

## Introducing North Carolina's Family Leadership Model

When people think of **prevention** within the child welfare community, they tend to think of our work with families **prior** to issues arising or when children are at risk for foster care. In fact, prevention applies to **all** aspects of the child welfare system, including CPS assessment, CPS in-home services, permanency planning services, guardianship, adoption, post adoption, and 18 to 21 services.

At the core of prevention services and good social work practice is "meeting families where they are." This is a key component of being family-centered. North Carolina has long embraced family-centered programming. Workers build stronger families through family-driven and youth-guided Child and Family Team meetings (CFTs), embrace families as experts in their own lives, and help families develop family-driven case plans. However, rarely have CPS-involved families been "at the table" when developing policies and programs. Policies have historically been created after consulting the best knowledge available from national experts, research, and child welfare workers' knowledge and experiences. Only sporadically have recipients of services been asked to contribute to policy discussions. But North Carolina is changing that paradigm. To achieve the desired outcomes in child welfare, staff **must** hear directly from individuals receiving or impacted by those services.

To that end, the North Carolina Division of Social Services (DSS) has developed a state-level Child Welfare Family Advisory Council (CW FAC). This 12-member body is comprised of 6 parents who have received child protective services, 1 foster parent, 1 adoptive parent, 2 kinship caregivers, and 2 youth who were served by the North Carolina foster care program. Through the CW FAC, DSS is able to hear from all individuals impacted by child welfare services.

The CW FAC Family Partners meet with DSS every month to offer insight and guidance on policy and programs. Since its inception in April 2018, the CW FAC has reviewed, revised, or provided input on:

- NC FAST forms
- Family Services Agreement
- Handbook (*given to parents when their child is removed*)
- Monthly visitation documentation
- Modified Child Welfare Policy Manual
- NC's Early Childhood Action Plan
- NC's Adoption Website
- Guardian Assistance Program marketing materials
- Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR)
- Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS)
- Community Response Program

### What has North Carolina learned from engaging Family Partners in system-level work?

The perspective of the Family Partner is invaluable because it causes a shift in thinking. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the words we use, creates a safe space where power differentials are suspended, and allows people to see each other as caring human beings. It creates better policies and more realistic programs. Having Family Partners engaged in system-level work reminds everyone that, at the end of every policy or program, there is a family trying to do its best for children (just as there is a child welfare worker trying to do the best to help families). DSS quickly realized working with families in this way is shifting the agency culture. All these factors will lead to better outcomes for children and families.

CW FAC members are also participating in state-level committees to help lend the parent voice to various issues, including the Driver's License Pilot Committee, the Community Child Protection Team (CCPT) Advisory

**A Family Partner is a youth or adult who has received services or is the caregiver/parent of someone who has received services and who has firsthand experience with the child welfare system. Therefore, when we refer to Family Partners, we are speaking of both youth and adults.**

Board, the FosteringNC.org Oversight Committee, and the Health Oversight and Coordination Plan Revision Committee. Members have also helped the statewide parent association (Foster Family Alliance NC) conduct focus groups across the state.

DSS recognized the child welfare system could be strengthened by including the family perspective at the county level in addition to the state level. To better understand how this might be implemented, three counties (Durham, Forsyth, and Richmond) agreed to pilot Family Engagement Committees (FEC). A FEC is a group of individuals at the county level who meet to discuss, implement, and support strategies to improve family engagement and permanency for children. Each FEC is comprised of parents who have been involved in the child welfare system, as well as other families and community stakeholders committed to improving services for children, youth, and families. FECs help ensure ongoing consultation from families so the county can respond to feedback and strengthen programming as needed. Members of the CW FAC have been able to provide technical assistance to three county departments of social services.

The work of the CW FAC and FECs is part of a Family Leadership Model developed by a dedicated team of stakeholders in North Carolina. This group, which began in continued next page

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2016, included parents, youth, members of the prevention and public health community, university partners, state and county staff, and consultants from the Capacity Building Center for States (a Technical Assistance agency funded by the Children's Bureau). Together, the group created a tiered system of family leadership opportunities based on the principle that family involvement evolves over time.

The tiered model builds upon quality family engagement by child welfare workers at the case level. Families begin their journey to system-level work through participation in activities such as parenting classes, focus groups, and training events (Tier 1). Then, families may become involved in speaking engagements and provide direct feedback on specific topics (Tier 2) before moving up to state-level policy and program work (Tier 3). Each tier builds leadership skills through engagement opportunities and helps ensure the child welfare system has ongoing consultation with consumers about the goals of child welfare (a CFSR Systemic Factor).

### **What are the benefits to social workers, supervisors, and agencies?**

When policies and programs reflect the realities of the families we serve, better tools can be developed for workers to meet families where they are. This is a win for everyone, including the agency. Preliminary studies have shown social worker job satisfaction and retention are linked to quality family engagement! So, if agencies can prioritize quality family engagement and collaboration, they may experience less staff turnover. Also, when agencies prioritize involving families at the system level, families will more readily see DSS as a supportive partner.

### **What are the benefits to the Family Partners involved?**

"I never felt successful until I was able to help other families," said a birth mother whose parental rights were

**When we talk about collaboration, we mean the process of agencies and families joining together for the purpose of interdependent problem solving that focuses on improving services to children and families.**

terminated. This is a common sentiment among Family Partners. Giving back and contributing to improving the system is what drives them every day. Seeing how their experiences help inform system change is often extremely rewarding. One Family Partner said, "Everybody listened, truly listened to what we had to say and used the information. Even if they didn't use it all, they used a lot of it. I was welcome to come and share my thoughts. I thought DSS made everyone feel that way." Family Partners are "wowed" when they see their feedback being used. "Being able to look back...and knowing that our personal voices and experiences made a difference" is one of the most rewarding aspects of this work. CWFAC Family Partners have said they feel encouraged and excited for the work ahead.

### **How will we know if we are making a difference?**

DSS has engaged the Center for Family and Community Engagement (CFFACE) at North Carolina State University to conduct a multi-layer evaluation of the North Carolina Child Welfare Family Leadership Model. CFFACE is collecting data on family-centered practice, family leadership development, and agency capacity to integrate family leaders as a part of their agency. Additionally, a minimal cost evaluation will be completed. Family-centered practice and collaboration are measured by collecting data on the family's perspective of the services received and staff/family perspectives of meetings and events. Family leadership is measured

by Family Partners assessing their leadership development via a self-assessment.

### **What is next for state and county programming?**

DSS is learning from Durham, Forsyth, and Richmond counties and is determining how best to include family leadership efforts in the North Carolina 2020-2024 Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP).

In the meantime, county staff can begin soliciting family input today. For example, ask one or more families:

- To give feedback on the layout and the words used on a new flyer.
- What would have made their initial interaction with the agency better?
- What are some of the things the worker did that helped them the most?
- What would have made their visits with their worker better?

After hearing from families, teams can review what was heard in a team meeting or discuss family feedback with their supervisor. Families can help improve the system every day.

Systemically including family voice in programming and policies illuminates the crucial interdependencies that exist in child welfare services. Working together with families from a position of equal responsibility and commitment eliminates common barriers to positive outcomes and embeds prevention activities throughout the child welfare service array. This, in turn, leads to the development of a shared vision, leadership, and ownership of the outcomes achieved.

Watch for a Dear County Director Letter (DCDL) from the NC Division of Social Services for updates and for ways you can refer one of your families for CWFAC membership as openings become available. ♦