



**National
Children's
Alliance®**

*The Force Behind
Children's Advocacy Centers*

Workforce Development Project

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING WORKING GROUP REPORT



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Project Overview

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

National Children's Alliance (NCA) values growing a strong and innovative workforce. By partnering, collaborating, and convening, NCA provides education and training opportunities to nurture a best-in-class workforce that strives to reflect the children and families it serves.

NCA partnered with consultants from Nonprofit HR to lead a comprehensive initiative to develop recommendations to recruit, support, and retain direct service providers and experts in the field of child abuse. This work is vital because every recommendation strengthens the frontline response, ensuring that children across the country receive timely, compassionate, trauma-informed services. With hundreds of thousands of children depending on these services each year, investing in workforce development is essential to ensuring every child receives the protection, care, and justice they deserve.

As part of our strategic planning process, our stakeholders identified the need for growth in:

- **Creating leadership training opportunities** for current Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC) Directors and CAC staff looking to advance their careers and to prepare for promotional opportunities.

NCA recruited volunteers in late 2023 for the Steering Committee and Working Groups to serve for eight to 10 months to help NCA complete a research phase, including a literature review with an annotated bibliography from the Child Abuse Library Online (CALiO), and to help craft written recommendations for the NCA's Board of Directors. The Steering Committee and Working Groups are composed of more than 60 dedicated volunteers from 30 states, representing CACs, Chapters, Regionals, and other stakeholders involved in the CAC movement. This report outlines the goals, processes, and recommendations crafted by the Leadership and Learning Working Group.



Recommendations Summary

The recommended solutions from the Leadership and Learning Working Group are on pages 5-9. These high-level summaries describe the group's top strategic recommendations prioritized using the decision filters below. It is important to note that the scope of our work extends beyond what is captured in this report. While this report highlights key points, all discussions and ideas generated by the workgroup have been documented and will inform the implementation phase of the approved recommendations.

100+ ideas generated during our overall process

Decision Filters Applied to Prioritize and Narrow:



Relevance: Evaluate how closely each idea aligns with the specific goals, priorities, and structure of NCA.



Effort: Gauge the level of effort required to implement each idea.



Impact: Consider the potential positive outcomes of each idea.



Scalability: Prioritize ideas where there are pathways for NCA to be able to scale broadly and garner support.

It is important to emphasize that these recommendations are not intended solely for NCA. Meeting the needs of the field will require coordinated action across the broader CAC ecosystem. While direction on specific recommendations may come from NCA staff, committees, or consultants, it may also emerge from Regionals or State Chapters. NCA will take the lead in developing action plans for the priorities approved by its Board of Directors and will identify and engage partners from across the network to help lead and support these efforts. Each recommendation is tagged with the relevant entities that may lead or play a significant role in implementation.

NCA | **CACs** | **REG**=Regionals | **CH**=Chapters | **PAR**=Partners or Consultants



Leadership and Learning

WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS



Leadership & Learning

Creating leadership training opportunities for current CAC Directors and CAC staff looking to advance their careers in the CAC movement and to prepare for promotional opportunities.



PROBLEM STATEMENT

Having CAC leaders with previous experience working in the CACs is invaluable. Currently there is no formal mechanism for CACs to equip existing employees to prepare for advancement into leadership roles. Supporting pathways to leadership for CAC staff calls for a focus on employee engagement, retention, leadership training, and preparation for promotional opportunities. This report aims to offer strategies to stabilize the CAC leadership transitions, to ensure that CACs have pathways for leadership development, and to propose sustainable options for leadership development and training opportunities for current CAC Directors and CAC staff looking to advance their careers at CACs. NCA recognizes that a strong, innovative, and fully staffed workforce makes for a strong CAC movement.



OUR GOALS

The Working Group:

- Conducted a needs assessment of skills CAC leaders need, existing programs, and gaps.
- Developed recommendations for effective career advancement training programs and approaches that cater to different career levels and aspirations within the organization.
- Established recommendations to create leadership development resources for CAC leadership.
- Provided recommendations for a process to identify and nurture staff members who aspire to advance their careers by providing them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and experiences to excel in leadership roles.
- Provided recommendations to establish transparent promotion criteria and career paths as a resource for the network to increase consistency and to encourage employee engagement and retention.



PROJECT DELIVERABLES

The Working Group:

- Reviewed the research, talked with stakeholders, and conducted a national survey on leadership development distributed to leaders in the field.
- Submitted written recommendations outlining potential solutions and next steps that have been approved by NCA's Board of Directors.



NCA's Strategic Plan

As outlined in Vision28, NCA's 2023-28 Strategic Plan, the Leadership & Learning Working Group explored and vetted the development of a collaborative Leadership Institute aimed at strengthening the business practices within CACs and Chapters, while grounding new leaders in the core values of the field.

After reviewing the research, engaging stakeholders, and analyzing results from a national survey on leadership development sent to leaders in the field, the group ultimately concluded that a broader Leadership Strategy, rather than an "institute," is a more effective path forward.

Feedback from surveys and stakeholder conversations, including voices from all levels of the CAC ecosystem, confirmed that numerous leadership development efforts were underway already.

In response, the Working Group committed to maintaining open communication and collaboration to enhance and support these existing efforts, rather than duplicating or replacing them. Ongoing discussions will further clarify the approach, define leadership roles within proposed initiatives, and identify the most effective ways to serve the field collectively.

Ultimately the Working Group determined that investing in targeted training, competency-based development, and sustained leadership support is more valuable for strengthening both current and emerging leaders than establishing a costly Leadership Institute.

OUR STRATEGY

The Leadership & Learning Working Group recommends a strategic framework grounded in three core pillars:



Leadership Foundations



Leadership Growth



Leadership Support

Each pillar is designed intentionally to strengthen leadership capacity across CACs by building a solid foundation, fostering ongoing development, and

ensuring sustained support for leaders at every level. This comprehensive strategy aims to equip leaders with the knowledge, tools, and resources necessary to navigate complex challenges and drive meaningful, lasting change.

As an initial priority, the framework focuses on providing targeted training and support for new CAC Directors, to help them lead with confidence, to enhance team development, and to improve retention. Subsequent efforts will focus on recognizing and nurturing leadership potential among direct service staff, such as program managers, advocates, forensic interviewers, and multidisciplinary team (MDT) coordinators, not only for succession planning but also for staff retention.

Our Strategy



1| Leadership Foundations

This pillar focuses on establishing baseline knowledge, tools, and foundational skills for leaders across CACs with a specific emphasis on current CAC leadership and a secondary audience of emerging leaders, as resources permit.

1.1 Leadership Essentials Training Program for New CAC Directors (NCA, REG, CH):

Develop a structured, role-specific onboarding program that focuses on essential skills for new CAC Directors.

1.2 Create an Organizational Competency Model (NCA, REG, CH):

NCA leads a process to help CACs define a set of foundational competencies that are relevant across the organization (e.g., decision making, emotional intelligence, etc.).

1.3 Develop Training Tracks for Different Roles & Levels (NCA, REG, CH):

NCA, Regionals, and Chapters will collaborate to offer tailored training tracks as part of existing training, leadership development and conference efforts.



2| Leadership Growth

This pillar focuses on developing leaders at all levels, fostering skill-building, and supporting individual leadership journeys.

2.1 Leadership Development Program for Emerging Leaders (NCA):

Design a specific program to support staff with leadership potential (program managers, advocates, forensic interviewers, and MDT coordinators).

2.2 Develop an Executive Coaching Program (CH, REG)*:

One-to-one coaching designed to support senior leaders, middle management, and emerging leaders in their personal and professional growth.

*Recommended by the Working Group, but further discussion is needed to assess feasibility.

2.3 Online and Micro eLearning Courses (NCA):

Create or curate accessible, bite-sized modules for self-paced practices.



3| Leadership Support Infrastructure

This pillar ensures the sustainability of leadership development efforts and ongoing support for leaders.

3.1 Coordinated National Onboarding Support & Programming (NCA, REG, CH):

Schedule of regular national calls for knowledge sharing, peer support, and leadership development for CAC Directors, to include the issue of secondary traumatic stress (STS).

3.2 Scaling Support for the existing Leadership, Exchange and Coaching (LEC) Program (REG):

In collaboration with LEC implementation partners, explore strategies on how to scale and expand the LEC program to reach more leaders.

3.3 Expanded Leadership Resource Hub (NCA, REG):

Centralize all resources (training modules, eLearning, coaching materials) in an accessible online platform (NCA Engage).

Implementation Guidance

RECOMMENDED METHODOLOGY

We recommend that any training, coaching, and support be designed to be intentional and cost effective while fostering meaningful engagement and growth. Rather than relying on lecture-based training, programs should prioritize interactive discussions and participant engagement to maximize learning. Creating a safe and supportive space is essential to ensure productive and impactful experiences.

Key Methodology Recommendations Include:

- **Flexible, Accessible Learning:** Offer both online and in-person options, with intentional access to in-person intensives to deepen learning.
- **Tailored for Different Needs:** Design multiple training tracks to support both new and emerging leaders, with content adapted for rural and urban CACs.
- **Adult Learning-Centered:** Ensure all programs align with adult learning principles, incorporating real-world application, peer learning, and mentorship.
- **Scalable and Cost-Effective:** Provide tiered access to resources, exploring free or low-cost options for under-resourced CACs and emerging leaders.
- **Peer Support and Cohorts:** Foster a sense of community and shared learning through structured peer cohorts and group-based training.
- **Varied Training Formats:** Develop learning opportunities of different lengths and intensities, allowing leaders to engage at the right levels for their needs.

By embedding these principles, we will create leadership programs that are impactful, accessible, and sustainable, ensuring that all CAC leaders—regardless of experience level or location—have the tools and support they need to succeed.

Committee-Identified Training Needs

- Nonprofit Management
- Financial Management
- Understanding and Engaging with Boards, Governing Entities, and Key Stakeholders
- Organizational Development



Contributors



Contributors

THANK YOU to our many contributors to this project!

Steering Committee

Leadership and Learning Working Group

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CALiO:

The Child Abuse Library Online, CALiO™, is a program of National Children's Advocacy Center, Huntsville, AL, and is the leading source for authoritative research, resources and other materials that promote evidence-based practice and the multidisciplinary coordinated response to child maltreatment.

- **Muriel K. Wells, M.Ed., MLIS**, Senior Digital Information Librarian, National Children's Advocacy Center, Huntsville, AL
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Thank You

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

The Workforce Development Project brought together a Steering Committee, and expert work groups focused on strengthening children's advocacy centers through comprehensive service delivery. Each group developed targeted recommendations to expand and sustain a skilled workforce and address critical gaps in expertise. Together, these strategies aim to enhance the quality, consistency, and accessibility of care for children and families, laying the foundation for a stronger, more sustainable future across the CAC network.

Questions?

Contact Us

For support or project-based questions, contact Michele Mullen to coordinate responses and any requested follow-up with the Working Group.



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Addendum A

OUR APPROACH: SPADE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Our Approach

SPADE DECISION MAKING MODEL

Each Working Group followed a consistent decision-making process known as SPADE, a consult and decide model that advances clarity and transparency in organizational decision-making. The model ensures that decisions are made with the right people at the appropriate level of the organization and are more relevant and effective.

SPADE is an acronym for Setting, People, Alternatives, Decide, and Explain. This framework was created by Gokul Rajaram at Square and was used to guide our Working Group process.

The key milestones are outlined below:

Reviewed Research & Gathered Data

Each Working Group reviewed existing NCA data and research on the topic provided by CALiO and gathered additional data through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and a survey.

Reviewed External Bright Spots

Each Working Group explored programmatic and strategic examples from similarly structured external organizations to gain insight and inspiration.

Designed Solutions

Each Working Group engaged in a two-hour virtual design session to generate more than 100 potential solutions for the group to consider.

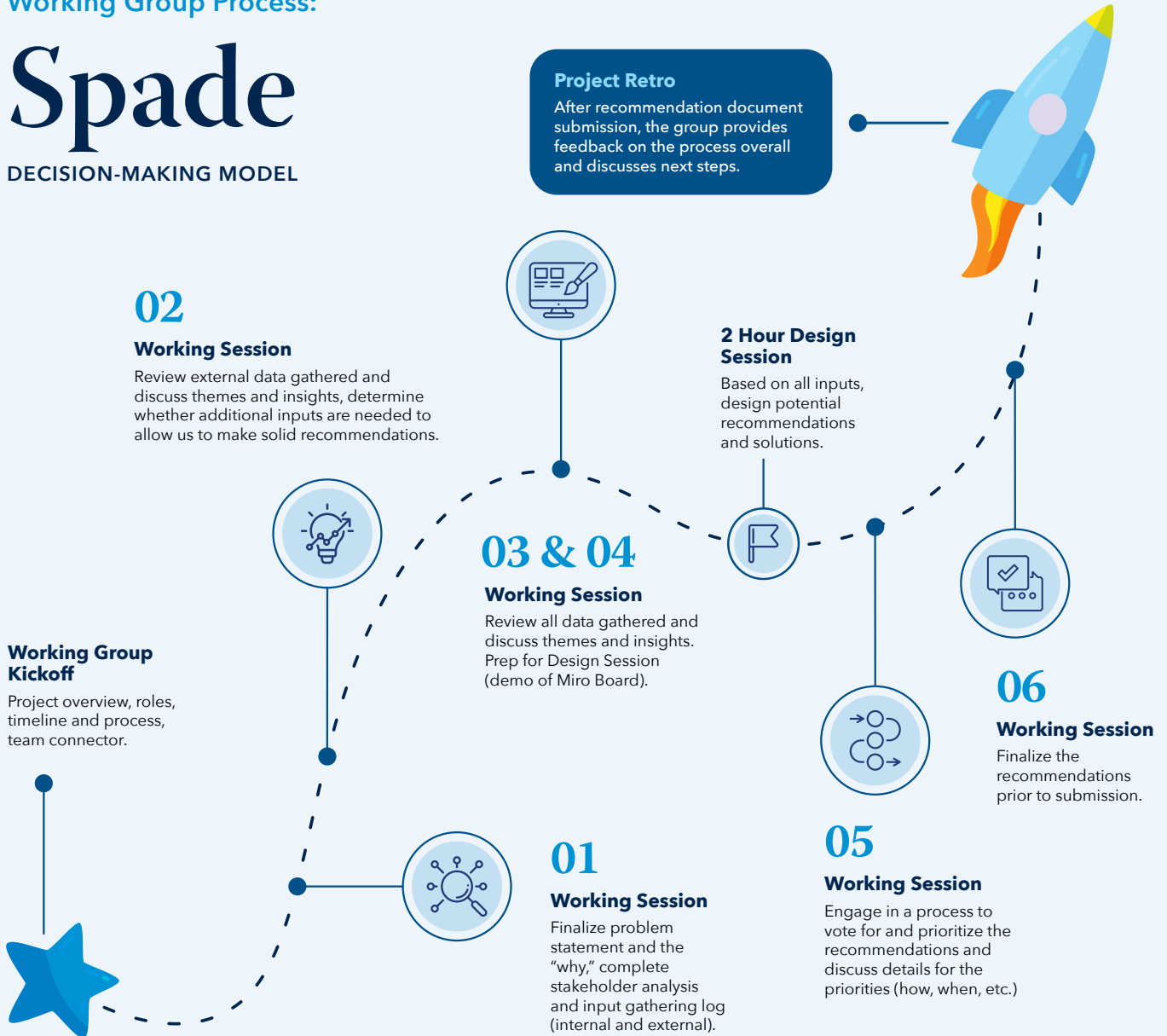
Prioritized Recommendations

Each Working Group used a set of decision filters to narrow down the most impactful and strategic solutions for Board consideration.

Working Group Process:

Spade

DECISION-MAKING MODEL



HIGH-LEVEL PROJECT TIMELINE:





Addendum B

RESEARCH: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Addendum C

RESEARCH: DATA COLLECTED

Focus Groups & Survey Results

Leadership Development Survey

A leadership development survey was distributed in September 2024 to all CAC Directors and Chapter Leaders with 95 survey respondents representing 87 organizations, including nine Chapters. A few findings from the survey:

- Most common leadership development opportunity is peer support or networking groups, highlighting their value in connecting leaders across similar roles or industries.
- A significant portion of participants have engaged in leadership skills development through both virtual (56%) and in-person (54%) settings, focusing on competencies like strategic thinking, conflict management, and people management.
- Other formats such as cohort programs (40%), coaching specific to leadership (39%), and management training both in-person (34%) for areas like HR and finances also play a crucial role.
- Peer support or networking groups are considered the most helpful development opportunities, with about one-third of the respondents considering it the most helpful.
- Leadership skills development and CAC management training are also helpful development opportunities, with more than 30% of respondents ranking it as either first or second in terms of helpfulness.
- Coaching (specific to a particular leadership) is considered a moderately-helpful development opportunity.
- Mentorship and cohort programs are least helpful leadership development opportunities compared with the other opportunities.
- In terms of the satisfaction level in the amount of training received, more than 60% of the respondents are either satisfied or extremely satisfied with the training they received for their current role.
- Only 20% of the respondents are either extremely dissatisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of training.

Leadership survey at Leadership Conference 2025

Additional input on leadership priorities was gathered through three targeted survey questions shared during the Membership Meeting at the NCA Leadership Conference in June 2025, and through a follow-up QR code distributed to the field post-conference.

A total of 174 participants provided further insights, which reinforced the key initiatives outlined in the Leadership Development Report:

Top 3 Leadership Development Priorities:

1. Leadership Essentials training for new directors (**54%**)
2. Development of training tracks tailored to different roles (**41%**)
3. A Leadership Development Program for emerging leaders (**33%**)



Priority Focus: Emphasis should be placed on supporting new leaders first, followed by emerging leaders.

Most Helpful Supports Identified:

- **Structured mentorship (55%)**
Note: This was ranked higher than the initial leadership survey in September 2024.
- **Leadership development initiatives (23%)**



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