personal agendas, do not adequately understand the complex world of a CPS agency, and do not provide any objective evidence to support their strong opinions ([Collins-Camargo et al., 2016](#)). Most CRPs

communicate with a higher level manager of the CPS agency serving as the agency's liaison. Where CPS agencies also provide direct staff support to the panels, there is often role confusion between staff support and agency liaison (Jones & Royse, 2008).

Despite all the challenges, there seems to be some examples of success. Palusci, Yager, and Covington (2010) report successful efforts of a Michigan Child Fatality CRP. Michigan is one of many states that designated existing bodies to serve as CRPs. Three CRPs – foster care and adoption, prevention, and child fatalities – were constituted in Michigan in 1999. The Fatalities CRP is a smaller group from the state's larger Child Death Review Board (CDRB). The CDRB is one of many such boards across the nation. The enterprise of CDRBs has a longer history and benefited from systematic efforts in developing and standardizing the process (Shanley, Risch, & Bonner, 2010). Michigan's Child Fatalities CRP benefited from this preexisting structure. Similarly, Delaware's Child Protection Accountability Commission (CPAC) was established by state statute, and also doubles as the state's CRP. Out of the 20 members on the CPAC, 14 are officials from state agencies, many of those leading their respective agencies. Remaining six are at-large members from specific practice or client communities. The probability of having an impact on child protection policies and practices for such a committee with high-level decision makers is relatively high. However, it is debatable if these configurations satisfy the congressional intent of providing opportunities to regular citizens to work alongside child protection bureaucrats. Participation in these panels is restricted. In Michigan's case, one has to be a member of a county-level CDRB. Membership in local CDRBs is limited to experts. In Delaware, the state's Governor appoints members, and access to such an appointment process requires political and social standing. On the other hand, participation does not always require direct membership in a CRP. If these panels in Michigan and Delaware provide opportunities for citizens to contribute as non-member resource persons, it is still possible for members of the general public to contribute as they can.

4.3. Technical assistance documents

For a national enterprise authorized by congressional mandate, there is minimal technical assistance and very little available published guidance. Consequently, CRPs continue to face persistent challenges even after almost two decades of implementation. The only technical document providing any concrete ideas on organization and structure of a CRP was published in 1996, and once updated in 1998 (Kot, Bruner, & Scott, 1998). From early 2000s to 2014, the National Resource Center for Child Protective Services (NRCCPS) maintained a website, organized a series of webinars, produced a series of tip sheets with operational advice, provided some consultation, and published a quarterly newsletter. In 2014, the national Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination (CANTASD) center assumed the responsibility for technical assistance. Activities through CANTASD include mentoring/technical assistance (through a contract for 2 h per month to serve the needs of more than 340 CRPs across the nation), continued development of tip sheets and newsletters, coordination of various webinars on relevant topics, and facilitates conference calls to foster peer learning (Bock, 2016).

Tip Sheets now published on CANTASD's National Citizens Review Panels Virtual Community website are the only notable documents that amount to formal technical assistance in a published format. However, these tip sheets are more a general list of suggestions with examples rather than technical guidance or step-by-step instructions on any specific task. For example, Tip Sheet #1 “CAPTA Citizen Review Panels 101” (Jones, 2015) outlines the purpose of CRPs, and describes the composition and functions of a CRP. Instead of building on federal statute and suggesting best ways to satisfy the requirements, the narrative focuses on the immense diversity that currently characterizes the enterprise nationally. While this is informative, it falls short of being technical advice for a panel beginning on its journey. Similarly, Tip

Sheet # 6 “Communicating with external groups” (Jones, 2016) offers a few suggestions, and features a state's efforts. Again, while this is helpful, it does not include any specific advice on how CRPs can share responsibilities and collaborate with other groups such as Court Improvement Project, Child Death Review Teams, advocacy organizations, etc.

4.4. National CRP Conference

With minimal support and technical guidance, CRPs evolved in diverse ways. The need for a community of practice to share best practices in conducting CRP activities was recognized early. CRP coordinators from a few states convened for the first time in Kentucky in 2001. This small gathering grew into an annual event, the National CRP Conference, organized and hosted by a different state CRP each year. The conference depends completely on the ability and resourcefulness of the host CRPs each year. There is no archive nor any published compendium of proceedings. Despite the 16 year history, the conference is yet to attract any substantial support or sponsorships. A National CRP Advisory Panel has been intermittently active since 2011, and is yet to play any significant role in setting a national agenda for the CRP enterprise. While such a national body seems meaningful, there is no statutory standing for such a body, and thus, no immediate or clear sources of support for its activities. The CRP enterprise seems to be in its nascent stage even after 20 years of implementation.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Federal statute, congressional record, and other supporting congressional documents clearly show that CRPs were intended to be mechanisms for public participation in child protection policy and practice. Federal statute allows for considerable room in structuring a CRP. After initial enthusiasm, the Children's Bureau relegated CRPs to merely a regulatory requirement, with minimal support and technical assistance, and no identified instrumental role. Consequently, CRPs evolved in diverse ways. Individual state CPS agencies struggle to find meaningful role for CRPs or a structure for their relationship vis-à-vis CRPs. Relationships between CPS agencies and their respective CRPs are often contentious. Despite two decades of implementation, CRPs are often labeled as “outside groups” and are constrained for resources. Many CRPs report limited capacity to perform their mandated functions. Peer-reviewed research consistently documents the challenges of CRPs as perceived on the frontlines. CRPs as mechanisms for public participation, are severely misunderstood, neglected, and underutilized. Below I offer possible reasons for the current state of affairs, and several associated recommendations.

5.1. Conceptualization of a CRP

CRPs are mostly understood as “watchdog” agencies, with review or evaluation of the CPS agency as their primary, and often only function. The inherent contentious nature of evaluation is cited as a possible reason for the impasse. “The fact that [CRPs] were designed to fulfill an evaluative function predestined a certain amount of tension between the parties. The nature and purpose of evaluation in any context tends to foster resistance, and in some unfortunate circumstances, outright hostility and antagonism toward those charged with the monitoring or evaluative responsibility” (Bryan, Collins-Camargo, and Jones, 2011, pp. 619–620). Along similar lines, notwithstanding the federal mandate, Buckwalter (2014) asserts that “CRPs clearly are not endowed with power to match or supersede the legal-rational authority of the state agency” (p. 583), suggesting that CRPs are yet to be empowered in a duel with CPS agencies.

First, evaluation need not always be contentious. There are multiple models of evaluation that involve various stakeholder groups, and can be collaborative (Johnson, 2015). Second, a CRP's evaluation is but one

of its three functions, and is envisioned to inform a sustained dialogue between CPS agencies and their various stakeholder groups. While review or evaluation is probably the central function, such an evaluation is expected to be informed by purposeful outreach, and in turn, should inform the panel's advocacy. Third, Congress intended for CRPs to assist CPS agencies to be more responsive to community needs, and to help in holding the CPS agencies accountable in some cases. However, CRPs were not intended to have power over CPS agencies. Federal statute is empowering in itself, at the highest level, and provides the necessary legal and rational authority. By asking the Children's Bureau twice to assess the effectiveness of CRPs, Congress expressed its interest in the success of CRPs. In addition, many states enacted their own statutes, some predating the 1996 federal statute, enhancing their respective panels' legal and rational authority.

Instead, CRPs suffer from a lack of clarity in regulations. Instead of conceptualizing CRPs as evaluation mechanisms, they should be understood as mechanisms to generate and sustain a robust dialogue among all stakeholders to identify ways for the CPS agencies to be more responsive to the needs of the community. As envisioned by Congress, CRPs should provide regular citizens opportunities to fill diverse roles in performing various tasks that contribute to their three mandated functions. CRPs are mechanisms through which regular citizens will be performing these three functions, and contribute alongside “child protection bureaucrats” towards resolving some of the long-standing challenges in providing CPS services. CRPs should be providing the safe and neutral space for various stakeholder groups to contribute and engage in a constructive dialogue, informed by the review and outreach conducted by the CRPs. Since CRPs exist to help CPS agencies enhance their community responsiveness, a CPS agency is a necessary participant in the dialogue generated and facilitated by its corresponding CRP. Therefore, CRPs are better conceptualized as collaborative participatory mechanisms with shared responsibility for factfinding and rule-making (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Since CRPs exist to help CPS agencies, it is in the interest of the CPS agency to have a functional and effective CRP. At the same time, CRPs cannot adequately perform their duties without a collaborative relationship with their CPS agency. Therefore, CRPs can be truly empowered through purposeful and collaborative relationship with their CPS agency. A CRP's authority can only be exercised if CRPs have a clear sense of purpose, instrumental role with respect to their CPS agency, and shared vision of mutual roles with their CPS agency. Responsibility to identify this vision should be shared by both the CPS agency and the CRP.

5.2. Resources and integration

Buckwalter's (2014) argument is valid from a resource perspective. While statutory authority is empowering, most CRPs do not seem to be adequately resourced to fulfill their mandate. There is currently no federal funding assigned specifically to the CRP mandate, leaving states to their own means to implement the congressional mandate. States provide a combination of cash and in-kind support for their CRPs. With some states designating existing boards or panels or task forces to perform the tasks of a CRP, sources and amount of support available for CRP-specific tasks is impossible to ascertain. Even among states where the amount of support is clear, resources available to CRPs vary widely. Despite volunteers performing the tasks of a CRP, recruiting, organizing and managing volunteers requires substantial resources. Reviewing the complex policy, legal, and social environment of CPS practice can be intense, and requires substantial technical skills. Engaging a variety of stakeholders and channeling their input into a constructive dialogue requires persistent effort in building trusting relationships. CRPs need capacity to collect, analyze, and use data. For a meaningful impact, such an enterprise involves much more than four meetings a year and one annual report. Resources available to CRPs should enable them to fulfill their intended purpose, not just the minimum requirements of the

federal statute.

In addition to the needed resources, CRPs need to be meaningfully integrated into their respective CPS operations. If CRPs are to engage various stakeholders, and be a true vehicle for public participation in CPS policy and practice, CRPs should be integrated into the apparatus of a CPS agency's community engagement enterprise. In order for CRPs to perform a helpful evaluative function, they need to be integrated into the CPS agency's quality assurance enterprise. Such integration will enable CRPs to understand the challenges and opportunities of the CPS agency, and focus their advocacy efforts to enhance the opportunities and overcome the challenges. CRPs as “outside groups” will be a distraction at best.

5.3. Training, technical assistance, oversight, and research

Apart from the broad federal statute, Children's Bureau issued very little guidance on roles and responsibilities of a CRP, corresponding CPS agency, or itself. There are no common minimum standards of operation nor any specific universal performance objectives. There is little to no oversight of the CRP enterprise. The CRPs are not integrated into any existing federal efforts to improve CPS services.

Training and technical assistance was provided through a National Resource Center until 2014. The Bureau reorganized its technical assistance apparatus in 2014 from a network of 10 Resource Centers to one central source that offers technical assistance through three different channels, each targeting a different constituent groups – Center for States, Center for Tribes, and Center for Courts. None of these Centers provide any targeted training or technical assistance to CRPs. Instead, CRPs receive their technical assistance through CANTASD. Just as CRPs need technical assistance, CPS agencies need to be trained and oriented appropriately on the purpose and methods of a CRP. It is unclear if and what training or technical assistance a CPS agency might receive with respect to CRPs, or the source of such assistance. The available assistance to CRPs is not only minimal, but also disconnected with the rest of the technical assistance apparatus, perpetuating the gaps between CPS agencies and CRPs.

There is little to no oversight of the CRP enterprise. States are required to establish panels and submit CRP annual reports and state responses every year. However, it is unclear if those reports are ever reviewed, by whom, and to what end. Further, there is lack of clarity at the federal level on the purpose and role of a CRP. The minimal technical assistance available for CRPs is offered through CANTASD, which is focused on “the front end of the child welfare system, creating resources and supporting peer learning activities for those engaged in primary and secondary prevention, child protective services and investigation, and multidisciplinary and interagency collaborations to promote the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families” (Administration for Children and Families, 2017). However, a CRP's mandate is quite broad, and is concerned with aspects of child protection well beyond the “front end of the child welfare system”.

The CRPs are not integrated into any existing federal efforts to improve CPS services. While the federal CFSR assess individual states on community responsiveness, states are not required to demonstrate the effectiveness of CRPs as part of this review. Thus, while states can demonstrate community responsiveness through various other channels, and often do so, CRPs are relegated to being just another option if the states choose to utilize them in instrumental ways. This approach requiring the states to ensure CRPs exist, but not expecting any instrumental use of them renders CRPs as duplicative at best and meaningless at worst. To add to the confusion, CFSR technical documentation lists CRP as one of many stakeholder groups to be interviewed during an on-site review. Characterizing a CRP as a stakeholder is inaccurate. CRP is a mechanism to engage stakeholders in a continued dialogue about CPS' challenges and opportunities. All these challenges need to be addressed at a national level.

Further, such a complex and vast enterprise will benefit from a

Table 3
Recommendations for an instrumental role for CRPs.

Recommendations
Conceptualization: CRPs should be understood as mechanisms for public participation, and not merely watchdog agencies. CPS agencies must recognize that CRPs are helpful mechanisms to enhance CPS services, and must share ownership and invest in the success of CRPs.
Resources and integration:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CRPs should be adequately resourced to perform their complex tasks. Resources should extend beyond staff support, and include infrastructure for evaluation, outreach, and advocacy. ● CPS agencies should integrate CRPs into their enterprise of quality assurance and community engagement. They should consider CRPs as valuable assets and conduits to community stakeholders.
Training, technical assistance, oversight, and research:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A set of common minimum standards of operation, and a set of performance objectives must be identified. ● Training and technical assistance must be enhanced, and should be offered to both the CRPs and CPS agencies. ● Federal oversight over the CRP enterprise should be intentional. ● CRPs should be better integrated into other federal efforts to improve CPS services in all states. ● Federal and state governments should fund research on CRPs. Theoretical models, assessment of effectiveness, and impact of CRPs on child protection policy and practice should all be encouraged.

committed and sustained effort to assess effectiveness and inform its practice. Research on CRPs is severely limited. Despite a congressional request, the assessment commissioned by the Children's Bureau was incomplete. Peer-reviewed literature is largely limited to survey research, with very little attention to the actual work or recommendations from the panels or the corresponding responses from the CPS agencies. Despite two decades of implementation, no theoretical models were developed on how best to enable a volunteer group of citizens to conduct complex technical tasks. Research on CRPs must focus on developing theoretical models for CRP operations, assessment of effectiveness by examining the recommendations and response sequence, and the impact of CRPs on child protection policies and practice. All suggested recommendations are presented in Table 3.

6. Conclusion

Citizen Review Panels grew out of efforts in various states to improve CPS responsiveness to community needs and better engage community stakeholders into CPS policy and practice. While every state complies with the 1996 federal statutory requirement to have CRPs, their functionality and impact have never been assessed. There is immense diversity in the tasks they perform, ways they are organized, resources at their disposal, and impact they have on their respective CPS agencies. Such diversity seems to be a result of inadequate effort to generate a common understanding of their purpose and role within the child protection enterprise. State CPS agencies stand to benefit from a more instrumental role for CRPs, and federal Office of Child Abuse and Neglect could help in multiple ways to enhance the effectiveness of CRPs.

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