

A Statewide Approach to Improving Father Engagement in Child Welfare: Lessons from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families

Research shows the benefits of a father's involvement in their families for children, families, and the fathers themselves (Diniz et al. 2021; Yogman and Eppel 2022; Saeteurn et al. 2022, Karberg et al. 2019; Kotelchuck 2022; Gold and Edin 2023; Islamiah et al. 2022). In 2018, the Administration for Children and Families issued a call to child welfare and other human services agencies to work together to create cultures that value the vital roles that fathers play in their families and engage them in services (Administration for Children and Families 2018). This brief describes how the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) launched and sustained a coordinated approach to improve father engagement across the state. The state's experience offers an encouraging example for other public agencies or organizations looking to improve child welfare practices statewide.

Connecticut modeled its approach after a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC), which is a collaborative learning approach used to test and spread potentially promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003). DCF's Hartford office was one of six child welfare agency teams in the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project that used a BSC to create a culture in the child welfare system that prioritizes and values fathers and paternal relatives (Box 1). The experiences of the Hartford team in FCL directly informed Connecticut's statewide approach.

Box 1. The Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare project

The Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project, conducted by Mathematica and the University of Denver, assessed the promise of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology for improving practices in child welfare. FCL is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, in partnership with the Children's Bureau in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

From 2019–2021, six sites representing five child welfare agencies participated in a BSC focused on strengthening father and paternal relative engagement (Fung et al, 2021). Sites used data and small tests of change to pilot engagement strategies. They also assessed their progress toward fully engaging fathers and paternal relatives in all aspects of delivering child welfare services, in order to shift agency culture. The agencies included:

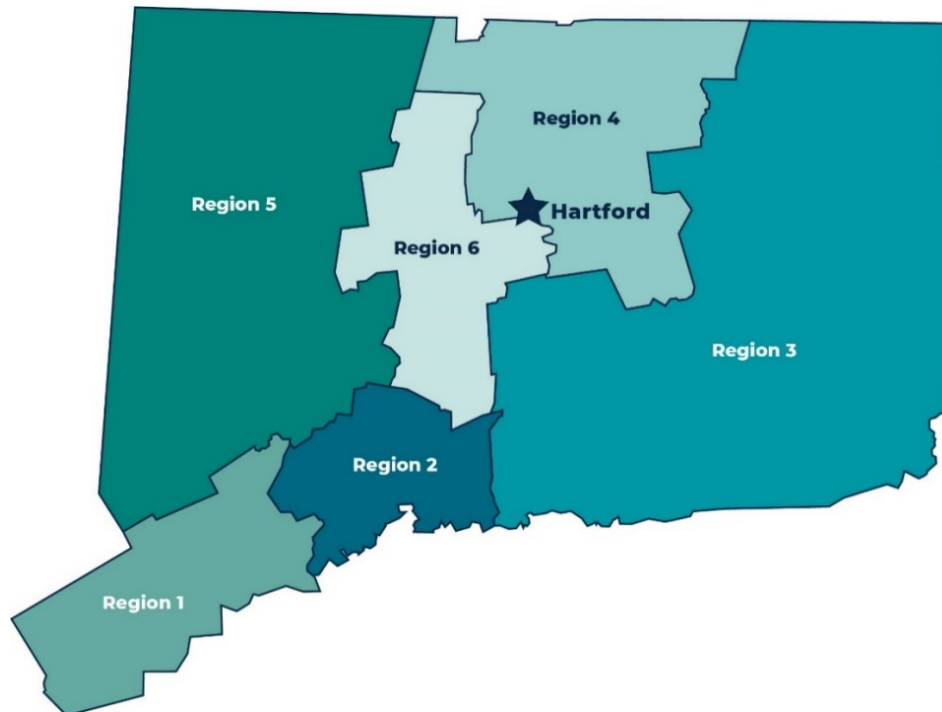
- Connecticut Department of Children and Families (Hartford office)
- Denver Human Services (Colorado)
- Los Angeles County Department of Children and Families (Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices, California)
- Prowers County Department of Human Services (Colorado)
- Wake County Department of Human Services (North Carolina)

From 2021–2023, the sites participated in a descriptive evaluation. The [FCL Descriptive Evaluation Design report](#) includes more information about the sites, the BSC, and this study.

The history of father engagement efforts in Connecticut DCF

Connecticut DCF is organized into six geographic regions, each containing two or three offices (Figure 1). Hartford and the office in Manchester make up Region 4, the largest region in the state. As of April 2023, Region 4 had 567 children in out-of-home care—about 20 percent of the statewide total. To support continuous improvement in each region, Connecticut DCF historically has required offices to operate communities of practice. One of these communities of practice was called the Father Engagement Leadership Team, or FELT. FELTs are typically led by three to five child welfare supervisors and caseworkers, with oversight from office leadership. FELTs sponsor regular internal and external activities in their service regions that focus on engaging fathers, such as holding staff meetings to review data on father engagement.

Figure 1. Connecticut DCF service regions



Source: Connecticut DCF Information Systems, Data Management & Analytics. "CT Department of Children and Families Regions & Area Offices: January 2020." https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/Agency/pdf/CT_DCF_Regions_2020-W-LINKS.pdf.

The FELT structure sprung up organically in some offices starting in the early 2000s. It spread throughout the state as staff transferred between regions and offices and as father engagement became a state priority in response to a Child and

"Some years ago, Connecticut had ... a statewide FELT community of practice. And when that community of practice existed, the state of Connecticut as a whole met [its goal for father engagement]. When we achieved that goal, [DCF leadership] sunset the group ... Within a year and a half, we were right back to where we were previously... because there was no oversight at the highest level."

— Regional FELT member

Family Service Review (CSFR)¹ finding that fathers and paternal relatives did not have their needs adequately assessed or addressed and were not actively involved in case planning (Connecticut Department of Children and Families 2009). To address these issues, Connecticut DCF developed a statewide fatherhood community of practice to provide a venue for offices to share information about father engagement and support practice improvements. Over time, the emphasis on engaging fathers waned as the state made improvements and other priorities competed for attention. Without a statewide fatherhood structure to motivate the work, many regional FELTs suspended activities. In 2018, another CSFR cited the state for insufficient efforts to help children in foster care visit and maintain relationships with their fathers, identify and address fathers’ needs, and involve fathers in case planning and other parts of the child welfare process (Administration for Children and Families 2016). In response, the state renewed its focus on engaging fathers and began requiring each office to establish and maintain a FELT. FELTs were supposed to meet regularly to review officewide administrative case review data on father engagement. It was with this backdrop that the Hartford office participated in the FCL BSC to focus on strengthening father and paternal relative engagement.

What is a Breakthrough Series Collaborative?

A BSC is designed to help participating teams cast a vision for addressing a topic at a structural level, test improvements, and reflect on their progress and plan for sustainability:

Cast a vision. The BSC model begins with a vision for how a child welfare system should work to address a practice challenge, embodied in a document called the Collaborative Change Framework. In FCL, this vision laid out five domains for improving engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare (Figure 2). For more information on the FCL Collaborative Change Framework, see the report [Using a Change Framework to Design Systems that Effectively Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives and Promote Racial Justice](#) (Spielfogel et al. 2023a).

Test improvements. With an overarching vision in place, teams are called to action. These teams are led by agency staff and encouraged to engage system partners in the work early to support and spread new practices. To build momentum, teams test strategies that are relevant to their agency’s context and that can be completed in a short time frame. Teams use Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to test strategies. A

Figure 2. The FCL BSC Collaborative Change Framework



¹ The Children’s Bureau conducts periodic reviews of state child welfare systems called Child and Family Service Reviews. States must develop Performance Improvement Plans to address areas of improvement that the reviews identify. For more information, see: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/monitoring/child-family-services-reviews>

PDSA cycle has four steps: (1) planning the test and stating its aims; (2) conducting the test, or “Do”; (3) studying data collected during the test; and (4) “Act,” or taking action based on the results of the test.

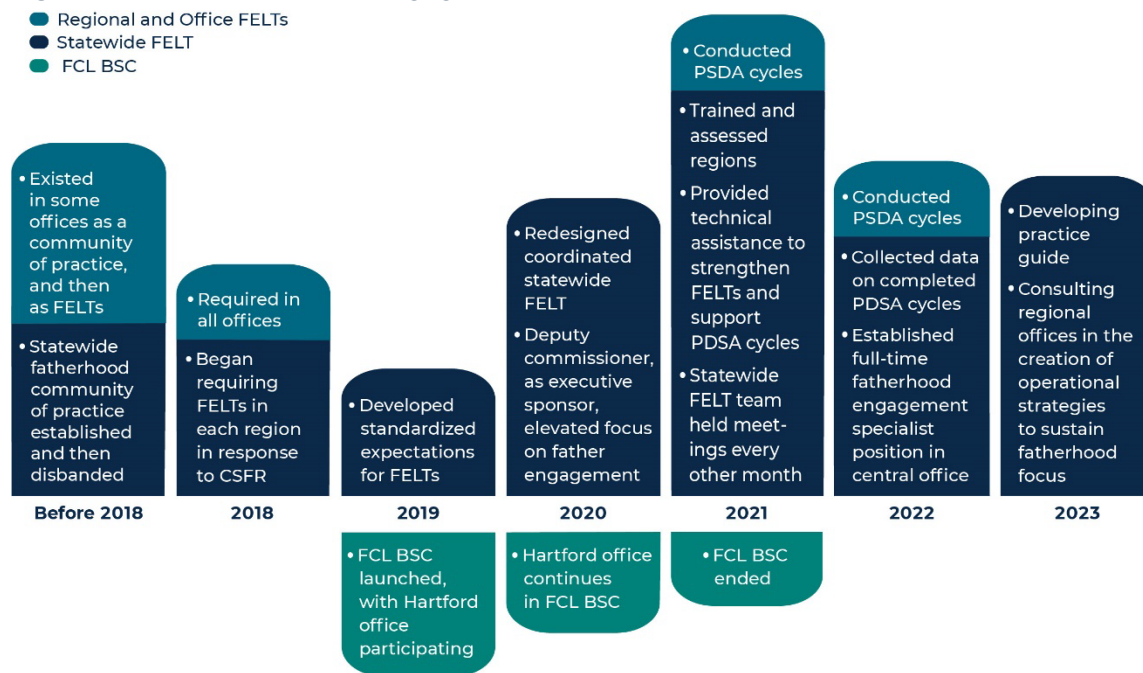
Reflect and act. Throughout a BSC, participating teams meet for shared learning opportunities to report back on what they find and plan for the sustainability of potentially promising practices. Coaches who are experts in child welfare or father engagement helped lead the FCL BSC.

For more information about the elements of this BSC and how agencies implemented it in the FCL project, see the report, [A Seat at the Table](#) (Fung et al. 2021).

Implementing a Statewide BSC

As the FCL BSC drew to a close in early 2021, participating teams developed sustainability plans for carrying on their work after the BSC ended. In late 2020, Connecticut DCF reviewed the progress the Hartford team had made and saw the potential to adapt the BSC as a framework for improving engagement of fathers and paternal relatives across the state. Connecticut planned a BSC adaptation that drew on both the existing infrastructure and the increased capacity built during FCL (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Timeline of father engagement efforts in Connecticut DCF



In Connecticut DCF’s statewide approach, FELTs led the development and piloting of strategies to change organizational culture related to father engagement in their regions. As a part of its FCL sustainability planning, Connecticut developed a new statewide FELT structure to support and coordinate FELTs in improving their region’s practices to engage fathers. Three chairpersons coordinated the activities of the new statewide FELT. Two of the chairpersons participated in the FCL BSC: an assistant chief of child welfare, who led the BSC team and was the Hartford office director during the FCL BSC, and a community partner who led an organization that provided counseling and other services to men and families in the greater Hartford area. The community partner also had a contract with Connecticut DCF to train new employees in its Academy for Workforce Development. The third chair oversaw the state Fatherhood

Engagement Services program, which was established as part of the statewide CFSR Program Improvement Plan.

The statewide FELT chairpersons played three key roles during Connecticut’s adaptation of the BSC:

1. Built FELT capacity to implement the Collaborative Change Framework. A chairperson introduced each FELT to the Collaborative Change Framework by leading the FELT through a self-assessment of father engagement practices in their regions. The self-assessment was one of the tools developed for the FCL BSC.²

“My whole role is to constantly push [FELTs] to think outside the box ... Systems become complacent with whatever the standard is. That’s why it was so important to push the envelope ... [so that father engagement] becomes the standard.”
— Statewide FELT chairperson

2. Facilitated PDSA cycles and practice improvements. One chairperson provided a training to each region called Turning 50 Barriers to Father Engagement into 50 Opportunities. The chairperson developed the training during the FCL BSC and led a PDSA cycle on it. The training gave the regions ideas for strategies to improve their practices to engage fathers. The chairperson also trained the FELT teams on the PDSA approach. The state required each FELT team to lead PSDA cycles on three strategies in their regions between June 2021 and September 2022.

3. Convened FELTs to learn and reflect. The chairpersons organized meetings of the regional FELT teams every other month. In the meetings, FELTs from each region shared updates about their activities to engage fathers, and the chairpersons led discussions about priorities related to father engagement. For example, one session focused on the importance of disaggregating case data by race and ethnicity to understand potential disparities in father engagement and to begin working toward racial equity. These meetings continued after the end of the 15-month adaptation period.

Lessons from Connecticut DCF

In September 2022, Connecticut DCF began taking stock of its adapted BSC approach and the progress FELTs had made in promoting father engagement, and prioritized activities for the statewide FELT’s ongoing role. Based on conversations with regional FELT leaders and statewide FELT chairpersons, three lessons emerged. Next, we share each lesson and the steps Connecticut DCF took to build on its approach.

Lesson 1: FELTs created accountability structures for staff to engage fathers

From the state perspective, the most promising strategies developed by the regions set clear expectations for caseworkers and their supervisors, and flagged cases in which caseworkers did not promptly engage fathers. For example, several regions conducted PDSA cycles on a strategy called First Five for Fathers, which required supervisors and caseworkers to discuss their attempts to identify and reach out to fathers during the first five minutes of every meeting they had about cases. Several regions also tested a strategy called Fatherhood Five that required caseworkers to identify and visit a nonresident father within the first

² The self-assessment can be found in “Toolkit for Building System Capacity to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare” (Spielfogel et al. 2023b), available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/fathers-and-continuous-learning>.

five days of the start of an investigation. Making these strategies a part of regular case practice communicated to caseworkers the importance of engaging fathers and created a clear accountability measure. If, for example, a father was not contacted at the beginning of an investigation, a supervisor could identify the issue early and take steps to address it.

According to one of the FELT chairpersons, strategies such as First Five for Fathers could help change the organizational culture related to fathers and paternal relatives. The chairperson reported that the primary obstacle to engaging fathers was an organizational culture—built up over years—in which nonresident fathers were a lower priority for the agency than mothers were. Although state policy tended to neutrally refer to families and parents, the unequal treatment of men in the child welfare system reflected how offices and regions implemented the policy, rather than the policy itself. By discussing fathers in every case consultation, for example, caseworkers would be held accountable for engaging all family members. Over time, engaging both parents equally would become standard practice for implementing policies that do not specify fathers or mothers when referring to parents and families.

“In many places, [our policy] speaks to families, [but] we have lots of cultural values that our policy doesn’t recognize.... [If we create] separate [policies] for dads, then we’re automatically carving dad out away from what we consider family.”

— Statewide FELT chairperson

Another chairperson cautioned that to meaningfully improve father engagement, the agency would have to address a broader compliance-oriented culture. A practice like the Fatherhood Five would not change culture if caseworkers were waiting until Day 5 of an investigation to contact a nonresident father. Similarly, a strategy like First Five for Fathers would likely not lead to meaningful improvements in child permanency and placement outcomes if all conversations about engaging fathers lasted five minutes regardless of whether there was still more to talk about. Some FELTs pursued more intensive strategies designed to spark deeper conversations about father engagement and change case practice. Two FELTs, for example, developed strategies in which FELT members consulted on individual cases when caseworkers had difficulty engaging fathers; made recommendations; and reviewed case notes afterward to confirm the caseworker followed the recommendations.

- *Next steps for Connecticut.* In late 2022 and early 2023, Connecticut DCF convened a steering committee to develop a father engagement practice guide for offices, with a goal of releasing it before the end of 2023. The steering committee included representatives of offices and DCF divisions across the state. Based on feedback from the regional FELTs, the state planned for the practice guide to incorporate strategies that FELTs conducted PDSA cycles on, provide training materials, and offer guidance for engaging contractors and community providers. Connecticut DCF envisioned the practice guide as a tool it could use to hold offices accountable for engaging fathers.

Lesson 2: Efforts to improve father engagement require long-term focus and support

Part of Connecticut’s motivation for participating in FCL and adapting the BSC was to maintain focus on and support for father engagement in child welfare. Before 2018, many offices had created FELTs but eventually let them go dormant. Even after 2018, when a new commissioner required each office to

establish a FELT, the offices operated largely independently from one another and had little accountability for engaging fathers.

Statewide FELT chairpersons argued that father engagement would remain a niche concern without long-term commitment in terms of both financial resources and personnel. Without ongoing emphasis and support, any progress made during 2021 and 2022 was at risk of fading away as it had in the past. Through 2022, Connecticut funded the statewide FELT and the state's contract with one chairperson using payments it received for participating in FCL. Another chairperson had multiple responsibilities in the DCF central office and estimated that he could spend only about one-quarter of his time on the statewide FELT and fatherhood services.

- *Next steps for Connecticut.* In early 2023, Connecticut DCF created a dedicated fatherhood lead position in its central office. The person in this role was to lead the development of the father engagement practice guide, collect and monitor data on engaging fathers, coordinate regional FELTs, and work with community partners.

Lesson 3: Endorsement from organizational leaders can give legitimacy to change efforts

Regional FELT members and statewide FELT chairs observed the importance of leaders' buy-in in ensuring that change initiatives were taken seriously, both at the state level and in regional offices. The statewide FELT chairpersons believed that the local office directors needed to be engaged in fatherhood work to convey the importance of engaging fathers to the caseworkers and other staff in their offices. The regions that had maintained FELTs for a decade or more had consistent and committed leadership. The FELTs in Region 5 and Region 2, for example—two of the regions that had the longest-running FELTs—were led by staff who brought the FELT model to Connecticut.

The statewide FELT chairpersons also recognized a need for central office leadership to be involved in the statewide FELT. Initially, a longtime champion of father engagement who participated in the BSC and was responsible for oversight of Regions 4 and 6 was involved in the statewide FELT at the executive level. When this person retired, their replacement was an office director with less executive-level contact. According to the statewide FELT chairpersons, not having leadership represented in the statewide FELT made it challenging to keep father engagement efforts a priority in the state because the statewide FELT no longer had a voice in high-level meetings in the DCF central office.

“When we started this, the whole plan was for me to do everything through the FELT. But we recognized that if I would have done everything through the FELT, only 30 people in the office would have gotten information. So we had to get to the office director.

When we lost [the assistant chief as a chairperson], we lost somebody that was meeting...with the higher administration [about fatherhood work]. Now, nobody's saying that. And so that means that [fatherhood is] falling back behind again [as a priority].... And that means they're talking about something else in [administrative] meeting[s].”

— Statewide FELT chairperson

- *Next steps for Connecticut.* In early 2023, Connecticut DCF named a deputy commissioner as a statewide FELT chairperson so someone involved with the statewide FELT would have the authority to keep father engagement a priority. Connecticut also extended the other chairperson's contract to continue his involvement with DCF. In the next phase of the statewide FELT, he planned to focus on working with office directors to develop strategic plans for engaging fathers, including plans to ensure each office maintained an active FELT and engaged with community providers. He also planned to work with the central office's fatherhood lead to develop the practice guide and make PDSA cycles a part of statewide continuous quality improvement practices.

Conclusion

In the FCL project, the Hartford office of Connecticut DCF used a BSC to develop and pilot strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives. As the FCL BSC drew to a close in early 2021, Connecticut DCF adapted and implemented components of the BSC methodology to improve father and paternal engagement statewide. By empowering regional FELT teams to develop and test their own father and paternal engagement strategies and providing them with training and support, Connecticut DCF was able to sustain the momentum from FCL. Together, the regional FELTs and the statewide team that supported them identified next steps, including developing a practice guide to hold offices accountable for engaging family members and organizational changes to ensure an enduring emphasis on father engagement to enhance child permanency and placement outcomes statewide.

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Submitted to:

Pooja Curtin and Katie Pahigiannis, Project Officers | Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation | Administration for Children and Families | U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Submitted by:

Matthew Stagner, Project Director | Mathematica | 111 East Wacker Drive, Suite 3000 | Chicago, IL 60601 | Telephone: (312) 994-1002 | Fax: (312) 994-1003

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