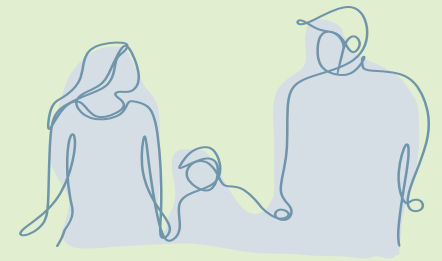


An approach to building local government involvement in family strengthening



This case study was developed by an external evaluation team as part of the Changing the Way We Care (CTWWC) initiative's five-year evaluation. In addition to looking at CTWWC's work overall, the evaluation created cases around five select approaches which the initiative used to influence change in order to understand their effectiveness in supporting care reform and wider care sector collaboration. The information presented in this case comes from the evaluation team's analysis of key documents, monitoring data, interviews with CTWWC staff, and a workshop with key stakeholders in Guatemala. The findings from this analysis are presented here to inform CTWWC's future plans and to inform wider work within the care sector. Find the additional case studies part of this evaluation and more resources on care reform from CTWWC on [CTWWC's website](#) and [Better Care Network](#).

Approach Summary: Establishing and strengthening Municipal Offices for Children and Adolescents (OMNAs) in Guatemala

In Guatemala, child protection responsibilities are split across four government bodies. The absence of a single convening structure, in addition to limited budget and human resources, impacts agencies' capacities to invest in children and families and support children. To help bridge this long-standing challenge with immediate action, CTWWC worked initially with the municipality of Zacapa to establish a Municipal Office for Children and Adolescents (OMNA). The purpose of the office was to streamline and localize implementation of defined child protection responsibilities, including financial and human resources, in support of prevention of separation, reunification, and family strengthening at the local level.

CTWWC collaborated with the municipality to develop a shared understanding of key concepts related to family care and a common vision among stakeholders at the municipal level. This included training on case management methodology, mapping of social services for improved referral pathways, as well as helping establish the Office's annual operating plan.

The following goals were defined as measures for effectiveness:

1. Increase inter-institutional coordination to promote planned and thoughtful family reintegration utilizing a structured and standardized case management methodology, mainly for prevention and family strengthening.
2. Prevent family separation through the identification of families at risk of separation and coordinate assessments and referral pathways to needed services for children and families.
3. Regularly document and discuss this experience to demonstrate success of this approach to care reform to provide a template for replication in other municipalities.

What is a Municipal Office for Children and Adolescents (OMNA)?

In Guatemala, the Municipal Office for Children and Adolescents (OMNA) is responsible for coordination of social services for vulnerable children and families at the local level, including promoting prevention and family strengthening actions in the communities of the municipality; providing referrals to social services to families identified at risk; and providing follow-up to families and children who are considered in need of support due to the conditions of the case. The office is staffed with professionals equipped to provide case management and psychosocial support.

In Zacapa, the office's work has included training processes and empowerment of local leadership on family strengthening, schools for parents, violence prevention awareness, and economic strengthening with local entity involvement (e.g. the Anti Gender-Based Violence Department, Employment Department, and various community organizations).



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Why CTWWC took this approach

The absence of a leading strategy or care reform policy at the national level in Guatemala has materialized in a fractured and under-resourced national care system. Understanding that strengthening relationships with the government is a critical component to ensure positive, lasting impact on the way children are cared for, CTWWC determined that an effective way to demonstrate core components of care reform in Guatemala would be to do so in sync with local governments.

There are 340 municipalities within Guatemala, revealing both the potential and expansiveness for scaling family strengthening at this level of government. CTWWC worked first with the local municipal leadership of Zacapa recognizing that demonstrating functioning care reform systems can initially be done more effectively at the local level, generating evidence that can then be used to strengthen and eventually scale to other localities.

Additionally, the bottom-up nature of the OMNA approach provides concrete models and results that can be utilized to influence national government and foster enthusiasm and buy-in, ideally resulting in policy creation and regulation at the national level. CTWWC worked to support OMNAs while simultaneously focusing efforts on strengthening collaboration, coordination and communication between each of the four national government agencies.

Relevance of this approach

Based on the evaluation team's analysis, the approach in this case study might be relevant for learning, adaptation, and application in contexts...

With these characteristics:

- Openness and political will to redirect local government resources and try something different by demonstration at a subnational level.
- Absence of a strong national care reform policy and associated practices and standards, or ineffective implementation.
- Child protection issues are fragmented with no central policy maker or defined leadership roles across national government agencies to direct local officials.
- Incentives exist for local governments to pursue family strengthening innovation (for example, increasing optics at a national level) and positively demonstrate the role of local government in care.
- Existence of social and specialized services that support family strengthening, as well as local bodies mandated with the protection of children and adolescents.

Where the goal is to:

- Prioritize and operationalize family strengthening, taking action on child protection even in the absence of strong, coordinated national policy and programs.
- Coordinate with multiple actors and entities at the local level for the purposes of strengthening service management and referrals, including identifying and minimizing risks to children.
- Leverage existing community strengths, systems, and resources.



photo by Karla Paz/CRS

The approach in practice

Based on documentation and input from stakeholders involved, the significant junctures on the journey of establishing and promoting family strengthening through OMNAs in the CTWWC demonstration area of Zacapa, Guatemala included:

1 Inauguration and operational infrastructure

In 2019, the first OMNA in Zacapa was officially inaugurated. CTWWC collaborated with the Zacapa municipality in structuring the OMNA to support a successful and sustainable rollout. Core to these foundation building activities were the development and creation of normative administrative structures—putting together the manual of work profiles and positions within the OMNA, functions of the OMNA, and an annual operating plan (inclusive of budget).

2

Local landscape mapping, establishing referral routes, and training on case management methodology

To best support services that were centrally focused on identifying families at risk of separation and preventing separation, the Zacapa OMNA and CTWWC worked with local stakeholders such as the Ministries of Health, Education, Labor, the National Council on Disability, and Protection Institutions to map social services and develop a social service referral route. The referral route provides a more comprehensive suite of pathways for families to access social services, facilitates knowledge sharing amongst key actors responsible for referrals, and helps to ensure appropriate follow-up. Additionally, CTWWC helped the OMNA train professionals equipped to conduct social work and psychosocial care through a case management approach.

3

National coordination, formalization of alliances, and program implementation

In September 2020, CTWWC signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the municipality of Zacapa for continued OMNA support. Following this, the OMNA and CTWWC collaborated with the Attorney General's Office (PGN) to create an inter-institutional prevention and coordination pathway. This was instrumental in supporting strong coordination of key actors in the identification of families at risk of separation and their referral to services.

At the same time, the CTWWC psychosocial and Zacapa OMNA teams were certified by the Secretary of Social Welfare to begin implementation of the education program for parents and families within several communities across the municipality. Seeing the potential for sustainability, the OMNA held its first parenting workshop, continuing efforts to identify family vulnerabilities and prevent family separation.

4

Expansion of municipalities and partnerships

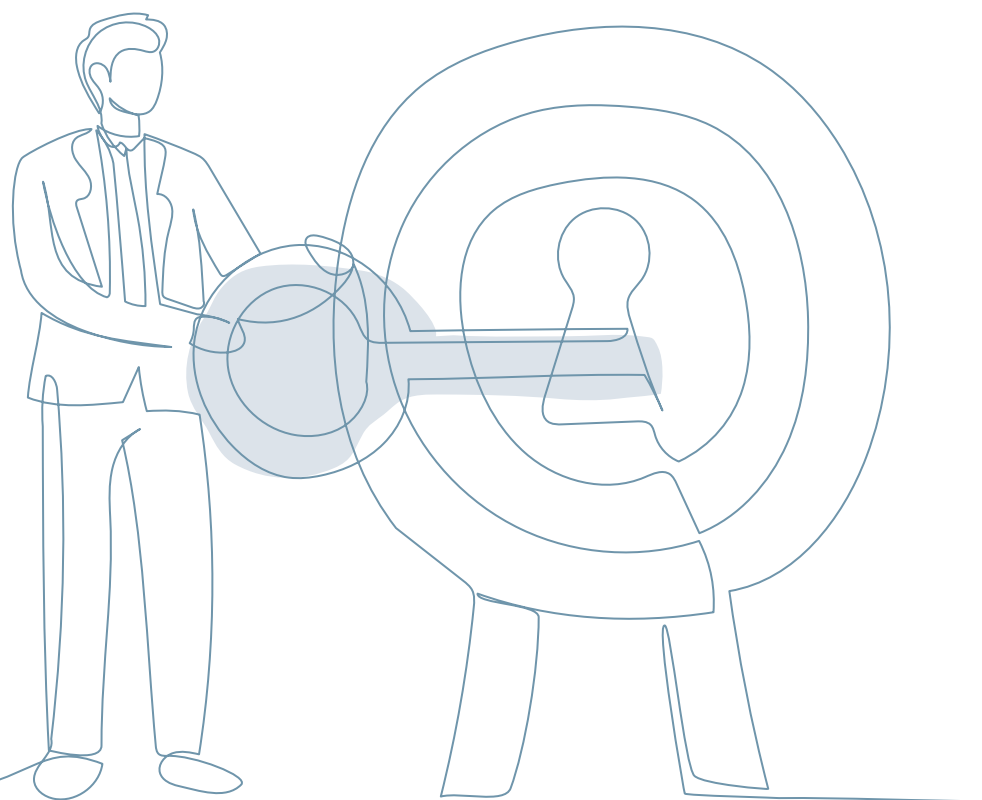
The Zacapa OMNA has continued service provision and provided a beneficial model which other municipalities in the department have since looked to replicate. As such, CTWWC has signed cooperation agreements with the additional ten municipalities in the broader Zacapa department and four more municipalities in western Guatemala to expand the reach of strengthening care services through more OMNAs.

Further, recognizing the importance of increasing capacity to OMNAs, CTWWC signed a collaboration agreement with the University of San Carlos, Zacapa Campus. Psychology students are supporting local OMNAs and replicating the “Educating the Family” parent school methodology in new communities.

Effectiveness of this approach

The OMNA of Zacapa demonstrates the success of planned and thoughtful focus on preventing family separation and overall family strengthening. This success was spurred by initial work in reintegration that helped key actors understand the link between early intervention of common risk factors as a means of preventing separation. Developing a common vision of a municipality that values and supports family care relied on changes in attitudes and practices that promote mutual support, highlighting the important role that communities play in keeping children and families together.

Recognizing that the timeline for systems change is long and high-level objectives are not likely yet to be met in totality, in this case 'effectiveness' is used as the extent to which the approach has been successful in achieving progress toward its stated goals. Each goal and the associated accomplishments are outlined in the table below. This list was generated via document review and amended and validated with CTWWC staff and stakeholders in Guatemala.



Goal	Evidence of effectiveness toward this goal
Increase inter-institutional coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination between Zacapa, and three of the four government bodies engaged in child protection and care (the Secretariat for Social Welfare, the Attorney General, and the Judiciary) led to the creation and approval of an inter-institutional pathway for reintegration of children. • Collaboration with the Attorney General's Office (PGN) to implement the coordination pathway and refer families to social or specialized services. • Established departmental, municipal, and micro-regional commissions for children and adolescents.
Increase family reunification and reintegration, family strengthening, identify families at risk of separation and coordinate management of services and referral pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As of March 2021, CTWWC Guatemala reunified 56 children from residential care in the facility in Zacapa to their families or caregivers. • CTWWC served 185 families at risk of separation in collaboration with the OMNA. • Established university partnerships supporting family strengthening programs in Zacapa and in new municipalities. • Community Family Care Commissions were also established, responsible for identifying families at risk and referring them to services and raising public awareness about protective and risk factors. CTWWC trained Commission members in leadership, mediation, and conflict transformation. • Development of a pilot with 15 families in Zacapa who had child protection cases in court where the Attorney General's Office took a family strengthening approach, demonstrating that families need not always be separated. • As of 2023, a total of 243 caregivers completed parental skills training through the positive parenting schools for fathers, mothers and other caregivers.
Demonstrate success in care reform to be replicated in other counties and spread nationally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As of 2023, five municipalities have opened and funded OMNAs and all municipalities within the Zacapa department have signed collaboration agreements for future work with CTWWC. CTWWC also has collaboration agreements with four more municipalities in western Guatemala. • As of the end of 2023, five additional municipalities have replicated the Community Family Care Commission. • The Judicial Branch (OJ) decided independently to replicate the reintegration process of cases of children residing in residential care for five years or more in municipalities beyond Zacapa with a vision of implementing it at the national level in the long term. • Developed Safeguarding Policies Proposal for San Jorge and Usumatlán municipalities. • Supported the establishment and/or the strengthening of psychosocial clinics and clinic management in 11 municipalities in the Zacapa department. • The Municipality of Zacapa developed a Family Strengthening policy. Using this as a model, three other municipalities also developed similar family-care policies.

Needed resources

The experience in Guatemala reveals the investment needed in the areas of relationships, time, shared definitions and vision, and expertise in order to promote care reform at the local policy level. Noteworthy to this case is that local governments have re-directed funds to move this work forward, demonstrating openness to creatively allocate funds from elsewhere in their budgets on behalf of supporting care reform. This institutional support signifies a commitment to this work and puts the responsibility for sustained funding for these efforts within their direct influence.

This case study takes an approach of lifting up lessons on what resources are needed for implementation with the aim of providing information on the affordability of this approach. Resources needed are likely to change over time, and the cost of transitioning to a new approach or system may be much different than what is needed to sustain that approach.

Relationships

- A broad array of actors are needed for the purposes of offering services, disseminating information, creating awareness and promoting buy-in to key concepts. Concentrate on establishing and/or strengthening relationships with child protection agencies, representatives of those national agencies also present at the local level, as well as local government officials, academic institutions, and community leaders.



Time

- Designated time is necessary for the intense coordination between local and national government agencies involved in child and family protection.
- Human and material resources are required for structuring, implementing, and running programming and case management.
- Allocate time between partners to collaborate on mapping and becoming familiar with all existing resources and family needs within the service area. Sharing final mapping materials with all relevant key actors to facilitate coordination is also key.



Expertise

- Targeted technical assistance to facilitate common definitions and vision for care reform, family strengthening, and case management, as well as to create administrative structures, operational procedures, and budgets.
- Regularly utilize user-friendly graphics as a means of promoting pathways and clarifying roles and responsibilities.
- Procurement of skilled psychologists and social workers as well as trainers to educate staff on case management methodology.



Challenges and Tips

The following were challenges noted by stakeholders involved in the implementation of this approach, as well as the actions they took or would recommend taking to help overcome these obstacles.

Challenge: Structural limitations of limited resources

- Budget and structural limitations meant challenges in recruitment and retention of personnel, and workloads that exceeded staff capabilities.
- CTWWC and OMNA staff experienced communication and learning delays due to managing heavy workloads.

Tips:

- **Pivot to where there is openness and willingness to resource family strengthening:** This approach was able to leverage the openness and willingness in the demonstration site, redirecting government funds towards investment in care reform. Investing resources, both resources of CTWWC and local government, then, had significant payoff within the demonstration site and across other municipalities, having observed the possibility of its success.
- **Continue to work closely with government entities to increase awareness and create buy-in:** Prioritizing and deepening collaboration with these partners, including regular sharing of results and learning, may influence the attention and resourcing put towards care reform. This partnership work is best done through relationship building, actively supporting and accompanying governments to achieve their priorities while understanding that broad systems change takes place over time.

Lessons learned

This case offers the following key learning points for consideration in design and replication:

- Family strengthening is key to the prevention of unnecessary family separation and local government entities are key in supporting the referral and approach of social services to families and children. Community leaders serve as a critical link to connecting directly to families.
- Inter-agency coordination, including with local government agencies, is essential and can be enhanced with field visits, study tours, peer-to-peer exchanges, and different meeting forums. These can be places to advocate for children's best interest using on-the-ground experience and concrete examples, analysis, and awareness.
- Exchanges between local government actors also allows them to see what they can achieve within the framework of their mandate and allotted resources.
- Resources should be dedicated to leveraging existing strengths of the local child protection system, including family care and social and specialized services.
- Implementing at a municipal level was particularly effective in expanding reach as it demonstrated how to redirect local funding and build on existing social systems. Municipalities observed an additional benefit to integrating the approach in an ability to meet existing municipal mandates, as well as raise municipal ranking on a national index of municipalities.

Acknowledgements

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Need to know more?

Contact Changing the Way We Care at info@ctwwc.org
Or visit changingthewaywecare.org

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