

# Service and systems integration: A collaborative project

Thomas Corbett and Jennifer L. Noyes

---

Thomas Corbett is an affiliate of the Institute for Research on Poverty and Jennifer L. Noyes is a Senior Fellow of the Hudson Institute.

---

The issue of social service program integration is not new, but it once again became prominent in 2002 in the context of welfare reform reauthorization. The Bush administration's proposal to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant—the primary federal cash assistance program for impoverished children—included a provision authorizing federal agencies to approve waivers of existing federal regulations across a broad range of public assistance, workforce development, and other programs.<sup>1</sup> The administration asserted that the proposed waiver authority, the so-called “superwaiver,” was designed to build on the federal government's past practice of permitting states to innovate and experiment with better ways of delivering social services. Critics responded that the superwaiver approach was not an effective way to address larger underlying structural problems, and ran the risk of undercutting key federal protections and accountability.

Within a few months, it became clear that the controversy generated by the superwaiver proposal could sidetrack broader consideration of policy devolution and systems integration as a strategy for improving services to low-income families with children. In response, several interested organizations developed an initiative to promote discussion of state flexibility that was grounded in evidence, experience, and substantive inquiry rather than ideology and anecdote.<sup>2</sup>

This cooperating group of organizations, loosely organized into an initiative we are currently calling SINET, or the Service Integration Network, includes IRP, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, the Hudson Institute's Welfare Policy Center, the Annie E. Casey Foundation Strategic Consulting Group, the Research Forum at Columbia University, and the Rockefeller Institute for Government at SUNY-Albany. One underlying motivation for the early work of SINET is a belief that some of the most promising insights and inspiration are located in those sites already struggling to deliver services to disadvantaged families and communities more effectively and efficiently. Thus, a focal strategy of this project is to facilitate communication among what they have come to call “lighthouse” sites—mostly local agencies engaged in innovative programming and

service delivery—and to draw lessons from those interchanges.

Since 2002, the sponsoring organizations have held workshops to foster conversations among policy experts and those working on the front lines and have reviewed at least some of the research literature. Project leaders have also visited a number of lighthouse sites to see what they have been doing and to understand why these sites have been successful where so many have failed.

## Stages in the SINET project

There are three major subprojects (or “modules”) in the SINET project (see Figure 1):

1. A project to examine legal issues that arise in cross-systems initiatives in particular areas, which has been followed by discussions with state and federal policymakers and the development of a set of recommendations for a federal role in support of cross-systems integration efforts. This module, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, included legal analysis by staff from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), and was coordinated by Jennifer L. Noyes, Susan Golonka and Courtney Smith (NGA), and Mark Greenberg (CLASP).

This work has been completed, and in an accompanying article by Mark Greenberg and Jennifer L. Noyes we report selected findings from one of the papers developed under this module. That article is the first in what we anticipate will be an ongoing series based on the findings that emerge from the SINET project.

2. An operational analysis of the lighthouse sites, to illuminate and disseminate insights and lessons that might facilitate the spread of integrated service models. Module 2 is funded at present by the Joyce Foundation and IRP. The work is being coordinated by Jennifer L. Noyes and Tom Corbett (IRP), with major contributions from James Dimas and James Fong (Casey Foundation), Susan Golonka, and Mark Ragan (Rockefeller Institute).

3. A technical and methodological analysis designed to assess how the accountability of integrated service models can be strengthened and how such models can be more rigorously evaluated. Module 3 is being planned, with support from IRP, the Research Forum at Columbia University, and the Hudson Institute. Barbara Blum (Research Forum) and

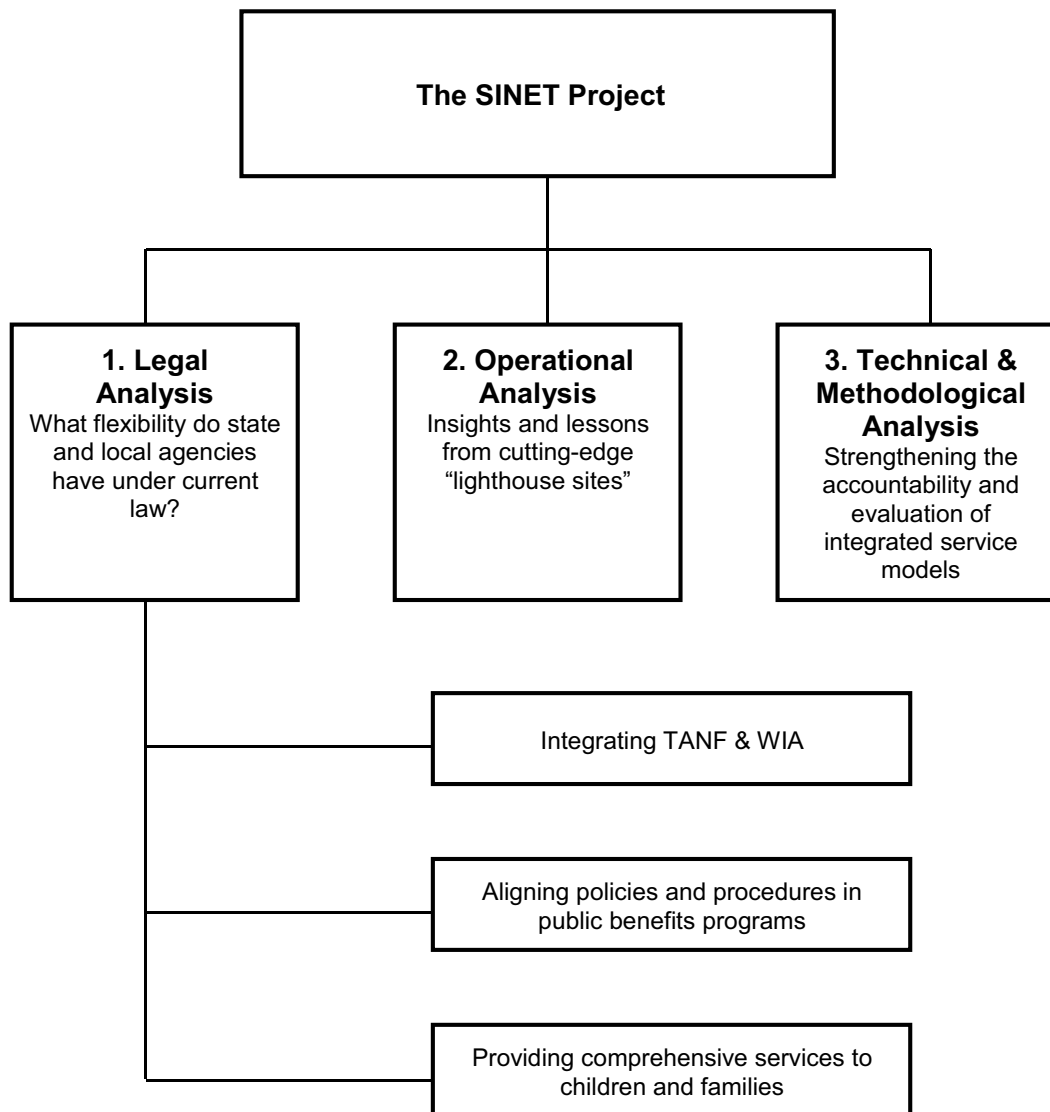


Figure 1. An outline for the SINET project.

Tom Corbett have coordinated early developmental work, with assistance from Jennifer L. Noyes.

Support for various initiatives undertaken as part of this effort is provided by the Joyce Foundation (Chicago, IL), the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Baltimore, MD), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through its core grant to IRP.

### Challenges confronting service integration

One clear, though hardly new, lesson that has emerged from the SINET project is that service integration is inherently difficult.<sup>3</sup> Some underlying challenges include:

1. How to encourage states and localities to experiment with integrated service systems while ensuring that the

most disadvantaged families are adequately served, not overlooked in systems designed to serve broader populations? This first perplexity raises questions about how equitable treatment is defined—is it more equitable to treat all who are similarly situated the same, or to provide services that reflect individual and geographic differences?

2. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 dramatically changed cash welfare programs while maintaining the statutory and regulatory structure of other programs important to low-income families, such as the food stamp, housing, and workforce programs. In so doing, it respected the different rationales for these programs, but created a source of continuing tensions among the institutional cultures within which the programs operate. How might these be resolved in an integrated program?

3. How can integrated services satisfy the legitimate fiscal interests of federal, state, and local governments in ensuring that funds are properly deployed to address policy objectives? It is easier to ensure fiscal and programmatic accountability and to assess performance when programs are narrowly defined in terms of target populations and the benefits or services provided.

These are major challenges that have continued to plague human services delivery, whatever the form such services have taken. Service integration efforts face a particular, additional difficulty: There is no compelling evidence that these integrated systems result in better outcomes, despite the enthusiastic testimony of those who have implemented such models. Rigorous proof is difficult to come by because of the conceptual and logistical challenges these models present to conventional evaluation methods.

There are thus many unanswered questions about integrated service models. Are some more vulnerable populations adversely affected by more inclusive models (e.g., one-stop centers) in which the needs of less aggressive or sympathetic customers might get lost? Are there issues of scale that limit the extent to which true integration can be achieved before systems break down or staff experience overload? Does confusion about an integrated agency's mission dilute the quality of services, confuse customers and staff, and diminish accountability? In the end, resolving challenges of accountability remains a critical issue.<sup>4</sup>

### Some issues to think about

There are also more pragmatic and immediate difficulties confronting the contemporary service integration effort. SINET project activities have provided insights and perspectives that may help to shape strategies for resolving them.

1. There is no single vision or definition of service integration. Existing models are organized around different purposes, are structured and managed in quite different ways, and include varied partners. This is in part because virtually all successful integrated service models are local and emerged as a consequence of local initiative and leadership.

2. Because many of the most difficult challenges to service and systems integration must be overcome at the state and local level, the debate has begun to focus more closely on the capacity of states and localities to take advantage of existing tools and strategies. Analysis of legal and regulatory barriers to integration suggests that, in general, state and local jurisdictions do have substantial leeway to craft cross-system innovations, though some structural and practice reforms at the federal level would advance this agenda. Many states are considering how they may abet local efforts to experiment with inte-

grated models and alter their governance strategies accordingly.

3. Successfully implementing integrated service models is very difficult. A number of the lighthouse sites have remarked that many officials visit their sites but very few replicate their models to any extent, though they may influence subsequent policy and practice. Of all the factors examined to date, strong leadership and a clear mission appear the most important in successful models. Because leadership often drives mission and vision, it appears to carry more weight than structural arrangements, innovative administrative processes, or other mechanical aspects of these systems.

4. Sustaining integrated service models may be even more difficult than implementing them. Apparently, the centrifugal forces that tend to drive systems apart, thus recreating the separate categorical structure that dominates the U.S. system of social assistance, are quite strong.

5. Service integration is not an event but a progress toward a goal, with many milestones along the way. In reality, the goal may never be reached, success always being after the next adjustment or after reform is complete. Nor is there any single strategy for advancing service integration. Strategies must be multidimensional and include many organizations and perspectives. That said, perhaps the best source of inspiration may be the examples and insights drawn from those actually doing it.

In future articles in this series, we will review a conceptual model for thinking about the challenges inherent in service integration projects. We also will report on some state and local initiatives being undertaken as part of the National Governors Association Policy Academy on Cross-Systems Innovation. ■

---

<sup>1</sup>*Working Toward Independence*, Summary of President's Welfare Reform agenda, February 26, 2002, page 35.

<sup>2</sup>T. Corbett, S. Golonka, C. Smith, and J. Noyes, "Enhancing the Capacity for Cross-Systems Innovation: A Project Overview," November 6, 2002.

<sup>3</sup>The movement toward service integration and some of the main issues involved were discussed in a series of articles in *Focus* 22:3 (Summer 2003), *Service and Systems Integration: Renewing the Quest for the "Holy Grail" of Public Policy*.

<sup>4</sup>This enumeration has been abridged and modified from a longer list originally published in a background paper prepared for an October 2003 meeting in Washington, DC, *Services and Systems Integration: Initiating the Journey* (the meeting is discussed later in this article). The paper can be obtained from Tom Corbett, Institute for Research on Poverty, or Jennifer Noyes, the Hudson Institute.