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## A Response to David Crampton

Jill Duerr Berrick

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Thank you for the opportunity to respond to David Crampton's discussion of my *Social Service Review* article, "Neighborhood-Based Foster Care: A Critical Examination of Location-Based Placement Criteria" (December 2006). I appreciate his thoughtful review and hope that his ideas and mine can spark a constructive conversation in the field about the role of child welfare services in distressed neighborhoods.

Crampton argues that neighborhoods should be the locus of family support and that neighborhood-based foster care is just one component of a larger community-centered innovation. I agree with this and applaud Crampton's interest in promoting the community as one of many appropriate levers of support for struggling families. Given the known etiologies of child maltreatment, child welfare agencies should be establishing partnerships with community members and providers of services, including income support programs, health services, community mental health efforts, employment development programs, schools, churches, housing programs, and substance abuse programs. Such partnerships should work to assist parents in their efforts to raise children effectively. Child welfare agencies cannot assume sole responsibility for child abuse prevention when so many of maltreatment's predictors implicate factors beyond parenting and when these elements lie outside child welfare agencies' jurisdictions and funding bases. Crampton extends this line of reasoning beyond considering the role of community-based services by providing valuable evidence (Korbin et al. 1998) about the potential role of neighbors in supporting families and improving parenting. Regardless of their characteristics, residents of all neighborhoods may have the potential to be enlisted as agents of support for parents strained by the demands of parenthood. Yet along the continuum of services from prevention to intrusive government intervention, there may be hazards in turning to the most disadvantaged neighborhoods as the best placement settings for vulnerable children, particularly

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those who are very young and those most likely to remain in care for long periods.

Crampton argues that neighborhood-based foster care placements are a small component of a larger effort to engage community in supporting vulnerable families, and when placement is required, kin should be considered as a placement priority. Indeed, federal law and child welfare practice have for over 2 decades consistently emphasized the importance of avoiding foster care placement by maintaining children in the homes of their birth families whenever possible. We also now approach the 10-year anniversary of the federal commitment to kinship placement preferences. I do not intend to suggest that, with the emergence of neighborhood-based placement priorities, child welfare workers have changed the basic premise of federal law. Indeed, of all children reported for maltreatment nationwide, only a very small proportion is ever placed in out-of-home care. For those children placed in care, however, I propose a cautious assessment of where children might best reside. Further, I do not intend to pit placement with family against placement in neighborhoods; I have long been a proponent of thoughtfully assessed kinship foster care. But if children must be placed, if appropriate family is not available, and if children are young or are likely to remain in care, prioritizing the neighborhood of origin as a valued criterion may have philosophical and practical implications for some children.

Crampton points out that a relatively small proportion of all children are currently placed in their neighborhood of origin (Lery, Webster, and Chow 2004), intimating that if the phenomenon does not occur very often, it need not be identified as a potential problem. But many child welfare agencies across the country are attempting to change these patterns. Indeed, some jurisdictions measure their progress toward child welfare reform by enumerating the proportion of foster children cared for close to home. Why would California jurisdictions measure "home/placement distances" (Needell et al. n.d.) as a child welfare "outcome" if the goal were not to keep more children in their neighborhoods of origin? And why launch foster parent recruitment campaigns in neighborhoods where the majority of removals occur if not to increase placement options that are based principally on geography? The purpose of critically examining location-based placement criteria is not to assess past practices when neighborhood was not articulated as a placement criterion but to consider future implications for children who are subject to a child welfare innovation with a thin empirical foundation.

Crampton ends with a call for more research, and on this point I could not agree more strongly. Understanding how we can effectively maintain children in their parents' homes, how to safely reunify families, and the elements of care that help children thrive should be child welfare's most pressing research agenda. The stakes are so high. In child welfare, parents and children can be separated from one another, some-

times for a lifetime. Experimentation without critical analysis and rigorous evaluation does little to advance the field or the interests of vulnerable children and families.

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