

CFRP POLICY BRIEF

Collaborative Family Engagement: A Promising Approach to Supporting Children in State Care

Recognizing the important role that extended family can play in improving outcomes for children who are in the custody of the state due to abuse or neglect, the 84th Texas Legislature approved funding for the Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) pilot project to examine promising practices for a more comprehensive approach to engaging family members in child protection cases. Through the CFE pilot project, Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and Child Protective Services (CPS) are collaborating to implement an adaptation of the Family Finding Model, a structured approach to extensively searching for and engaging adult relatives and family friends to provide additional support for children in substitute care. This brief highlights preliminary qualitative findings on the first year of CFE implementation in three pilot counties in Texas.¹ Initial findings from focus groups and stakeholder interviews suggest that the CFE project is making positive contributions to the quality of collaboration between CPS and CASA in the pilot areas. In addition, both CPS staff and CASA advocates perceive that the CFE approach promotes meaningful engagement of extended family members and enhances case management and planning, making this a promising practice for effectively serving children in substitute care.

Engaging Family in Child Welfare Cases

Child welfare caseworkers routinely look for extended family in CPS cases as a means for identifying potential foster or adoptive parents for children who have been removed from their parents' custody due to abuse or neglect. Research over the last decade, however, has increasingly shown that a more comprehensive family engagement approach, one that looks beyond the goal of merely identifying prospective caregivers, can be valuable for supporting children and parents.² In addition to potentially serving as guardians for children in substitute care, extended family members and fictive kin (unrelated adults with whom the child has a family-like relationship) can provide children with familiarity and consistency, potentially lessening the emotional stress and instability that can result when they are removed from their homes.³

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The Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) Project

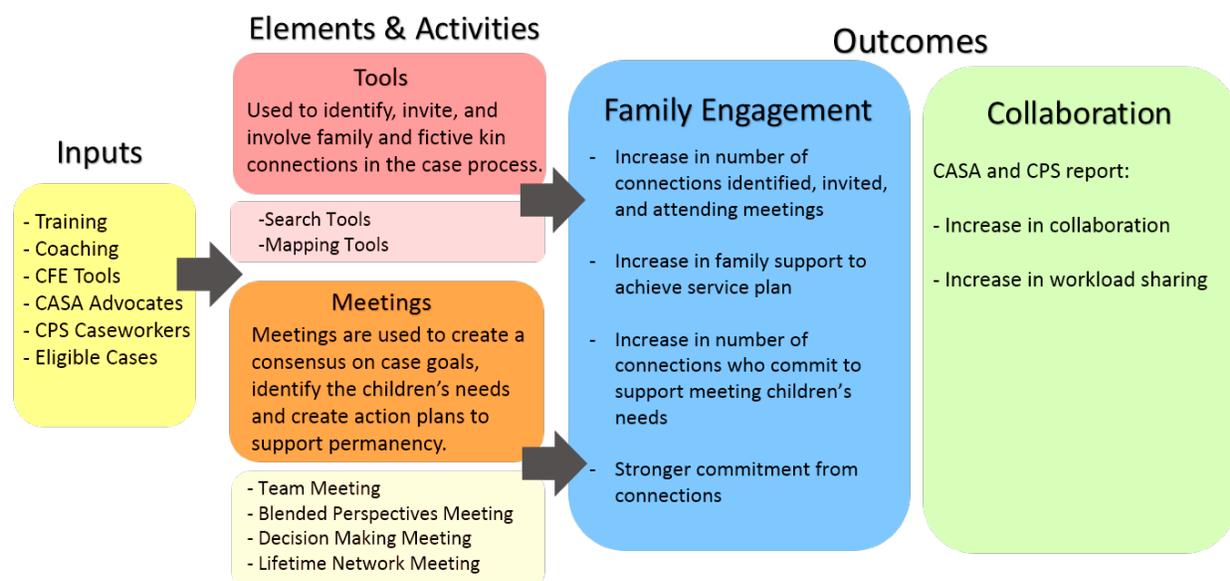
The CFE project is a collaboration between CPS and CASA that uses a team-based approach to identify and engage family and fictive kin for children in substitute care. As the state child welfare agency, CPS is mandated to investigate reports of child maltreatment and place children in the protective custody of the state when they cannot safely remain in their homes. Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) are community volunteers who are appointed by local judges to serve as advocates for children who have been removed by CPS.

The CFE project has two primary goals: 1) To increase the number of adult relatives and fictive kin willing to act as a support system for children who have been placed in substitute care, and 2) To strengthen collaboration between CASA volunteers and CPS staff to facilitate better case management and service delivery for the children they jointly serve.

Under CFE, each child’s case is supported by a team consisting of the CPS caseworker and CASA volunteer assigned to the case, as well as the CPS supervisor, the CASA volunteer’s supervisor, a CPS family meeting facilitator, and potentially other professionals, such as the child’s attorney. The CFE teams work to achieve the project’s goals by using specialized search tools to identify and engage extended family members and fictive kin (referred to as a child’s “connections”) to develop a support system for each child. Once located and engaged, a child’s connections are invited to participate in collaborative meetings with CPS and CASA to develop plans for meeting the child’s immediate needs and to support the family’s service plan.

The central elements and activities of CFE are linked to the desired family engagement and CPS/CASA collaboration outcomes as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Collaborative Family Engagement Framework



Findings from Year One of CFE Implementation

Texas CASA and CPS chose three local CASA programs in three Texas counties (Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Nueces) to participate in the first year of the CFE pilot project, which spanned from September 2015 to August 2016. After CPS and CASA personnel at all pilot sites were trained in the Family Finding Model and CFE approach, cases from each site were selected for inclusion in the CFE project based on an assessment of whether each case would be a good fit, made jointly by the CPS Program Director and CASA Program Director.

The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) contracted with Texas CASA to independently evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the CFE project. The first year evaluation focuses on the early implementation of CFE in the pilot sites, providing a preliminary, qualitative assessment of the extent to which the activities of CFE are aligned with the ultimate goals of enhancing family engagement and improving local collaboration between CPS and CASA. The findings presented below represent information collected by CFRP through interviews and meetings with implementing partners at the state and local levels, as well as focus groups with the front-line CPS staff and CASA volunteers delivering the program services.

Overall, year one findings suggest that CFE offers innovative tools and strategies for engaging families and provides a framework for strengthening collaboration between the two agencies. More specifically, the first year findings indicate:

- **CFE expanded the typical goals that CPS staff and CASA volunteers have for engaging extended family in cases involving children in substitute care.** Both CPS and CASA personnel participating in the first year of CFE describe a shift toward a more comprehensive approach to engaging extended family and a new understanding of the ways that family connections can be an asset to children and their parents beyond serving as a placement option.
- **CPS and CASA identified many components of CFE that can be implemented widely to enhance family engagement and collaboration on *all* cases.** One of the strengths of CFE is that the tools and strategies can be adapted to fit local needs and contexts, as well as the unique characteristics of each case.
- **Using the CFE approach increases meaningful family engagement, enhancing case management and planning.** From the perspective of CASA volunteers and CPS staff, the CFE pilot cases engage extended family and fictive kin connections in family meetings, service plans, and overall case processes in ways that non-CFE cases typically do not. CASA volunteers and CPS staff consistently describe the importance of these family connections for children in substitute care.

Both CPS staff and CASA volunteers perceive that CFE offers innovative tools and strategies for engaging families and provides a framework for strengthening collaboration between the two agencies.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

First-year evaluation findings suggest that Collaborative Family Engagement shows great promise as an approach for strengthening CASA and CPS interagency collaboration and facilitating better case management for children in substitute care. Participants from both CPS and CASA report that CFE has shifted them beyond the mindset of engaging relatives solely to serve as potential placement options for children, and toward an understanding that involving extended family and fictive kin can enhance case planning, assist parents as they work toward reunification with their children, provide emotional support and continuity for children in substitute care, and ultimately promote better case outcomes.

The evaluation also identified some first-year implementation challenges, which provide opportunities for adjusting and refining the approach to maximize the effectiveness of the CFE program in year two. Among other things, the first year implementation highlighted the importance of:

- Aligning CFE meetings with existing CPS timelines and processes to avoid creating additional obligations for CPS staff and family members who are involved with the case;
- Clarifying the respective roles of CPS and CASA in the CFE process to minimize duplication of efforts and foster efficient collaboration; and
- Engaging family members by creating an open, positive, and family-driven environment that encourages participation.

In September 2016, year two of CFE began, with new pilot sites in nine different Texas counties joining the project. CPS and CASA programs in both the original and the new sites will build on the implementation lessons learned during year one and continue to improve on this promising approach for increasing family engagement and strengthening collaboration. The addition of the new sites will allow CFRP to examine child and case outcomes associated with CFE in the year two evaluation as more families are served. Collecting more case-specific information on the children and families being served during the second year of the project, including a project-specific CFE Survey administered to CPS and CASA participants before and after six to eight months of implementation, will also facilitate a more quantitative analysis of the benefits of CFE than was possible in the first year.

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.

¹ Osborne, C., Huffman, J., & Lipton Galbraith, A. (2016). *Evaluation of the Collaborative Family Engagement pilot project: Year one report*. Austin, TX: Child and Family Research Partnership, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin.

² Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2010). *Family Engagement*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

³ Cromer, D. (2007). Through no fault of their own: Reasserting a child's right to family connectedness in the child welfare system. *Family Law Quarterly*, 41(1), 181-195.