

## Child Welfare Issue Brief

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# Promising Strategies for Collecting, Analyzing, and Reporting Data on Father and Paternal Relative Engagement in Child Welfare

### **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, is testing the use of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) methodology, a collaborative learning approach used to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. FCL is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and administered 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 test the father and paternal relative strategies they implemented. 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 (Region IV, including the Hartford and Manchester offices)
- 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 are participating in a descriptive evaluation. The [FCL Descriptive Evaluation Design report](#) includes more information about the sites, the BSC, and this study.



Child welfare agencies need data about fathers and paternal relatives at every stage of a case to understand whether and how child welfare staff fully engage fathers and paternal relatives in all aspects of delivering child welfare services. To do this, agencies must systematically collect data about fathers and paternal relatives from the beginning to the end of a case. However, current data systems do not focus on measuring whether and how child welfare agencies engage fathers and paternal relatives, nor do they include structured data elements about fathers and paternal relatives (JBS International 2020). Much of the data available is qualitative and difficult to analyze. Without such data, child welfare agencies cannot assess whether their staff engage fathers and paternal relatives at every stage of a family’s involvement with the agency.



“We are operating in such an archaic [data] system.”

—Site leader

Based on conversations with sites beginning in summer 2021 and site visit interviews with agency staff in late summer 2022, this brief highlights examples of data outside their own data systems that sites participating in the FCL project are collecting, analyzing, and reporting. This brief also describes the strategies sites use to collect and analyze these data. Sites shared that they are collecting new data, including data about the service referrals that program staff make to fathers and paternal relatives. Sites are also updating and developing new protocols to capture better data on father and paternal relative engagement, such as expanding data collection during investigation and tracking initial contacts with fathers and paternal relatives throughout investigation (Appendix A shows the data sites are tracking for FCL).

FCL sites found new ways and adapted existing methods to collect data about father and paternal relative engagement for performance evaluation and continuous quality improvement. ▲

## Participating in the BSC helped sites intentionally focus on data collection about father and paternal relative engagement

As part of the BSC, FCL sites developed 13 metrics aimed to help them understand their agency’s father and paternal relative engagement.<sup>1</sup> They then tried to collect data and report on these metrics.<sup>2</sup> Engaging in this work highlighted the challenges in data collection and the lack of data about father and paternal relative engagement. FCL sites realized that data systems in the child welfare system often could not capture this information. During the BSC, all sites collectively reported data across the 13 metrics, but data was only available to support some metrics at each individual site. No site could provide data on all the metrics. For example, during the BSC, all sites collected data about father engagement in family team meetings, during which families, agency staff, and other partners meet to discuss the safety and well-being of the child. However, only two sites collected data about whether fathers were invited, and just four sites collected data about fathers’ attendance at family team meetings.

### ..... Example metrics from the BSC

- Initial request to identify the father in an investigation
  - Initial identification of the father at point of first contact
  - Notifying the father of new placements
  - Invitation of fathers and paternal relatives to the family team meeting
  - Needs of fathers and paternal relatives met by services in case plans
  - Reunification with fathers or paternal relative ▲
- .....

In this section, we present promising strategies FCL sites used to address data challenges and strategies to collect data that helped sites further assess father and paternal relative engagement.

### **Developing a tracker to assess father engagement**

Staff in the Hartford office of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families who participated in the BSC understood the value of data to assess their father and paternal relative engagement and to identify promising engagement strategies. Without data, staff knew they risked discontinuing a potentially successful strategy or practice. Because data in their information system data was difficult to use, staff developed a SharePoint site with an online form to assess father engagement. A staff member from the data team reviewed case notes to update the online form. Staff at this site can now compare caseworker efforts to engage fathers against a set of criteria regarding father engagement. For example, staff can use the online form to track whether fathers were notified when their child was placed in foster care. This information has helped the Connecticut Department of Children and Families identify strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives.



“We were able to demonstrate impact with the BSC... we were able to truly demonstrate the impact and challenges that let us know as an agency that we need to do better.”

—Site leader

### **Using documentation and reviews to increase engagement efforts**

Staff in Hartford developed a strategy to document caseworkers' efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives before meetings that occur when the agency is considering the removal of a child. This strategy also documents caseworkers' efforts to capture next steps determined during the meeting. Connecticut staff meet with the family to develop a

safety plan in an attempt to prevent removal. The family is encouraged to invite other family members and providers where they access services. These meetings are led by a trained facilitator who works with the caseworker to prepare for the meetings, helps the group develop a safety plan during the meeting, and documents the meeting. Because caseworkers should have already attempted to identify, contact, and assess the father and paternal relatives before the meeting, the facilitator confirms these efforts have been completed and encourages staff to continue when efforts are not yet complete. The facilitator also uses a log to note whether the father was invited to the meeting; whether he attended; whether the father participated in the meeting; and if he does not live in the home, whether it would be viable for the child to live with him. After each meeting, facilitators document information about whether the father is a viable placement option. Office directors and supervisors then review notes from the meetings. As a result of collecting this information and coaching caseworkers about engaging fathers and paternal relatives in these meetings, staff shared that they have seen an increase in the number of fathers attending meetings, and an increase in the number of fathers becoming placement options for their children.

### **Visualizing data to inform decision making**

Since the BSC, Wake County Department of Human Services began using data visualization through Microsoft Power BI. To develop more than 20 data dashboards, Wake staff uploaded data weekly for Child Protective Services and monthly for Permanency Planning and Prevention services from their data systems into Power BI. The dashboards can filter data by time period, regional zone, and supervisor to help Wake County staff use the dashboards to inform decision making. For example, Wake staff use a specific dashboard to review reunification rates with fathers. Staff also pulled and analyzed data directly from the data systems. Wake County is moving towards a single and modern comprehensive case management system to better capture and analyze data in real time.



“We have a number of different databases that are old and archaic and don’t talk to each other. We download data from [our data system] and upload it manually to Power BI [for analysis]... We’ve been able to upload or refresh the data weekly and monthly...”

—Site leader

### **Developing code to create new data reports on father and paternal relative engagement**

Because its data system did not report data about fathers and paternal relatives, Denver Human Services had difficulty reporting on BSC metrics. To address this challenge, Denver staff developed programming code to create and add new reports specifically about father and paternal relative engagement. For example, staff can use the code to analyze data about whether fathers are identified at referral and whether they are identified at assessment. Staff can also analyze whether fathers are invited to family team meetings and whether they attend. Staff developed an accompanying data dictionary for the data gathered and analyzed. Staff used the code to analyze data on father and paternal relative engagement without investing additional time and effort into developing new code. As the agency experienced staff turnover, it used this



“Collecting some of the data... was difficult just because of our system. So it was they had to really kind of figure out how to write different code...to figure out how to how to capture that data...We’re still collecting data, you know, regarding our fatherhood work and paternal relatives.”

—Site leader

code to help new staff adapt to the role, get them up to speed on the data analyzed using the dictionary, and continue tracking father and paternal relative engagement. The code will continue to inform Denver Human Services after its participation in FCL.

After the BSC ended in 2021, sites continued collecting data on metrics that were most meaningful to them and expanded their data collection to include new data elements. Sites shared that they now collect data routinely to provide more information about engagement during the investigation. For example, one site collects data on efforts to locate fathers and paternal relatives, and other sites collect data on initial contact with fathers and paternal relatives and timeliness of initial contact with fathers and paternal relatives. FCL sites also broadened the engagement data they collect beyond reunification with the father and paternal relatives. Some sites now track notification of the father and paternal relative when placement of a child is made, as well as father or paternal relative visits with children in out-of-home care. These data will be used in a forthcoming descriptive evaluation being conducted as part of FCL. Table A.1 provides more information about the key constructs and data that sites are sharing for the descriptive evaluation.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges FCL sites faced during the BSC highlight considerations for developing an agency’s Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System.<sup>3</sup> Addressing these data challenges and implementing new strategies can ultimately improve outcomes for children, shift the agency’s culture around engaging fathers and paternal relatives, and shed light on opportunities to strengthen father and paternal relative engagement. Sites participating in FCL valued father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare cases and invested in strategies to collect and analyze data outside their data systems. The sites also demonstrated that agencies can use their current data systems or create new data collection processes to understand and influence the extent to which fathers and paternal relatives are engaged throughout child welfare involvement.

## References

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is a collaborative learning approach used to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. The BSC included staff with diverse roles in a team-based learning approach; multiple in-person learning sessions and site-specific consultation; emphasis on rapidly using data, feedback, and quality improvement; and a focus on organizational change and sustainable practices (Lang et al. 2015; Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The BSC ended in March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The focus of child welfare information systems is evolving with the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, which was designed to make data collection more useful and flexible for agencies. Before this notice, child welfare data collection focused more on compliance-based reporting in accordance with the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, and the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS). At the time, states were building their SACWIS, and engaging fathers and paternal relatives was not a major focus of the child welfare system. As a result, information systems were not set up to collect detailed information about engaging fathers and paternal relatives. CCWIS aims to help agencies share data between multiple systems and tailor their information technology tools to align more closely to their programs and communities.

## Appendix A

**Table A.1. Availability of program data for the FCL descriptive evaluation, as of June 2022**

Construct	Connecticut Department of Children and Families	Denver Human Services	Los Angeles County Department of Children and Families	Prowers County Department of Human Services	Wake County Department of Human Services
<b>Intake</b>					
Identification of father in initial call or referral		✓		✓	✓
Identification of paternal relatives in initial call or referral				✓	
<b>Investigation</b>					
Efforts to locate fathers and/or paternal relatives					✓
Initial contact with fathers and/or paternal relatives		✓	✓		
Timeliness of initial contact with fathers and/or paternal relatives		✓			
<b>Family team meetings</b>					
Invitation of father		✓			✓
Attendance of father	✓	✓	✓		✓
Determinations made from family team meeting	✓				
<b>Ongoing casework</b>					
Father or paternal relative involvement in case planning	✓		✓		
Contact with father or paternal relative		✓	✓	✓	
Father or paternal relative involvement in home visits				✓	
<b>Services and activities</b>					
Assessment of father and/or paternal relative's needs	✓				
Referrals for father and/or paternal relatives to services	✓	✓		✓	✓
Follow-up on referrals for services				✓	
Participation in fatherhood classes or groups				✓	
Completion of fatherhood classes or groups			✓		✓
Staff and/or partner completion of fatherhood-focused training		✓	✓		
<b>Permanency</b>					
Notification of father and/or paternal relative when placement of a child is made	✓				
Placement with father		✓			✓
Placement with paternal relative					✓
Father and/or paternal relative visits with children in out-of-home care	✓	✓			✓
Father and/or paternal relative visits with children in out-of-home care	✓	✓			✓

Note: Checkmarks indicate that the site is collecting that data and has made the data available for the descriptive evaluation.

**Submitted to:**

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Administration for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at [www.acf.hhs.gov/opre](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre).

**Contract Number:**

HHSP2332015000351/HHSP23337025T

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This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Fung, Nickie. “Promising Strategies for Collecting, Analyzing, and Reporting Data on Father and Paternal Relative Engagement in Child Welfare.” OPRE Report #2023-147. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

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