



Beyond Checking the Box: How Participating in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative Supported the Efforts of Five Child Welfare Agencies to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives

August 2023 | OPRE Report #2023-223

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
330 C Street, SW
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Project Officers: Pooja Curtin and Katie Pahigiannis
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Submitted by:

Mathematica
1100 1st Street, NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002-4221
Project Director: Matthew Stagner
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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Overview.....	x
Primary Research Questions.....	x
Purpose.....	x
Key Findings and Highlights.....	x
Methods.....	xi
I. Introduction.....	1
The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC).....	2
Agencies participating in the FCL BSC and descriptive evaluation.....	6
Aims of the descriptive evaluation and research questions.....	8
Roadmap for this report.....	9
II. Child welfare agencies' efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare.....	11
Developing, amplifying, and sustaining strategies to identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives and enhance ongoing services.....	11
Partners in engaging fathers and paternal relatives.....	13
Facilitators and challenges to spreading and sustaining engagement strategies after the FCL BSC.....	15
III. Father and paternal relative engagement in agencies participating in the FCL BSC.....	19
Staff perceptions and observations of changes in father and paternal relative engagement.....	19
Data on engaging fathers and paternal relatives.....	20
Agencies' capacity to collect and use data on father and paternal relative engagement.....	21
IV. Shifts in organizational culture related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives.....	25
Strategies for altering organizational cultures.....	26
Facilitators and challenges for organizational culture change.....	31
Perceptions of organizational culture among fathers, paternal relatives, and the community.....	32
V. Conclusion.....	35

The promise of the BSC framework in child welfare	35
Opportunities for future research	38
Conclusion	38
References.....	41
Appendix A Connecticut Department of Children and Families	A.1
Appendix B Denver Human Services.....	B.1
Appendix C Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services	C.1
Appendix D Prowers County Department of Human Services.....	D.1
Appendix E Wake County Department of Health and Human Services	E.1

Tables

I.1.	Characteristics of agencies participating in the FCL descriptive evaluation.....	2
I.2.	Domains and goals of the Collaborative Change Framework for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare and achieving racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system	5
I.3.	Data sources and methods	9
A.1.	Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC.....	A.6
B.1.	Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC.....	B.6
C.1.	Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC.....	C.6
D.1.	Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC.....	D.6
E.1.	Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC.....	E.5

Figures

I.1.	FCL BSC logic model for father and paternal relative engagement in the child welfare system	4
I.2.	Agencies participating in the FCL BSC and descriptive evaluation.....	6
III.1.	Data shared by sites during the FCL descriptive evaluation, as of March 2023	23
IV.1.	Hartford, Connecticut Child Welfare office mural	27
IV.2.	Wake House fatherhood mural	28

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Overview

Despite research documenting the importance of a father's positive involvement in the life of a child and the family and the benefits of the involvement of extended family members for children's well-being, fathers and paternal relatives have historically not been well engaged in child welfare services. To build the knowledge base for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare, the Administration for Children and Families contracted with Mathematica and the University of Denver (the Mathematica-DU team) to conduct the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project.

As a part of FCL, six teams representing five child welfare agencies received support through a collaborative learning approach called a Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) to develop and test strategies to improve the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare services. This report describes their ongoing work to engage fathers and paternal relatives since the FCL BSC ended in March 2021, and assesses the potential contributions of the FCL BSC to lasting change.

Primary Research Questions

This descriptive evaluation aimed to assess the progress agencies made in supporting father and paternal relative engagement in three outcome domains: (1) organizational cultures and networks; (2) staff skills and attitudes; and (3) documented changes in father and paternal relative engagement outcomes, such as levels of identification, engagement in child welfare activities, and the extent to which their needs are assessed and addressed. The descriptive evaluation also documented potentially promising strategies that agencies developed and continued to use after the conclusion of the FCL BSC.

The evaluation aims are articulated in a set of four research questions.

1. How did implementing the BSC contribute to the launch and potential sustainment of strategies and approaches for engaging fathers and paternal relatives?
2. Are father and paternal relative engagement strategies linked with increased levels of father and paternal relative engagement?
3. To what extent did the BSC facilitate organizational-level or system-level culture shifts for engaging fathers and paternal relatives?
4. Is the BSC a useful and promising tool for addressing the challenges facing child welfare agencies?

Findings related to these research questions are primarily based on the observations and reports of child welfare agency staff. In this report, the research team does not make any statistical inferences or causal claims about the FCL BSC's influence.

Purpose

This descriptive evaluation aims to assess the promise of the BSC framework for addressing challenges in child welfare. The BSC is a collaborative learning approach for addressing high-priority practice challenges, such as father engagement. Over the past two decades, the BSC has been used to address a number of challenges in child welfare.

Key Findings and Highlights

The report shares findings for each of the research questions.

- 1. The FCL BSC helped agencies develop new father and paternal and relative engagement strategies and continue existing efforts.** Despite challenges such as staff turnover and limited staff capacity, child welfare agencies continued to use strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives after the BSC ended.
- 2. Child welfare staff reported that father and paternal relative engagement had improved with their agencies' participation in the FCL BSC.** Program data showed mixed engagement success with room for continued improvement. Overall, it was challenging for agencies to collect and use data to inform their practice and report on improvements.
- 3. Child welfare staff reported that their agencies had become more intentional about working with fathers and paternal relatives.** They reported that active and engaged leaders promoted father and paternal relative engagement. To shift culture, agencies pursued officewide initiatives focused on the importance of fathers and paternal relatives and strategies such as making child welfare offices more welcoming and father-friendly. Community partners acknowledged the agencies' efforts to shift organizational culture. Community partners, agency staff, and fathers and paternal relatives noted room for continued improvement.
- 4. Child welfare agency staff reported that participating in the FCL BSC was a valuable experience.** Participating in the BSC helped child welfare agencies focus on addressing challenges in providing services, identify solutions with support from experts and other agencies, create new partnerships and reinforce existing ones, and lay a foundation for changes in practice and culture.

Methods

As a part of FCL, six teams representing five child welfare agencies participated in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative focused on father and paternal relative engagement between August 2019 and March 2021. During that time, the teams developed and tested strategies to improve the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives. More information about the implementation of the BSC in FCL is in the pilot study report, [A Seat at the Table: Piloting Continuous Learning to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare](#), which includes data collected through June 2020. The pilot study report describes how child welfare agencies engaged in the FCL BSC, what factors influenced their ability to do so, what strategies for change they developed, and which strategies might be sustainable.

This report describes their work to engage fathers and paternal relatives since the FCL BSC ended in March 2021, and assesses the potential contributions of the FCL BSC to lasting change. The Mathematica–DU team conducted three primary data collection activities between April 2021 and March 2023:

- **Site visits** to each agency included interviews with key staff, focus groups with child welfare and partner staff, and focus groups with fathers and paternal relatives who had recently closed child welfare cases.
- **A survey of child welfare caseworkers, their direct supervisors, and partner staff** asked for their perceptions on agency culture related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives in the child welfare system and their support for this engagement.
- **Collection of program data** related to the father and paternal relative outcomes in the FCL BSC logic model (receipt of referrals, extent to which their needs are assessed and addressed, engagement in the child welfare system, and engagement with their children).

I. Introduction

Research has long documented the importance of a father’s positive involvement in the life of a child and the family. (For summaries of the research, see Diniz et al. 2021; Yogman and Eppel 2022, and Saeteurn et al. 2022.) In addition, fathers who are involved with their families tend to fare better in terms of their social and emotional, health and financial status (Karberg et al. 2019; Kotelchuck 2022; Gold and Edin 2023; Islamiah et al. 2022). When child welfare agencies successfully engage fathers in their children’s cases, the agencies create a connection that can improve outcomes for children and families (Casey Family Programs 2019). The involvement of extended family members in children’s lives is also linked with children’s well-being (see, for example, Erola et al. 2018), and with protection from adverse outcomes in child welfare (for example, Corwin et al. 2020). Child welfare agencies that successfully involve paternal relatives in children’s cases increase the number of extended family members who can play a positive role in the lives of those children. Despite research describing the benefits of fathers’ involvement for children, families, and fathers themselves fathers have historically not been well engaged in child welfare services (Administration for Children and Families 2018).

To build the knowledge base for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare, the Administration for Children and Families contracted with Mathematica and the University of Denver (the Mathematica-DU team) to conduct the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare

(FCL) project (Box 1.1). As a part of FCL, in August 2019, six teams representing five child welfare agencies began participating in a Breakthrough Series Collaborative focused on father and paternal relative engagement (Table I.1). The BSC is a collaborative learning approach used to test and spread potentially promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. This report describes their work to engage fathers and paternal relatives since the FCL BSC ended in March 2021, and assesses the potential contributions of the FCL BSC to lasting change. The design of this descriptive evaluation was covered in an [earlier report](#) (Baumgartner et al. 2022).

Box I.1. The Goals of the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare Project

The Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project had three goals:

1. **Map touchpoints** within a child welfare case where fathers and paternal relatives could be more fully engaged. See [“A Pathway to Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare”](#) for more information.
2. **Use the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC)** methodology to work intensively with child welfare agencies to implement and test father and paternal relative engagement strategies, and study the feasibility and implementation of the BSC. See [“A Seat at the Table”](#) for more information.
3. **Conduct an evaluation of the BSC and engagement strategies and approaches**, which is the focus of this report.

FCL was funded by the Office of Family Assistance and overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, in partnership with the Office of Family Assistance and the Children’s Bureau. All are in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Mathematica and the University of Denver carried out the project. More information about FCL can be found on the project website:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/fathers-and-continuous-learning> ▲

Table I.1 Characteristics of agencies participating in the FCL descriptive evaluation

Agencies	Organization	Location	Setting	Children in out-of-home care ^a
Connecticut DCF (Region 4, including the Hartford and Manchester offices)	State administered	Hartford and Manchester, Connecticut	Urban, suburban	567
Denver Human Services	State supervised, county administered	Denver, Colorado	Urban	550
Los Angeles County DCFS (Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices)	State supervised, county administered	Los Angeles, California	Urban	2,282
Prowers County Department of Human Services	State supervised, county administered	Lamar, Colorado	Rural	4
Wake County Department of Health and Human Services	State supervised, county administered	Raleigh, North Carolina	Urban, suburban	435

^a The number of children in out-of-home care reported by agencies in March and April 2023.

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC)

The BSC originated as a method to support the adoption of evidence-based practices in health care settings (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003; Lang et al. 2015). Its use has since spread to other areas, including child welfare (Box I.2) and early childhood (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003; Daily et al. 2018).

The BSC methodology has five key elements. These elements support the implementation of potentially promising practices in the real-world contexts in which people work in service of an overarching aim (Daily et al. 2018; Lang et al. 2015; Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003).

For FCL, the overarching aim of the BSC was to improve children’s placement stability and permanency outcomes.

Box I.2. Prior use of the BSC in child welfare settings

Since 2000, the BSC has been used to address a wide range of topics in child welfare (Agosti et al. 2021), including adopting trauma-informed practices (Conradi et al. 2011), reducing racial disparities in children’s outcomes (Agosti 2011), improving the timeliness of family reunification (Casey Family Programs 2011), addressing educational challenges for youth in out-of-home care (Casey Family Programs 2009), and creating a sustainable workforce (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute 2023), among others.▲

- **Collaborative Change Framework.** This framework depicts a vision of an optimally operating child welfare system that prioritizes and values fathers and paternal relatives and engages them at every level of the system. The Collaborative Change Framework has three components: (1) key domains for addressing the practice challenge; (2) specific goals within each domain; and (3) a set of change concepts or suggested strategies to address the practice challenge. The Collaborative Change Framework used in the FCL BSC is described in detail in the next section.
- **Improvement teams.** Each participating organization chose an improvement team that represented a cross-section of the organization plus key partners and representatives of the organization’s service population.

- **Faculty coaches.** Individuals with expertise in child welfare, programming for fathers, and racial equity worked directly with teams to support their work and participate in a shared learning environment.
- **Shared learning environment.** The shared learning environment encompassed a set of activities designed to help teams build relationships and learn from each other. This included in-person and virtual learning sessions and calls, affinity group calls facilitated by faculty coaches, and a project website for teams to post and review materials.
- **Model for improvement.** The model for improvement was designed to turn concepts in the Collaborative Change Framework into discrete strategies that teams could test and refine. The teams used the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) framework to test strategies (Box I.3).

Box I.3. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles

The PDSA framework provides an outline for conducting a small test of change to determine whether the change achieves its intended goals. The PDSA framework involves: (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. ▲

The Mathematica-DU team’s support for the FCL BSC began in August 2019 and ended in March 2021. More information about the implementation of the BSC in FCL is in the pilot study report, [A Seat at the Table: Piloting Continuous Learning to Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare](#), which includes data collected through June 2020. The pilot study report describes how child welfare agencies engaged in the FCL BSC, what factors influenced their ability to do so, what strategies for change they developed, and which strategies might be sustainable.

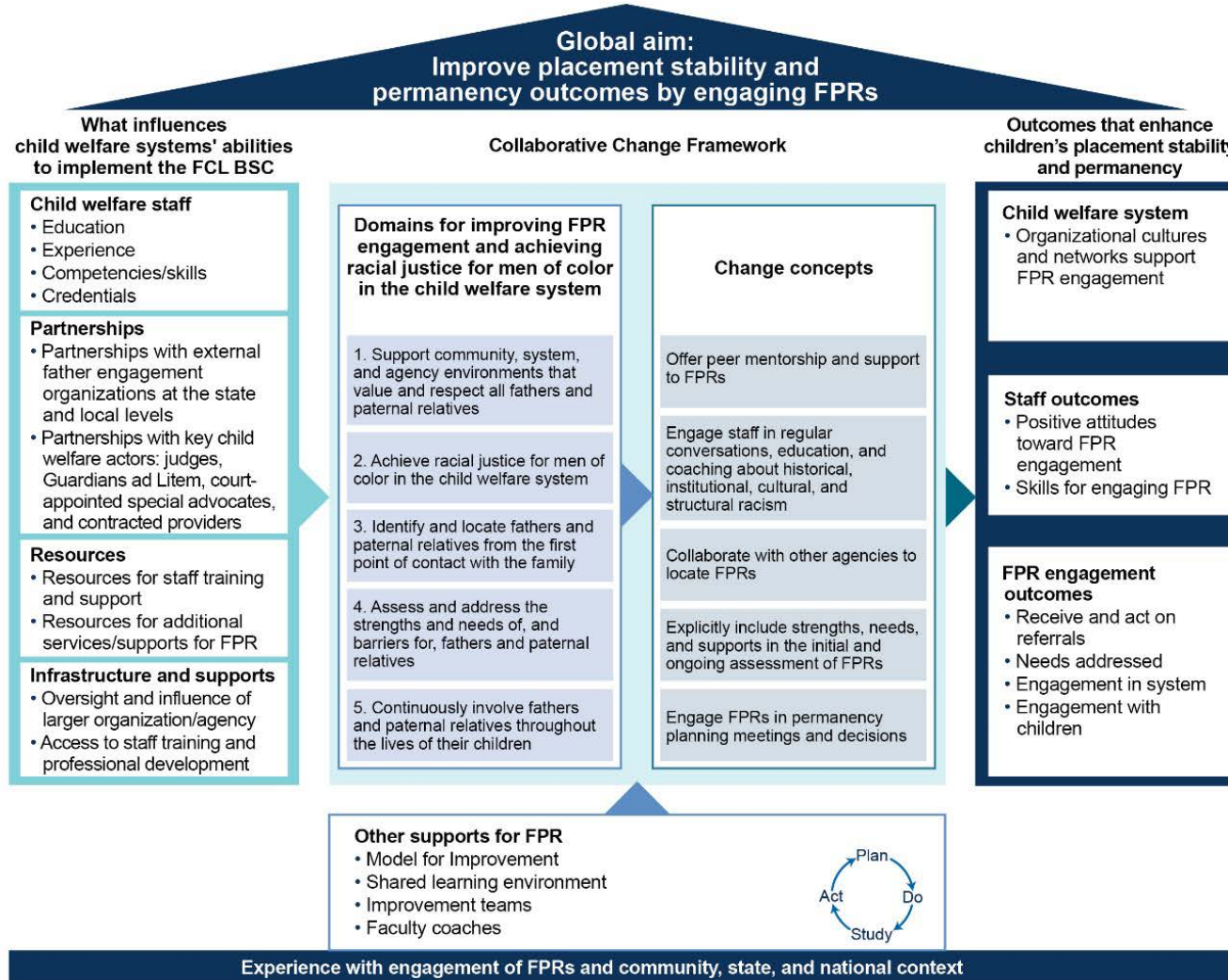
The FCL BSC logic model

The FCL BSC logic model illustrates the components of the FCL BSC and articulates the pathways by which the FCL BSC could lead to improvements in placement stability and permanency outcomes for children (I.1). At the center of the logic model is the Collaborative Change Framework. The column on the far left lists four factors that influence the child welfare system’s ability to implement the FCL BSC: (1) child welfare staff, including caseworkers, managers, and leaders; (2) partnerships in the community and the broader child welfare system; (3) available resources; and (4) infrastructure and supports in the agency that houses child welfare services. Successful implementation of domains and concepts in the Collaborative Change Framework—described in detail below—is theorized to lead to improved outcomes in three areas:

- **System-level outcomes** related to a culture that supports engaging fathers and paternal relatives
- **Staff-level outcomes** related to the motivation and capacity of child welfare staff to engage fathers and paternal relatives
- **Outcomes of fathers and paternal relatives** that reflect how engaged and involved they are with their families and the child welfare system

BSC elements—including the model for improvement, shared learning environment, improvement teams, and faculty coaches—support successful implementation of the Collaborative Change Framework (Table I.2).

Figure I.1. FCL BSC logic model for father and paternal relative engagement in the child welfare system



Note: The FCL BSC logic model was updated in April 2022 to align with the updated Collaborative Change Framework. The domains and change concepts of the updated Collaborative Change Framework appear in the middle of the figure.

FPR = fathers and paternal relatives.

Table I.2. Domains and goals of the Collaborative Change Framework for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare and achieving racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

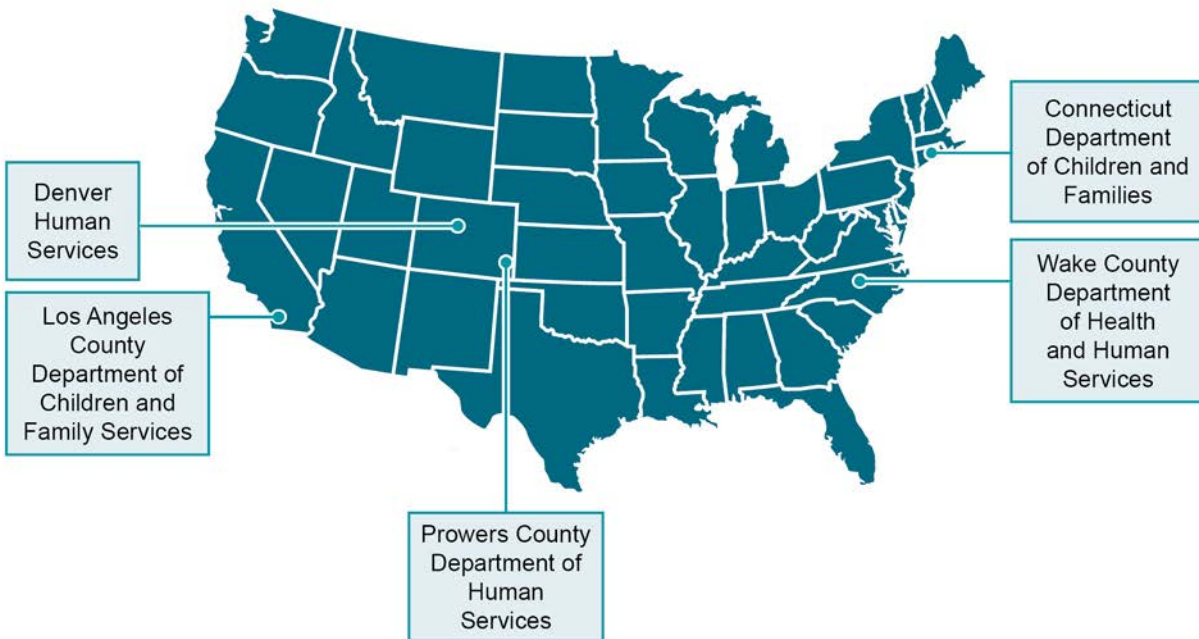
Domain	Goals
Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create environments and climates (in agencies, systems, and communities) that place strong emphasis on the value of fathers and paternal relatives in children’s lives. 2. Develop an atmosphere where the voices and active engagement of fathers and paternal relatives help create an inclusive environment. 3. Actively promote and integrate inclusive practices and the value of fathers and paternal relatives into the community.
Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acknowledge the impacts of historical, institutional, cultural, and structural racism on policy, practice, and decision making. 2. Recognize and honor the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of fathers and paternal relatives, communities, and tribes to drive child welfare decision making. 3. Align with related systems to identify, address, and change institutionally racist policies and practices. 4. Promote personal awareness among staff to acknowledge implicit bias and implement practices that improve father and family outcomes.
Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify fathers and paternal relatives. 2. Actively locate fathers and paternal relatives.
Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of—and barriers for—fathers and paternal relatives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess fathers’ and paternal relatives’ unique and individual strengths and needs. 2. Identify and address barriers to engaging fathers and paternal relatives. 3. Provide individualized plans that meet the unique needs of families and include fathers and paternal relatives.
Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children’s lives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Partner with fathers and paternal relatives to prepare them for active participation in decision making and other activities for their children. 2. Continually engage fathers and paternal relatives and consider them as equally positive options as mothers and maternal relatives for caring for the child. 3. Support healthy and productive relationships with fathers and other caregivers. 4. Support relationships between fathers and paternal relatives and their children by maximizing the types of and opportunities for involvement.

The Collaborative Change Framework in the FCL BSC logic model informed agencies’ development of strategies. The framework presented in Table I.2 reflects updates made by the Mathematica-DU team and improvement teams after the FCL BSC ended in early 2021 (Spielfogel et al. 2023). Central to these revisions is the recognition that engaging fathers and paternal relatives is inextricably tied to addressing racism and promoting racial justice for families of color who are involved with the child welfare system. Through the second domain of the Collaborative Change Framework, the FCL BSC addressed racial justice from the start of the project. But throughout the FCL BSC, improvement teams increasingly recognized and vocalized the direct link between racial justice and father involvement and the Collaborative Change Framework was updated to reflect this. More information about how the Collaborative Change Framework was revised to put more emphasis on promoting racial justice is in the brief, [Designing Systems That Effectively Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives and Promote Racial Justice](#) (Spielfogel et al. 2023).

Agencies participating in the FCL BSC and descriptive evaluation

Six improvement teams representing five child welfare agencies participated in the FCL BSC and descriptive evaluation (I.2). This section gives a brief overview of each agency. Appendices A through E contain more information about the agencies and their father and paternal relative engagement strategies.

Figure I.2. Agencies participating in the FCL BSC and descriptive evaluation



Connecticut Department of Children and Families

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) is a state-administered child welfare agency with six regions. Its Hartford office participated in the FCL BSC. Both the Hartford and Manchester offices, which make up Region 4 in the state, participated in the descriptive evaluation because both offices coordinated and implemented engagement strategies for fathers and paternal relatives and had a joint strategic plan to improve engagement of fathers and paternal relatives. The Manchester office implemented each strategy that the Hartford office developed and tested using PDSA cycles during the FCL BSC. As of April 2023, Region 4 had 567 children in out-of-home care.

Connecticut DCF had a long history of focusing on engaging fathers and paternal relative before participating in the FCL BSC. The state required each regional office to establish a Father Engagement Leadership Team to champion its efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives. Region 4 also operated the Fatherhood Engagement Services program, in which community partners worked with DCF to help fathers understand their rights in the child welfare system, advocate for themselves, and improve their relationships with DCF.

Denver Human Services

The Division of Child Welfare in Denver Human Services is a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare agency in Denver, Colorado. As of March 2023, Denver Human Services had about 550 children in out-of-home care settings.

Before participating in the FCL BSC, Denver Human Services followed state mandates to locate and contact fathers through a family search and engagement team. Denver Human Services offered voluntary group classes to fathers and paternal relatives to help them develop parenting skills. Denver Human Services' parent partner program also connected fathers who were involved with the child welfare system with male mentors who supported the fathers.

Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services

The Los Angeles County DCFS is part of a state-supervised, county-administered system with 20 offices throughout the county. Its Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices participated in the FCL BSC. As of December 2022, the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices served 2,282 children in out-of-home care settings.

Before participating in the FCL BSC, Los Angeles County DCFS had implemented a variety of strategies to locate and engage fathers and paternal relatives, including inviting them to participate in case planning meetings. Los Angeles County DCFS offered optional father engagement trainings for staff. It operated Project Fatherhood, a program that provided therapy, support, and training for fathers. Los Angeles County DCFS connected parents involved with the child welfare system, including fathers, to parents with lived experience navigating the child welfare system.

Prowers County Department of Human Services

The Prowers County Department of Human Services (DHS) is a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare agency serving all of Prowers County, Colorado, a rural county in the southeast part of the state. As of April 2023, four children in the county were in out-of-home care.

Before participating in the FCL BSC, Prowers County DHS operated the Colorado Parent Education Program (CO PEP), which provided services and support for noncustodial parents to help them pay child support and reengage with their children. Prowers County DHS leveraged its community connections to identify fathers and relatives to engage in cases. The department also offered fatherhood classes using the Nurturing Parenting and Love and Logic curricula at the agency and at alternative locations, such as the county jail and the community.

Wake County Department of Health and Human Services

Wake County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is a state-supervised, county-administered system serving the North Carolina state capitol of Raleigh and the surrounding county. As of March 2023, Wake County had 435 youth in out-of-home care.

Before participating in the FCL BSC, Wake County DHHS emphasized engaging fathers and paternal relatives in case practice as the result of a Performance Improvement Plan that began in 2015. Wake County DHHS had a father engagement specialist and father engagement unit working with fathers to provide supervision and advocacy services. Its parent education division provided fatherhood services and training for staff. The child welfare division within Wake County DHHS also had a long-standing

partnership with the Wake County DHHS child support division to locate and share information about fathers. Wake County DHHS also connected fathers to fatherhood engagement coaches—agency staff who provided coaching, facilitated support groups, and connected fathers to resources.

Aims of the descriptive evaluation and research questions

This descriptive evaluation aimed to assess the progress agencies made in achieving the outcomes in the FCL logic model. It did this by documenting potentially promising strategies that agencies developed and continued to use after the conclusion of the FCL BSC. It examined (1) agency staff members' perceptions of how the FCL BSC influenced the sustainment and spread of potentially promising strategies and the influence of participation in the FCL BSC on organizational culture and (2) outcomes related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives. This study report shares the resulting insights on the promise of the BSC as a continuous quality improvement framework for addressing challenges in child welfare system.

The evaluation aims were articulated in a set of four research questions (Box I.4). It is important to note that the insights related to these research questions were primarily based on the observations and reports of child welfare agency staff. In this report, the Mathematica–DU team does not make any statistical inferences or causal claims about the FCL BSC's influence.

Box I.4. Research questions in the FCL descriptive evaluation

1. How did implementing the BSC contribute to the launch and potential sustainment of strategies and approaches for engaging fathers and paternal relatives?
2. Are father and paternal relative engagement strategies linked with increased levels of father and paternal relative engagement?
3. To what extent did the BSC facilitate organizational-level or system-level culture shifts for engaging fathers and paternal relatives?
4. Is the BSC a useful and promising tool for addressing the challenges facing child welfare agencies?▲

To answer these questions, the Mathematica–DU team conducted three primary data collection activities (Table I.3):

1. **Site visits to each agency** that included interviews with key staff, focus groups with child welfare and partner staff, and focus groups with fathers and paternal relatives who had recently closed child welfare cases
2. **A survey of child welfare caseworkers, their direct supervisors, and partner staff** asking for their perceptions on agency culture related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives in the child welfare system and their support for this engagement
3. **Collection of program data** related to the father and paternal relative outcomes in the FCL BSC logic model (receipt of referrals, extent to which their needs are assessed and addressed, engagement in the child welfare system, and engagement with their children)

Table I.3. Data sources and methods

Data source	Methods for collection	Data collection period
Qualitative data from site visits		
Interviews with key staff	Semi-structured interviews conducted during in-person site visits and virtually after the visit	August 2022–October 2022
Focus groups with child welfare and partner staff	Semi-structured focus groups with staff, conducted during in-person site visits	August 2022–October 2022
Focus groups with fathers and paternal relatives	Semi-structured focus groups with fathers and paternal relatives with recently closed cases, conducted during in-person site visits	August 2022–October 2022
Quantitative data		
Survey data	A survey asking staff to assess the child welfare agency’s organizational culture and their own practices related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives. Respondents completed this survey twice.	February 2022 and February 2023
Program data	Data and reports related to father and paternal engagement, including data from state systems, case review summaries, and reports collected outside of the state data system. The agencies differed in their capacity to collect and share data and the measures and indicators they reported for the study varied.	April 2021–March 2023

Roadmap for this report

This report is organized around the study research questions. It shares findings that synthesize examples and common themes from multiple agencies. The chapters are not intended to provide comprehensive descriptions of each agency’s activities during or after the FCL BSC.

- Chapter II addresses the first research question, describing how the FCL BSC contributed to the launch, sustainment, and spread of engagement strategies.
- Chapter III explores how the agencies’ strategies and approaches for engaging fathers and paternal relatives may have contributed to changes in engagement outcomes.
- Chapter IV describes the organizational-level or system-level culture shifts observed by site staff.
- We conclude in Chapter V by addressing the fourth and final research question about the feasibility and usefulness of a BSC as a tool for addressing challenges facing child welfare agencies. We do this by synthesizing findings and insights from the first three research questions. Chapter V also offers potential next steps and opportunities for future research.
- Appendices A through E are profiles of each of the sites that participated in FCL. They describe the strategies sites continued to implement after the FCL BSC.

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II. Child welfare agencies' efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare

Agencies participating in the FCL BSC developed strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives in their families' child welfare cases. The strategies aligned with one or more domains in the Collaborative Change Framework:

1. supporting community, system, and agency environments that value and respect fathers and paternal relatives
2. achieving racial justice for men of color in child welfare
3. identifying and locating fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with a family
4. assessing and addressing the strengths and needs of—and barriers for—fathers and paternal relatives
5. continuously involving fathers and paternal relatives throughout the lives of their children.

This chapter documents potentially promising strategies that agencies kept using after the FCL BSC ended in March 2021 to identify fathers and paternal relatives, address their needs, and involve them in the lives of their children (Research Question 1). Strategies designed to support (1) environments that value and respect fathers and paternal relatives and (2) achievement of racial justice for men of color in child welfare are described in Chapter IV because they aimed to address organizational culture. This chapter shares staff perceptions and insights about how participating in the FCL BSC may have influenced the launch and continuation of work to engage fathers and paternal relatives.

Box II.1. Key findings

- Agencies pursued engagement strategies during the FCL BSC that enhanced existing father and paternal relative engagement efforts.
- Agencies developed, amplified, and sustained strategies to improve the identification of fathers early on in their contact with a family.
- Agencies partnered with community organizations, the judicial system, and other public agencies to engage fathers and paternal relatives in the child welfare system, provide services to address their needs, and help fathers be involved in the lives of their children.
- Agency leaders championed the spread and sustainment of strategies in the face of challenges related to staffing, turnover, and longstanding organizational policies and practices.▲

Developing, amplifying, and sustaining strategies to identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives and enhance ongoing services

All of the agencies participating in FCL had worked to engage fathers and paternal relatives before the study, and they used preexisting organizational initiatives as springboards for their work during the BSC. Before the FCL BSC, for example, Connecticut had made engaging fathers and paternal relatives a focus of continuous quality improvement statewide by requiring all of its six regions to have a Father Engagement Leadership Team (FELT). Hartford's improvement team in the FCL BSC included members of the regional FELT. By integrating the FCL BSC with the regional FELT, the Manchester office—which is part of the same region—gained exposure to what Hartford implemented and tested during the FCL BSC. Though the Manchester office was not included in the PDSA cycles Hartford completed, it did implement all of the father engagement strategies Hartford developed. Similarly, at the start of the FCL

BSC, Los Angeles integrated FCL BSC activities and ongoing work to engage fathers with its existing Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity (ERDD) initiative. This decision underscored the link between engaging fathers and paternal relatives and achieving racial justice within the child welfare system. Through the FCL BSC, the agencies pursued strategies that enhanced existing efforts.

Through the FCL BSC, agencies developed, amplified, and sustained strategies to improve the identification of fathers early on in their contact with a family (Box II.2). Prowers County, Denver, and Wake County, for example, provided resources to caseworkers to help them conduct diligent efforts to identify fathers, starting with the questions that hotline staff asked when reports of child abuse or neglect came into the agency. The child welfare division in Wake County also deepened a partnership with the county child support division to increase access to genetic marker testing. Through this strategy, child welfare staff could quickly administer voluntary paternity tests to presumed fathers. Establishing paternity entitled these men to more rights in the system and enabled fathers to take custody of their children before they were placed in foster care. Staff believed genetic marker testing helped more children reunify with their father or a paternal relative.

Father Strong came out of the BSC. It is a collaborative process between community and department. It has given a voice to [the] community. Advocates through Father Strong allow the [community] not to be hushed.

—Community partner, Los Angeles

reach out to a father 30 days before the meeting and meet with him beforehand to explain the administrative case review process. Wake County and Prowers County launched strategies to make a more concerted effort to invite both fathers and father advocates to planning and case review meetings. Father advocates are parent education staff whose role is to help fathers participate in meetings, provide coaching, and connect fathers to community resources. In Los Angeles, staff held meetings called ERDD roundtable discussions to develop a culturally competent approach to working on cases involving Black families when there was a possibility of removal. Community partners with ties to the Black community, called “cultural brokers,” participated in the roundtables. These discussions explicitly included questions about the identity and whereabouts of the father so the group could brainstorm ways to engage and involve him and his relatives. Denver, Los Angeles, and Connecticut also required supervisors and caseworkers to discuss father engagement in every case consultation meeting.

Box II.2. Initial system response

When a report of abuse or neglect is made to a child welfare agency, intake staff determine whether the report merits investigation. If it does, staff collect more information to assess the child’s safety and risk level.

Domain 3 of the Collaborative Change Framework emphasizes identifying and locating fathers in the early stages of a family’s contact with the child welfare agency. Achieving this goal can involve collaborating with other agencies to locate fathers and paternal relatives. ▲

Beyond simply identifying fathers and notifying them that the child welfare agency had opened a case, agencies developed and sustained a number of strategies to support staff in intentionally including fathers as active participants in the activities required of and offered to the family (Box II.3). Connecticut, for example, developed a strategy centered on making sure fathers were invited to upcoming administrative case review meetings and could participate in them. As a part of this strategy, Connecticut caseworkers had to

Box II.3. Ongoing services to families

Throughout their involvement with child welfare, families meet with child welfare staff who identify services they might need, provide input on their case, and review progress toward permanency. Supervisors and the caseworkers they supervise also have regular “case consultations” to review each case on the caseworker’s caseload, take stock of progress, and brainstorm strategies to address challenges caseworkers may encounter in engaging families. Families may also receive referrals to address their needs. Child welfare staff may supervise visits between families and their children and help biological parents attend critical meetings and events with their children.

Domains 4 and 5 of the Collaborative Change Framework articulate the importance of assessing and addressing the strengths and needs of fathers and paternal relatives and continuously involving them throughout the lives of their children. To accomplish this, agencies can explicitly include strengths, needs, and supports in initial and ongoing assessments of fathers and paternal relatives and engage them in permanency planning meetings and decisions. ▲

Partners in engaging fathers and paternal relatives

In the FCL BSC, improvement teams were encouraged to engage system partners to support and spread father and paternal relative engagement practices. The agencies in the FCL BSC worked with community partners, judicial partners, and public agency partners to engage fathers and paternal relatives and provide services to address their needs. For more information, see “[The Power of Partnerships: What Fatherhood Programs Can Learn from Child Welfare](#)” (Cavallo et al. 2023).

Community partners

The FCL BSC helped agencies establish fatherhood services or amplify existing ones to address fathers’ and paternal relatives’ strengths and needs (Box II.4). As part of the strategies Connecticut developed in the FCL BSC, the agency sought to increase referrals to its Fatherhood Engagement Services: child welfare offices contracted with community partners to engage fathers, educate them about the child welfare system, and help them advocate for themselves. When Los Angeles started participating in the FCL BSC, it rebranded its existing Project Fatherhood as the Father Strong initiative. As part of Father Strong, “champions” provided support to fathers and participated in efforts to strengthen agency practices related to father engagement. These champions included agency staff and fathers who had gone through the child welfare system themselves. During the FCL BSC, Denver sought to increase uptake of its fatherhood program. The program included parent support groups and classes for fathers. As part of the program, specialized staff called fatherhood advocates helped fathers access training, work supports, and referrals to external services. The fatherhood program also included special supports to paternal relatives to help them get certified for kin placements.

Box II.4. Community partners in engaging fathers and paternal relatives

Community partners were integral to many agency efforts in the FCL BSC. Three examples follow.

- **Father Engagement Services (FES; Connecticut).** In FES, caseworkers make referrals to community partners who help them engage fathers. Services offered by FES providers include parenting workshops, peer groups, and other wraparound support. The providers also educate fathers about the child welfare system and help fathers advocate for themselves in the system. FES began in Connecticut before the FCL BSC, but providers were involved in the agency's implementation team, provided training to staff, and helped sustain strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives after the FCL BSC ended.
- **Cultural brokers (Los Angeles).** Before FCL, Los Angeles began contracting with partners called cultural brokers to participate in planning meetings that took place when the agency was considering putting a Black child in foster care. The brokers helped the agency identify and connect families to culturally responsive community services. Cultural brokers included faith leaders and other partners with connections to Black communities. These cultural brokers helped the agency consider cultural dimensions of the decision-making process and ensure the decision was in the best interests of the child.
- **Helping fathers access services (Powers County).** Powers County is a small, rural county with few resources. During the FCL BSC, Powers County established a partnership with a community resource center. In this partnership, Powers County refers fathers to the center for assistance applying for services that can help fathers provide for their children, such as the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program. The resource center reviews information it has on file to help Powers County identify and locate fathers of children who have become involved with the agency.▲

Judicial and public agency partners

Engaging fathers and paternal relatives involved educating and collaborating with other elements of the child welfare system (Box II.5). Families in the child welfare system who have children removed from their home participate in court hearings to determine whether the child should be in the court's jurisdiction. These hearings are ongoing for families while their case is open. Child welfare agencies can help families navigate these hearings. Public agencies are also important partners in the child welfare system. Agencies like child support, who often serve the same families as the child welfare agency, helped locate fathers and coordinate their services.

One challenge raised by staff from different agencies was that the child welfare agency was just one part of a broader system that involved a number of public agencies, including the police, courts, and local education agencies. These partner agencies did not all place the same value on engaging fathers and paternal relatives as the agencies participating in FCL did. Outreach to these agencies focused on making the entire child welfare system welcoming to fathers. For example, Powers County and Wake County both strengthened partnerships with guardians ad litem, whose role was to advocate for the child's best interest in court proceedings. Powers County worked with guardians ad litem to reach out to fathers and meet with attorneys to advocate for giving fathers custody of their children when it was appropriate to do so. Los Angeles provided a fatherhood training to judges, the county's legal counsel, and their Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program. The Wake County child welfare division deepened its partnership with the child support division to share information about the identity and whereabouts of fathers. Wake County child support and child welfare also coordinated about individual fathers to ensure that, for example, a father's nonpayment of child support was not used to justify termination of his

parental rights. As a small, rural county, Prowers County staff often communicated across offices about the families their agencies served.

Box II.5. Judicial and public agency partners in engaging fathers and paternal relatives

The court system was a key partner for several agencies in the FCL BSC in helping families navigate the court system and ensuring court hearings and processes valued fathers and the positive role fathers could play in their families.

- **Guardians ad litem and court-appointed special advocates** advocate for the best interests of the child in court proceedings. Prowers County and Wake County intensified relationships with guardians ad litem to help them engage with fathers and advocate for reuniting children with their fathers when appropriate to do so. Los Angeles provided a fatherhood training to court-appointed special advocates.
- **Judges** preside over court proceedings. Denver, Prowers County, and Los Angeles provided information and training and communicated with judges about efforts to engage fathers and help them participate in court proceedings. When they are aware of available services, judges may be more likely to recommend fatherhood services to men so they can be reunited with their children, and the judges are less likely to consider only the mother's perspective in court proceedings.
- **Attorneys** represent the child welfare agency in court proceedings and consult on open child welfare cases. In all FCL agencies, attorneys were important advocates for father engagement efforts.

Families involved with the child welfare agency are often involved with other public agencies. These agencies can help the child welfare agency engage fathers and paternal relatives.

- **Child support (Wake County)**. The FCL BSC helped Wake County deepen a long-standing partnership between the child welfare and child support divisions of the Department of Human Services. Child support helped child welfare identify fathers by reviewing information it had on noncustodial parents and involving the child welfare division in a paternity testing initiative. The child welfare division also coordinated with the child support division about individual fathers to make sure a father's nonpayment of child support was not used to justify termination of his parental rights.
- **Public health (Prowers County)**. As a small, rural county, Prowers County staff spoke in interviews about how they often communicated across agencies to identify and locate fathers and meet families' needs. Prowers County is part of a state-funded collaborative management program called About FACE. Partners in this program, which include the child welfare division of the Department of Human Services, courts, probation, and the public health agency, meet to coordinate services for families involved in more than one agency. An About FACE partner attends relevant case review meetings to ensure that families' and fathers' needs are met, although this strategy was not a part of the FCL BSC.▲

Facilitators and challenges to spreading and sustaining engagement strategies after the FCL BSC

Agencies used the momentum from participating in the FCL BSC to enhance their work to engage fathers and paternal relatives after the FCL BSC ended. Program champions, including child welfare staff and external partners who had been involved in improvement teams during the BSC, continued to push the spread and sustainment of engagement strategies in the face of challenges related to staff turnover, organizational policies, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Facilitators to spreading and sustaining engagement strategies

Staff from all five agencies reported that FCL BSC implementation team members and other agency leadership staff championed the adoption of father and paternal relative engagement strategies. These champions broadcast a consistent message about the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives to staff and provided support to help them engage fathers and paternal relatives in their cases. For example, staff in Connecticut and Denver wrote regular office newsletters that shared office data related to father engagement and strategies and tips about father engagement. Improvement team members in leadership roles, such as the agency director in Prowers County, program managers in Connecticut, and the director of the parent education department in Wake County, encouraged supervisors to discuss father engagement efforts in case conferences so caseworkers heard about the importance of engaging fathers through multiple channels.

To continue providing the fatherhood services they offered during the FCL BSC, both Prowers County and Denver sought to become implementation sites for the state of Colorado's federally funded Fatherhood FIRE grant (Box II.6). Under the grant, Colorado began implementing a statewide fatherhood program that included case management, financial literacy, and domestic violence services. Connecticut refocused its statewide fatherhood engagement effort, modeled after the BSC itself. In this effort, regional FELTs acted as implementation teams, conducted a self-assessment, participated in trainings developed during the FCL BSC, and tested changes using PDSA cycles on their own strategies for engaging fathers and paternal relatives. For more information, see the brief, [A Statewide Approach to Improving Father Engagement in Child Welfare](#) (Baumgartner 2023). The state planned to use this information to develop a statewide father engagement practice guide in 2023. Los Angeles began developing plans to expand Father Strong to other offices in Los Angeles County and provide more funding so offices could recruit more cultural brokers and compensate them for attending more ERDD roundtables.

Staff from all five agencies reported that FCL BSC implementation team members and other agency leadership staff championed the adoption of father and paternal relative engagement strategies. These champions broadcast a consistent message about the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives to staff and provided support to help them engage fathers and paternal relatives in their cases. For example, staff in Connecticut and Denver wrote regular office newsletters that shared office data related to father engagement and strategies and tips about father engagement. Improvement team members in leadership roles, such as the agency director in Prowers County, program managers in Connecticut, and the director of the parent education department in Wake County, encouraged supervisors to discuss father

Box II.6. The Fatherhood FIRE grant program

The Office of Family Assistance in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides Fatherhood FIRE (Family-Focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential) grants to organizations offering fatherhood programs to men with low incomes. Grant recipients provide services that support parenting and co-parenting, help fathers achieve economic security, and build and sustain healthy relationships and marriage.

In September 2020, the Colorado Department of Human Services received a five-year Fatherhood FIRE grant to provide wraparound supports to fathers participating in a variety of human services agencies. In May 2021, Prowers County Department of Human Services and Denver Human Services were selected as two of the seven implementation sites for Colorado's grant. Staff received training on two curricula, Nurturing Fathers and Dads Matter, to provide wraparound services to fathers involved with the child welfare systems in their counties. ▲

engagement efforts in case conferences so caseworkers heard about the importance of engaging fathers through multiple channels.

Challenges to spreading and sustaining engagement strategies

Despite the energy and momentum generated by the FCL BSC, organizational and contextual headwinds influenced the implementation and sustainability of strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives. The primary challenges agency staff cited were related to staffing and turnover. Staff in some agencies had only limited capacity to participate in training opportunities given time constraints. There was a perception among agency staff that some caseworkers resisted engaging fathers because they saw it as extra work that competed with their other job responsibilities. These staff noted that effectively engaging fathers would require them to spend more time doing outreach, conducting visits, and following up. Some staff reported that overwork led to burnout, which could negatively affect work quality.

High turnover at all levels and difficulty hiring replacement staff exacerbated staff capacity issues. When caseworkers left, others had to absorb their caseloads. High turnover also led to increases in case transfers. Regularly being assigned to new workers made it difficult for fathers to establish trusting

relationships with them, and it created more opportunities to lose information about a family.



And, we have been seeing an increase in the participation of dads and paternal relatives. But it's one of those things, I mean you could almost match it exactly to our turnover rate. It's like we saw this increase.... I haven't done the calculation to see if there's a positive correlation, but that's my theory at this point: you're seeing these natural ebbs and flows with the staffing issues.

—Manager, Wake County

Agencies were actively trying to hire qualified staff with priority characteristics, such as men of color and Spanish speakers, to fill vacant roles but these candidates were hard to find.

Some agencies reported that state or local policies and contracts created obstacles to implementing and sustaining work to engage fathers and paternal relatives efforts, but they developed workarounds. Los Angeles and Denver established work groups to identify ways to infuse this engagement into agency policy. As a result of its work group, Los Angeles created a [new policy](#) clarifying that the agency could release a child into a non-offending father's care if

they deemed him appropriate. Connecticut became more aggressive in giving waivers to kinship care licensing requirements that made it difficult for many paternal relatives—especially ones with lower incomes—to be certified to take in children they were related to. Many forms and processes that Wake County and Denver used were required by their respective state agencies, which limited their ability to change them. Agency leaders, however, were able to develop guidance for caseworkers that defined what counted as “diligent” efforts to engage fathers.

Disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 disrupted the operations of child welfare agencies and the implementation of the FCL BSC. These ongoing disruptions affected the sustainability of some strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives. For more information on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the agencies participating in the FCL BSC, see [Opening Up Possibilities: Father Engagement Lessons During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency](#) (Abendroth et al. 2021).

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Teleworking lightened some of the load for workers. [The] con was the face-to-face visits not occurring, and not being able to see the child in the home. [COVID-19] allowed us to communicate differently with families and coworkers.

—Caseworker, Connecticut

Moving to virtual services presented both opportunities and challenges. Although technology enabled caseworkers to meet virtually with fathers and potentially make it easier for them to participate, it also made it harder for caseworkers to observe children in their homes. Some agency leaders also said it was harder to share messages about the importance of engaging fathers or for staff to collaborate and problem-solve about challenging cases when they were not in an office. The pandemic also directly affected some engagement efforts—particularly those involving in-person services. For example, Connecticut planned to survey fathers for their feedback about supervised visits, but when the visits were stopped, this was not possible. As of fall 2022, Connecticut had no plans to survey fathers because staff turnover had limited its capacity.

III. Father and paternal relative engagement in agencies participating in the FCL BSC

The FCL BSC logic model suggests that engagement strategies aligned with the Collaborative Change Framework should help fathers and paternal relatives:

- Receive and act on referrals to services that address their needs
- Have their needs addressed so that they can play a positive role in the lives of their children
- Engage in the child welfare system so that they can be involved in decisions related to their families
- Engage with their children.

This chapter shares findings about whether father and paternal relative engagement changed during the implementation of engagement strategies (Research Question 2). At the end of the chapter, we share findings related to the agencies' data collection and use.

Box III.1. Key findings

- Staff reported in interviews that father and paternal relative engagement had improved with their agencies' participation in the FCL BSC.
 - Program data submitted to the Mathematica-DU team showed that agencies experienced some mixed success in engaging fathers and paternal relatives but had room for continued improvement.
 - Overall, it was challenging for agencies to collect and use data, both to inform their practice and report on improvements. ▲
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Staff perceptions and observations of changes in father and paternal relative engagement

Agency staff thought FCL helped bring about meaningful changes in child welfare practice. Staff and community partners in Wake County and Los Angeles, for example, reported that caseworkers were making more diligent efforts to locate fathers and including them in different stages of the child welfare process. Los Angeles, Prowers County, and Denver staff noted that caseworkers were doing a better job of documenting their efforts to locate fathers. Connecticut staff reported since they started collecting information about fathers' participation in meetings to determine whether a child needs to be removed from their home and coaching caseworkers about engaging fathers and paternal relatives in these

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And the good news is that [staff attitudes towards father engagement are] headed in the right direction. The message around is: "Check this box, ask Dad." But my prayer, I guess, is to move that dialogue really more towards, "Your life is of value. Your health matters ... If you are healthy, your children have more [of a] chance to be healthy." We know it's going to take [the staff] longer. It's going to take you more work. It is going to be frustrating ... So we kind of have to move through that [and] it actually benefits our work.

—Specialist, Connecticut

meetings, they had seen an increase in fathers' attendance. Wake County staff reported seeing more fathers involved consistently in their cases and participating in visitations.

Staff also observed changes in some outcomes related to engaging fathers and other paternal relatives. Staff in Wake County, Connecticut, Los Angeles, and Prowers County all reported that they had observed increases in the number of cases in which a child went into the care of their father instead of a foster placement or was able to be reunified with their father. Connecticut staff attributed this change primarily to the requirement that safety assessments be completed on the homes of both parents. Los Angeles staff noted that nearly three-quarters of men who completed the Father Strong program were reunified with their children.

Despite genuine efforts by agency leaders to improve how they worked with fathers and paternal relatives, there was variability in the efforts expended by staff, community partners, and fathers. Some staff in Los Angeles questioned the quality or depth of staff interactions with fathers, and staff in Connecticut echoed this sentiment, wondering how often staff were "checking the box" on father engagement. Some agency staff in Connecticut, Prowers County, Wake County, and Los Angeles also reported that fathers felt valued, and that more fathers were participating in fatherhood services and finding them beneficial. However, some community partners and fathers in these jurisdictions disagreed with this assessment. For example, in Los Angeles, fathers reported that peer groups were the only positive aspect of their interactions with the child welfare system.

Data on engaging fathers and paternal relatives

As part of the model for improvement in the FCL BSC, child welfare agencies collected and reported on a set of metrics to track and assess their progress in engaging fathers and paternal relatives. As a part of the descriptive evaluation, the Mathematica-DU team asked agencies to continue reporting data they had available on father and paternal relative engagement to understand their progress in achieving outcomes in the FCL BSC logic model. Agencies encountered a number of challenges to tracking and using data (Box III.2).

The bulleted list below summarizes agency performance related to father and paternal relative engagement based on agencies' submission of available data to the Mathematica-DU team. It is important to note that the data discussed below are not comparable across agencies. Agencies tracked different metrics and were able to provide data for different time periods. The size of the agencies also varied widely. Some, like Prowers County, worked with fewer than ten fathers each month, whereas others worked with dozens. Generally, trends in these numbers were flat, with no appreciable increase or decrease in measures of engagement during the study period.

Box III.2. Challenges in interpreting data on father and paternal relative engagement strategies

A few confounding factors made it difficult for agencies to track and understand clear trends in program data. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, affected caseloads because families had fewer contacts with institutions like schools that would be mandated to report possible abuse or neglect. With fewer cases, small changes from month to month in the raw numbers of fathers who attended a case review, could, for example, result in large swings in office averages. The pandemic also affected the availability of services, both by making virtual meetings and visits more possible, but also because it reduced access to services that would otherwise be in person, like parent-child visitation. Increased staff turnover, as noted, made it harder for some staff to dedicate time and attention to engaging fathers and paternal relatives.▲

- **Identifying fathers.** Three agencies tracked how often fathers are identified during the initial report to the agency. At one agency where staff are required to ask about the father in that report, an intake worker asked about the identity of the father in about 74 percent of the initial reports between April 2021 and March 2022. In another agency, between May 2021 and February 2023, the father was identified during the initial report 92 percent of the time. In the third, between April 2021 and March 2023, the father was identified by the end of the investigation period in about 78 percent of cases.
- **Continuously involving fathers in child welfare activities.** Four agencies tracked fathers' participation in important meetings, such as case reviews and case planning meetings. For all four agencies, participation rates ranged from about 30 percent of meetings to about 55 percent of meetings during the date ranges the Mathematica–DU team reviewed.¹ One agency reported that when a child was placed in foster care between May 2021 and March 2023, fathers were notified about 40 percent of the time. About 23 percent of the time, the father could not be notified because he was deceased or not able to be identified or located. Agency staff were unable to notify fathers in the remainder of cases.
- **Assessing and addressing fathers' needs.** One agency reported that between April 2021 and March 2023, about 80 percent of reviewed cases rated fathers' referrals to services as a "strength," meaning that fathers had received referrals to services that could meet their needs. Another agency reported that fathers received referrals for services in almost all cases opened during a given month between May 2021 and February 2023.
- **Permanency outcomes.** One agency tracked how often child welfare staff recommended that a child at risk of removal from their home be placed in their nonresident father's care. Between April 2021 and March 2023, the agency held about 42 meetings per month to make removal determinations—each focusing on one case—and recommended a child be placed in their father's care about 5 times per month. Another agency reported that, between April 2021 and March 2023, about fifteen children achieved permanency per month. On average, about one of these children reunified with their father.

Agencies' capacity to collect and use data on father and paternal relative engagement

Historically, child welfare data systems have not been set up to measure 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). During the FCL BSC and the descriptive evaluation, collecting and reporting metrics proved challenging for child welfare staff to access and use (Fung et al. 2021). Across agencies' respective data systems, most information related to contacts with fathers was captured qualitatively in case notes. Staff shared that case notes were time-consuming to enter into data systems. Extracting the data was also a time-consuming, manual process.

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We have a number of different databases that we use. They are old, archaic systems that don't talk to each other. So, we download data ... and upload it manually into [the agency's data visualization tool]. There's no live connection.

—Manager, Wake County

Overall, agency staff believed that participating in the FCL BSC had helped them focus on more routine collection and review of data related to father and paternal relative engagement. Several agencies

¹ One agency reported data between April 2021 and February 2023. Three reported data between April 2021 and March 2023.

developed short-term tools during the BSC that helped them collect and review data outside their data systems (Box III.3). After the BSC ended, however, most agencies stopped tracking engagement metrics because the inadequacy of agencies' data systems and lack of staff capacity. Staff across agencies found it too time-consuming to keep mining qualitative case notes regularly for information about the consistency of contact between caseworkers and fathers. Agencies also struggled with capacity issues. Connecticut and Denver, for example, both lost key data and quality improvement staff shortly after the end of the FCL BSC. Los Angeles had tracking systems related to fathers' involvement in their families' cases, but county offices did not have dedicated staff to run and analyze reports or make sure they consistently tracked efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives.

Box III.3. Tools to track father and paternal relative engagement

During the FCL BSC, agencies developed short-term tools and strategies to assess father and paternal relative engagement. These tools included tracking data outside of their regular data system or automating extraction. For example:

- **Connecticut** developed an online form to record fathers' invitations to and attendance at "considered removal" meetings—meetings with families that occur after a caseworker identifies a safety concern but before a decision is made on whether to remove a child from their home. After each considered removal meeting, meeting facilitators document information that helps determine whether the father's home is a viable placement option. Office directors and supervisors then review notes from the meetings.
- **Wake County** began extracting Child Protective Services and Permanency Planning and Prevention service data on a weekly and monthly basis and using a data visualization tool to create dashboards that supervisors and other staff could use to inform decision making. The data visualization tool included filters for time period, regional zone, and supervisor, so staff could narrow their analysis as needed. The dashboards included information on the number of reunifications with fathers and fathers' attendance in ongoing case planning meetings.
- **Denver** pursued a longer-term strategy to use administrative data by developing programming code to automate the extraction of data from the state database and to produce reports about father and paternal relative engagement. These reports included data on whether and when fathers were identified and whether they were invited to and attended case planning meetings.

The brief "[Promising Strategies for Collecting, Analyzing, and Reporting Data on Father and Paternal Relative Engagement in Child Welfare](#)" (Fung 2023) includes more information about these strategies. ▲

Overall, for each of these four indicators, at least one agency was able to track and report data after the FCL BSC ended: (1) identifying fathers; (2) continuously involving fathers in child welfare activities; (3) meeting and addressing fathers' needs; and (4) permanency outcomes. Some agencies reported multiple metrics for an indicator. For example, Prowers County reported whether fathers were identified in an initial call and whether they were identified during assessment. Two agencies collected metrics related to permanency. One tracked father-child reunifications, and one logged the number of times per month that a child welfare agency staff recommended reunifying a father and child. Only one agency reported collecting any metrics about paternal relatives. III.1 shows the key indicators and metrics that agencies shared data on during the descriptive evaluation.

Figure III.1. Data shared by sites during the FCL descriptive evaluation, as of March 2023

Indicator and Metrics	Number of FCL BSC agencies reporting
Identification of fathers	
Identification of father in initial call or referral	● ● ● ○ ○
Identification of fathers during assessment	● ● ○ ○ ○
Attempts to identify fathers	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Continuous involvement of fathers in child welfare activities	
Attempts to contact fathers	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Successful attempts to contact fathers	● ● ● ○ ○
Engagement of paternal relatives	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Invitation of fathers to case planning, case review, and other important meetings	● ● ○ ○ ○
Attendance of fathers at case planning, case review, and other important meetings	● ● ● ● ○
Notification of fathers when placement decisions are made	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Number, frequency, and/or quality of father-child visits	● ● ○ ○ ○
Continuity of father-child relationship	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Assessing and addressing fathers' needs	
Assessment of fathers' needs	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Referrals to fatherhood services	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Enrollment in fatherhood services	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Attendance in fatherhood services	● ● ○ ○ ○
Contacts with fathers enrolled in fatherhood services	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Completion of fatherhood services	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Permanency outcomes	
Reunification between fathers and children	● ○ ○ ○ ○
Recommendations made to reunify fathers and children	● ○ ○ ○ ○

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IV. Shifts in organizational culture related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives

The FCL BSC logic model suggests that system- and staff-level outcomes must change to engage fathers and paternal relatives more effectively.

- At the system level, organizations and partners in the child welfare system must change negative perceptions in the community and reinforce the importance of father and paternal relative engagement with their staff.
- Within child welfare agencies, staff must have the skills to engage fathers and paternal relatives and the opportunity to do so. They must also recognize the benefits of engaging fathers and paternal relatives for children, fathers, and families.

This chapter explores the progress of participating agencies in making their organizational cultures more welcoming and inclusive to fathers and paternal relatives (Research Question 3).

Box IV.1. Key findings

- Staff reported that their agencies had become more intentional about working with fathers and paternal relatives over the past several years and that staff were beginning to internalize the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives as a regular practice. They believed that active and engaged leaders were the force behind this cultural change.
- Agencies made environmental changes to reinforce positive messages about fathers and paternal relatives with staff, and to publicly signal their desire to be more inclusive and welcoming to fathers.
- Agencies sponsored officewide conversations and training to examine implicit bias, the history of disparate treatment of people of color in child welfare, and steps that agencies could take to achieve racial justice.
- Community partners acknowledged agencies' efforts to change organizational cultures but noted room for continued improvement. In focus groups, most fathers shared examples of what they saw as unjust treatment.▲

Changing an organization's culture is complicated, especially when the change is taking place in the complex historical and political environment that agencies operate in (Khademian 2002). In different ways, the agencies involved in the FCL BSC engaged in multilayered approaches to change key elements of their organizational culture—a culture that was the product of decades of welfare policies whose effects were directed toward separating and penalizing families of color and families with low incomes (Minhoff and Citrin 2022). This work is likely to take more time than the four years between the start of the FCL BSC in 2019 and the end of data collection for the

What we want is a workforce that really cares and understands that kids have better outcomes when their dads are playing the healthiest role [they can]. So we have spent way more time trying to motivate people, helping them understand why it's so important that dads are playing an active role. That's hard to do, and it's soft work.

—Manager, Connecticut

descriptive evaluation in 2023. Experts suggests that in public programs, culture change is an ongoing process with no fixed endpoint (Khademian 2002).

Strategies for altering organizational cultures

Agencies launched a number of strategies during the FCL BSC that were geared toward changing agency culture. These strategies were meant to promote fatherhood, make offices more father-friendly, build staff capacity, and kick-start conversations about the importance of fatherhood and how agencies could work toward achieving racial justice.

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[The] BSC has legitimized [our] efforts. For the department, fatherhood was on the agenda, but now it has been spotlighted.... Regional administrators getting involved is important. [The BSC has] helped [us] move towards equity because fathers are being included.

–Manager, Los Angeles

Supporting environments that value and respect fathers and paternal relatives

Agency staff emphasized the importance of physical reminders that fathers are important. All agencies made environmental changes, such as putting up posters and bulletin boards, to reinforce the positive role fathers could play in their families. In Connecticut, the Hartford office installed a mural on its façade that showed a man of color playing with his daughters (IV.1). Wake County converted a waiting room in its main office to a father-friendly space with couches, books, and parent-child activities readily available. Wake County also painted several murals depicting fathers and men of color on the walls in Wake House, a family visitation center set up to look like a house (IV.2). As of the study site visit in September 2022, Wake County had not been able to use its waiting room after suspending in-person services in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency, but had started serving fathers and their families in Wake House.

In addition to reinforcing positive messages about fathers and paternal relatives with internal staff, environmental change involved demonstrating to the broader community and child welfare system the agency’s desire to be more inclusive and welcoming to fathers. Connecticut and Wake County sponsored public conferences and events promoting fatherhood, continuing efforts that began before the FCL BSC. Prowers launched a social media campaign called #IMADAD in partnership with the Prowers County Youth Initiative. The campaign promoted fathers’ involvement in systems throughout the county, including the schools, correctional system, and courts.

Figure IV.1. Hartford, Connecticut Child Welfare office mural



As a part of these efforts, the FCL BSC pushed agencies to establish or strengthen community partnerships and publicize their efforts to be more welcoming to fathers. In all of the agencies, community partners provided training and support to agency staff to help them overcome community biases. The agencies hoped these partnerships would confer legitimacy on agencies in communities that had a history of being treated unfairly by the child welfare system. Having been given a seat at the table, they vouched for the agency's commitment to improvement.

Box IV.2. Supporting environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

The physical environment of a child welfare office can send a message about the agency's values. Families could interpret a cold, sterile environment, for example, to mean that the child welfare agency was impersonal or unconcerned with families' well-being. Domain 1 of the Collaborative Change Framework is to support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives.

Agencies in the FCL BSC created spaces that were welcoming to fathers. They put up posters and other materials that reinforced positive messages about fatherhood. In addition to welcoming fathers, these environmental changes can remind staff of an agency's values. Environmental changes can also demonstrate what an agency values to the broader community. These could include things like public art and sponsoring community events.

A supportive environment can also be reflected in policies and practices that reinforce the value of fathers and their importance in the lives of their children. Some policy changes that agencies made to remove barriers to engaging fathers and paternal relatives are described in Chapter II. ▀

Figure IV.2. Wake House fatherhood mural



Promoting racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

From the inception of FCL, promoting racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system was a domain of the Collaborative Change Framework. Agencies identified racial justice as a central tenet of improving father and paternal relative engagement. During the early stages of the FCL BSC, improvement teams faced the most challenges developing strategies within this domain (Fung et al. 2021). Following [the murder of George Floyd](#) in the summer of 2020, staff interest in discussing racial justice and disparities in how families of color had been treated in child welfare and other systems grew (Box IV.3). Agencies sought to create a judgment-free zone where staff could discuss these topics openly.

- Wake County launched a Racial Equity Change Team, which hosted monthly conversations with a social work professor and community activist about topics such as disparities in education and how to increase capacity to serve fathers in the community. Agency leaders believed the FCL BSC had “given permission” to the agency to broach these difficult conversations.
- Connecticut began hosting quarterly “café conversations” on topics such as the court system and how workers experience racism when entering affluent neighborhoods. Though this strategy was a part of a statewide continuous quality improvement initiative on racial justice, agency staff talked about how the goals of that initiative overlapped with those of the FCL BSC.
- Denver organized “learning circles” about topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The agency organized the learning circles in different affinity groups. For example, one learning circle group for white women gave them a space to explore their implicit biases together.

- Los Angeles included cultural brokers in ERDD roundtable meetings, as described in Chapter II. These cultural brokers, who had ties to Black communities, helped the agency consider equity in decision making about cases involving Black children, and kept conversations about racial justice front of mind for the agency.

Box IV.3. Achieving racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

Research highlights the child welfare system's disproportionate impact on families of color (Font et al. 2012; Yi et al. 2020) and calls for agencies to address systemic racism (Berkman et al. 2022; Detlaff et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2022). Some research suggests that fathers of colors in child welfare may be uniquely disadvantaged (Arroyo et al. 2019). Domain 2 of the Collaborative Change Framework specifically focused on achieving racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system. One way that agencies could pursue this goal is by engaging staff in regular conversations, education, and coaching about historical, institutional, cultural, and structural racism. More information is available in [Using a Change Framework to Design Systems that Effectively Engage Fathers and Paternal Relatives and Promote Racial Justice](#) (Spielfogel et al. 2023).▲

Addressing staff knowledge, skills, and buy-in

Changing culture required caseworkers and other child welfare staff to adjust long-standing mindsets about fathers and paternal relatives. One perspective that agency staff said they had to confront was the idea that fathers were less capable of caring for their children than mothers were. For example, Connecticut office leaders stressed that caseworkers should distinguish between safety factors and risks when considering whether to put a child in the care of their father. Safety factors, such as a current domestic violence issue, might lead a caseworker to recommend against having the child live with their father, whereas a risk like a past arrest for drug possession should not be used to justify putting a child in foster care. Los Angeles staff connected this perspective to antiracist work and had open office discussions to communicate to staff that men with criminal records (and were disproportionately men of color in both participating Los Angeles child welfare offices) were capable of parenting appropriately. Prowers County leaders described efforts to change the term “visitation plan” to “parenting plan” to emphasize fathers’ roles as parents, rather than just visitors or babysitters who were not consistently involved in their children’s lives.

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[If] safety is “take your kid out of the home, put him in a foster care,” there's a false sense of safety there.... [But] that kid deserves to wake up tomorrow morning to the sights and smells of his own home and family with him, with his blanket and his stuffed animal there. I don't see it as a continuum. I see it as opposite ends.... And so the art for us is striking that balance.... We have to ensure our kids are safe. But we can't just overdo the safety aspect because in my mind, the hardest thing that a kid will ever have to overcome in life is separation from his family.

—Manager, Connecticut

Another common perception that child welfare leaders said needed countering was that engaging fathers was “extra work” that distracted caseworkers from the core priority of child safety. Although several agency leaders acknowledged that reaching out to fathers and including them involved more effort than not doing so, they sought to convince staff that engaging fathers was part and parcel of ensuring child safety because children were better off with family members than they were in foster care. In Los

Angeles, for example, staff said that when they talked to fathers they focused on the “benefits to children” of their involvement, not the benefits to the father or the challenges of navigating the parents’ relationship. In Connecticut and Prowers County, changing this perspective meant that caseworkers and other staff had to treat every family with dignity and look at their unique circumstances when assessing a case.

To build staff’s knowledge and their skills for working with fathers, agencies provided numerous opportunities for caseworkers to learn about and discuss the importance of engaging and involving fathers, and how to overcome obstacles to engagement. Los Angeles mandated a training for all staff that included modeling techniques to engage fathers. Wake County provided local training on racial equity and the county’s father engagement program. This training included hearing from fathers who had been involved with child welfare in the past. In Connecticut, a community partner delivered a training on “50 barriers and 50 solutions to engaging fathers.” After the FCL BSC, the partner delivered the training to staff in every region of the state. Denver trained staff on several curricula for fathers, such as the Caring Dads curriculum, a group-based intervention for men who have abused or neglected their children. All staff in Denver also received training on diversity, equity, and inclusion. After participating, staff discussed the content of the training in learning circles.

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In working with our workers, [we are] helping them start to change some of that language, like not calling dads “placement” or “child care,” [to be] really being inclusive in that dad is a parent and not a placement.

–Supervisor, Denver

case. Other staff said they had become more aware of the language they used and biases that may be playing into their thinking. For example, staff from different agencies said they had stopped using the phrase “deadbeat dad.” Some agencies as a whole began moving away from using the term “placement” when a child went to live with their father, since that term refers to a temporary living situation when a child cannot safely remain in their home. Using this term implied that a father’s care was temporary and lesser than a mother’s. Staff at multiple agencies also spoke about shifting away from accepting without verification a mother’s perspective of the father’s suitability to care for a child or report of the father’s involvement in the child’s life as the truth.

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Now, conversations [about case reviews] go beyond [the mother not sharing information about the child’s father, to] discuss the value of father’s involvement and benefit to children. [The conversations] take the focus off the relationship between the parents and ... on the benefit to the children.

–Community partner, Los Angeles

In interviews, many staff spoke about greater intention in working with fathers and paternal relatives—of moving beyond “checking the box” to internalize the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives as part of their regular practice. Some caseworkers said that, for example, they never tried to exclude fathers, but did not make special efforts to engage fathers who were hard to reach or reacted with anger when they learned they were involved with a child welfare

Facilitators and challenges for organizational culture change

Agency staff reported that participating in the FCL BSC helped keep attention and focus on father engagement as a key priority. They hoped that with continued focus over time, staff would adopt father and paternal relative engagement strategies as normal practice instead of part of a special initiative. As of summer 2022, agency staff acknowledged that change was slow, and there was room for improvement. Across agencies, the advocacy of leaders and staffing changes emerged as important facilitators and challenges for changing organizational culture.



Being involved in the BSC has really changed my focus a little bit more and pushed [father engagement] even more, and really making sure those efforts are being done.

—Supervisor, Connecticut

Leadership and champions

Staff at all agencies cited the importance of leadership and “champions”—advocates inside and outside of the agencies—in continuing to promote a culture that emphasized father and paternal relative engagement. Leaders stressed engagement through messages to all staff, directing supervisors to talk about it in case conferences and promoting conversations about fathers and fatherhood. For example, in Connecticut and Wake County, managers encouraged supervisors to talk to caseworkers about their own relationships with their fathers to unpack internal biases they may have about the role of fathers.



Supervisors have to be all in. Leadership has to lead by example.

—Agency leader, Los Angeles

Supervisors also encouraged caseworkers to attend trainings and community events about fathers. Caseworkers who had worked in other jurisdictions reported that in their current roles, they had more encouragement to engage fathers and paternal relatives, and that it was more of a focus than it was in their previous jurisdictions.

Staffing changes and turnover

Staffing changes were both a challenge and facilitator to culture change. The turnover that made implementing engagement strategies difficult also made it hard for leaders to instill a father-friendly mindset in some staff. When staff were feeling time pressures, such as when they had to absorb the cases of a staff member who had left, some had to miss voluntary trainings or tended to fall back on what they knew instead of doing something new.

Turnover also meant that new staff—who were inexperienced but open to father engagement—were entering the organization. On the one hand, new staff needed to be trained in the services available to fathers and how they could access them. Community partners and fathers noted that new caseworkers tended to “follow the script” and didn’t have the confidence or experience to adapt to meet fathers where they were. On the other hand, some agency leaders noticed a generational shift: in their eyes, more recently educated caseworkers tended to be more open to father engagement strategies. Their social work programs had been updated with more information about the importance of fathers. In hiring interviews, leaders in Connecticut and Wake County asked specific questions about candidates’ attitudes and beliefs about engaging men. Agency staff also reported that over time, the staff composition had come to look more like the families they served. In Prowers County, for example, all four of the agency’s caseworkers

were male as of the summer of 2022—a rarity in a profession that has historically been dominated by women. Denver and Los Angeles staff also intensified efforts to hire more male caseworkers.

Perceptions of organizational culture among fathers, paternal relatives, and the community

In interviews, community partners acknowledged the child welfare agencies' efforts to become more welcoming and inclusive for fathers and men of color, but they said the pace of change was slow. Community partners noted the sincere efforts of agency leadership, and observed changes in working with individual caseworkers, but they had some mixed experiences. For example, one community partner in Connecticut noticed that the referrals they received for fatherhood services were more complete than they had been in the past, but often listed far more needs than strengths for fathers. This observation indicated to the community partner that caseworkers were still taking a deficit-based approach to fathers.



To me, social work is jazz. I'm going to flow with the what the needs and wants [are] of the people that I'm serving [Some child welfare staff] don't play jazz. They're just going to play the notes. But we have to make sure that we have all the notes in the world. The notes have to be incorporated in the work, and they have to be held accountable to those notes.

—Community partner, Connecticut

Community partners pointed out that the agencies were one part of a broader system involving police, courts, and other agencies that were slow to include fathers. In Los Angeles and Connecticut, for example, the focus on processing cases quickly sometimes meant that fathers didn't have time to complete services that could help them care for their child, like a parenting program, before the agency terminated their parental rights. Community partners in Wake County pointed to the buy-in of the courts as positive, but noted that other agencies were not as committed to engaging fathers. Community partners in Prowers County mentioned that despite increased support for fathers in court, fatherhood programming couldn't be court mandated, and uptake of services was slow.



So even if you make some headway here in child welfare, there's still going to [be] poor outcomes and inequitable issues in the other systems that [will] be impacting what happens with [fathers] in child welfare ... It's very piecemeal. It's very fragmented. And, what I try to do is applaud whatever little steps are being made.

—Community partner, Wake County

In focus groups, men with a recently closed child welfare case shared what they interpreted as unjust treatment. Despite the agencies' efforts, the fathers' responses underscored the tall mountain agencies had to climb to earn the trust of the communities they served.

- In Connecticut, most of the fathers in the focus group had either been the ones to call child welfare or had been involved from the beginning because the case opened at the child's birth. They believed their family was involved in the system because of something the mothers of their children had done—not something they did. They believed the system's default was not to trust their ability to parent, and thought it was unjust that they had to attend parenting classes or other services before they could gain custody of their child. Most fathers in the group said they had self-advocated but had not received much help from their caseworkers. Some fathers also believed their caseworkers could not empathize with them because they had different life experiences.

- In Wake County, fathers said they did not trust the system and were suspicious of anyone who worked for the child welfare agency, even though they had father advocates who worked with them, and they had all participated in a dads' group. They thought it was unfair that they had to participate in and pay for parenting and anger management classes when they believed it was the actions of the mother that got the family involved with the system. Some parents of child welfare-involved fathers, on the other hand, shared that their sons had failed to make choices that would have made it possible for the child welfare agency to work with them and helped them get more involved with their children.
- In Los Angeles, one man believed his ethnicity was a trigger for caseworkers in a jurisdiction that received national attention for failing to keep a child safe from a man of the same ethnicity. Another man of color—after he and the other men in the group had pointed out that every caseworker they have had was a woman—believed that most workers saw them through the lens of their own experience as single mothers who had negative personal histories with men and with their own fathers.



The first [fatherhood] class was mandated ... I've taken the class two times since. I've only been a parent for about four years, so everything that helps me out is tremendous.

—Father, Prowers County

Across the focus groups, some fathers and paternal relatives spoke positively about specific services or workers, such as fatherhood training in Prowers County, peer groups in Los Angeles, Father Engagement Services in Connecticut, and a kinship care peer group in Wake County. One father in Prowers County, for example, had initially resisted participating in a parenting program, but found that his experience had ended up being worthwhile.

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V. Conclusion

In assessing how participating in the FCL BSC may have helped child welfare agencies improve their engagement of fathers and paternal relatives, this descriptive evaluation has also aimed to understand how useful the BSC can be as a tool for addressing various challenges facing child welfare agencies.

This chapter begins by addressing the promise of the BSC as a tool for addressing challenges facing child welfare agencies (Research Question 4). We synthesize findings covered in the three previous chapters that relate to the first three research questions. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

Box V.1. Key findings

- The FCL BSC appears to have amplified and enhanced what the participating agencies were already doing to engage fathers and paternal relatives. The FCL BSC helped leaders preserve engagement as an agency priority.
- After the BSC ended, agencies continued to use strategies designed to (1) improve processes for identifying fathers and their relatives; (2) provide more guidance to caseworkers; (3) standardize communication with fathers; (4) make fathers feel more welcomed and included; and (5) increase access to services to enable fathers to play a positive role in their children's lives.
- Staff acknowledged that changing organizational culture was a difficult and long-range goal. They were beginning to see changes in their organizational culture, though there was still room for improvement. From their perspectives, participating in the FCL BSC had given their work to engage fathers legitimacy and momentum, and had given teams tools, such as the PDSA cycle, to continue making progress after the end of the formal BSC.
- Though hampered by disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, the agencies continued to press forward in their efforts to engage fathers.▲

The promise of the BSC framework in child welfare

After the FCL BSC ended, agencies continued to practice strategies to improve their engagement of fathers and paternal relatives, including those that aimed to:

- improve processes for identifying fathers and their relatives
- provide more guidance to caseworkers
- standardize communication with fathers
- make fathers feel more welcomed and included; and
- increase access to services to enable fathers to play a positive role in their children's lives.



The challenge of fatherhood engagement is structural, and the BSC helped us crack the structure.

—Deputy director, Los Angeles

To minimize bureaucratic obstacles, they established policies and practices such as kinship care licensing requirements and state-required forms. Agencies also forged or reinforced partnerships in their communities, including with court systems, father-focused service agencies, and other related agencies, like child support.

Agency staff and community partners alike reported that the organizational culture around fathers and paternal relatives had begun to shift, but also emphasized that it was a slow process. Staff reported that caseworkers were more intentional about engaging fathers. Across agencies, there were mixed feelings: some staff spoke about the benefits of father engagement for children, whereas other staff reported that their colleagues went through the motions, “checking the box” on father engagement because it was required. Community partners echoed this impression, reporting on the sincere efforts of agency leadership but mixed interactions among caseworkers. Some of the fathers who participated in focus groups appreciated elements of the agency’s efforts, like parenting classes, yet they still reported what they saw as unjust treatment.



[Before the BSC, improving a process would have been] a whole long thing, and it took a lot of people, and it was a lot of process. [Since participating the BSC,] we're like, let's do this. PDSA what? Let's just bring in the people that we need to bring in to talk about this. Let's just do it. And it doesn't have to be this big thing, right?

–Manager, Denver

office-level data and organizing events, such as having speakers give presentations to staff. Staff in Connecticut shared that the FCL BSC had taught them a “PDSA mindset” of addressing a challenge by starting with one small piece. Leaders believed this approach made a big challenge more manageable. Leaders in Denver and Los Angeles echoed this sentiment. According to Denver leaders, the FCL BSC encouraged more creative thinking that empowered staff to try out new ways to approaching agency challenges. Staff in Prowers County shared that they had gained capacity to use data for decision making. Despite challenges with their data systems, agencies said they developed workarounds and methods for collecting useful data.

Agency staff reported that after participating in the BSC, they saw positive movement in outcomes as a result of implementing strategies and keeping an emphasis on engaging fathers. For example, staff noted better attendance at ongoing case planning and review meetings, more reunifications between fathers and children, and participation in fatherhood services. The limited utility of agency case management systems for reporting and using data made it difficult to assess trends in father engagement outcomes.



Prior to [participating in the FCL BSC], we were not tracking [father engagement work], and so we were not able to tell our story. And ... once we did the BSC, we were able to truly tell the story. But we were [also] able to demonstrate the challenges, and that let us know as a division and as a state, that we need to do better. And so the BSC helped us to tell the story [in a way that allowed] individuals to have buy-in.

–Manager, Wake County

Confounding external factors like disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic also made it difficult to determine whether the strategies agencies developed made any differences in these outcomes.

Contextual factors influencing efforts to strengthen father and paternal relative engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted agencies' work to engage fathers. It caused agencies to shut down most in-person activities in March 2020 while they were in the middle of the FCL BSC. These disruptions put a stop to some father engagement strategies, like those focused on in-person visits, but created other opportunities, such as enabling fathers to join case review meetings virtually. According to some agencies, the inability to come together in an office hampered efforts to promote a cohesive organizational culture around fathers and paternal relatives.

At the same time, staff turnover accelerated as staff decided to retire or change jobs or were reassigned due to falling caseloads. As a result of this turnover, the remaining staff had increasing workloads under conditions that were more stressful than usual. This sometimes made them less likely to embrace father engagement strategies because they often added to their workload. On the other hand, vacancies created opportunities for agencies to hire new staff. According to agency leaders, many of these new staff were more open to father engagement strategies and better reflected the people they served; this included having more male caseworkers.

Although some agencies already had ongoing work related to racial justice and identified it as a priority for engaging fathers and paternal relatives at the start of the BSC, agencies initially struggled to develop strategies to promote racial justice in child welfare (Fung et al. 2021). The response to the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 prompted agencies to have open discussions about racial justice and how child welfare interacted with communities of color, creating an opportunity for culture change. During the FCL BSC, agencies struggled to develop strategies to address racial justice, the second domain of the Collaborative Change Framework (Fung et al. 2021). The discussions about racial justice after the murder of George Floyd reinforced the connections between racial justice and agencies' work to engage fathers and paternal relatives. Agencies explicitly made this connection. Examples were Los Angeles, which housed father engagement efforts in its ERDD advisory board, and Wake County, which launched Racial Equity Change Team discussion groups as a part of its parent and father education division. As a part of a racial justice work group during the FCL BSC, the agencies created a "call to action" to infuse antiracist practice into child welfare (Spielfogel et al. 2023). This call to action led to a revision of the Collaborative Change Framework so there was more emphasis on achieving racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system.

Champions were critically important for the spread and sustainability of father and paternal relative engagement strategies and changing office culture. Agency leaders shared consistent messages about the importance of engaging fathers and paternal relatives. Agency staff cited their leaders' advocacy and passion for the work as key contributors to a father-friendly organizational culture. For some agencies, like those in Los Angeles and Connecticut, father engagement champions came from outside the agencies. These community partners served on the implementation teams, developed trainings for agency staff, vouched for agencies' progress in their communities, and provided an external perspective on opportunities to improve father and paternal relative engagement. The reliance on a limited number of champions did leave agencies' engagement efforts vulnerable to a change in leadership or dissolution of a partnership.

Opportunities for future research

This descriptive evaluation highlights potentially promising strategies to promote father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare, describes the experiences of agencies after the FCL BSC ended, and describes the factors that may have contributed to their experiences. The evaluation was not designed to make claims about the effectiveness of the FCL BSC. The section below offers opportunities for future research that could contribute to the field's understanding of best practices for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare.

Future research can continue to explore promising strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare. For example, future research could focus on describing specific strategies in depth, standardizing and scaling the strategies to multiple agencies, and assessing the contributions of specific strategies to father and paternal relative engagement outcomes.

Future research could support child welfare agencies to more efficiently collect and use data to improve practices for engaging fathers and paternal relatives. Agencies in the FCL study faced challenges with collecting and using data to improve their practice. Agencies had limited use of data systems, and after the conclusion of the FCL BSC, they struggled to maintain practices they established to monitor and review data. A companion brief to this report describes short-term strategies that agencies participating in the FCL BSC used to collect and use data on father and paternal relative engagement outside of their administrative data systems (Fung 2023).

Better child welfare data could also advance the field's understanding of what works in child welfare. For example, data systems that made it easier to extract and review data on father engagement would enable agencies to more consistently link strategies and outcomes. The data could be used in real time to inform PDSA cycles or other improvement efforts. In turn, strategies that are more definitively associated with improvements in practice and outcomes could be disseminated, replicated, and studied rigorously.

I think it's been really, really difficult to have our staff track specific PDSAs or strategies that have been implemented through the [FCL BSC] and that we've tried to implement through FELT. Because you can pull a report ... and the report is going to be all-inclusive of all of our cases and all that we service and that we assess. But we don't have a way to say, okay, these 100 cases, we implemented this intervention ... we just don't have the resources to do that, and we don't have the systems in place to support that.

—Manager, Connecticut

Conclusion

In addressing father and paternal relative engagement, the agencies in the FCL BSC tried to make fundamental changes to the way they approached their core missions. The agencies made substantial progress, but acknowledged the amount of work they had left to do to change staff mindsets and repair trust in the communities they served. According to agency staff, the FCL BSC helped them create the time and opportunity to make change and develop systems and structures to hold themselves accountable for improving father and paternal relative engagement. A number of staff involved in the FCL BSC implementation teams appreciated the opportunity for all of the participating teams to come together for group meetings. Two years removed from the end of the FCL BSC, agencies were continuing to spread and sustain efforts to engage and serve fathers and paternal relatives. Three agencies—Connecticut, Prowers County, and Denver—used their experiences in the FCL BSC to springboard into large, multisite

efforts to engage fathers. Connecticut refocused its statewide FELTs around the BSC framework with the goal of promoting engagement across the state by developing and sharing a statewide fatherhood engagement practice guide with all regions. Connecticut also made fatherhood engagement more lasting on a statewide basis by establishing a permanent, full-time fatherhood position in the state agency and installing a commissioner as a chairperson of the statewide FELT. Denver and Prowers County were selected by the state of Colorado as service delivery sites for its federal Fatherhood FIRE grant to provide programming to fathers with low incomes. Wake County planned to hire additional staff to help manage and direct father engagement efforts. Los Angeles developed plans to spread Father Strong and the cultural broker initiative to offices across the county.

The findings in this report suggest that participating in continuous learning efforts such as a BSC can help child welfare agencies focus on addressing challenges in providing services, identify solutions with support from experts and other agencies, create new partnerships and reinforce existing ones, and lay a foundation for lasting, sustainable changes in practice and culture. With time, child welfare agencies can move “beyond the box,” so that fathers and paternal relatives are engaged and involved in the child welfare system as regular practice, and children involved in the child welfare system have more opportunities to grow up happy and healthy with their families.

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Appendix A

Connecticut Department of Children and Families

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The Connecticut Department of Children and Families

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) is a state-administered child welfare agency with six regions. Its Hartford office, one of two offices in Region 4, participated in the FCL Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) and in the descriptive evaluation. The Manchester office, also in Region IV, participated in the descriptive evaluation. DCF implemented a joint strategic plan to improve engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in Region 4 and, as a result, the Manchester office implemented each strategy the Hartford office developed and tested using PDSA cycles during the FCL BSC. As of April 2023, Region 4 served 567 children in out-of-home settings. This overview describes implementation activities as of summer 2022, unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy implementation

The Hartford and Manchester offices employed several strategies to improve engagement of fathers and paternal relatives, building on Connecticut DCF's long history of focusing on father and paternal relative engagement. Before the FCL BSC, each regional office established a Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) to champion father and paternal relative engagement efforts. Over the course of the FCL BSC, both offices employed newly developed strategies and continued strategies they were using already. These strategies are discussed here, organized by the relevant domain and goal in the Collaborative Change Framework, which guided the sites' work during the FCL and is described in detail in Chapter I.¹

Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

Informing the masses. As part of the FCL BSC, a community partner and father engagement service provider developed a strategy called "Informing the Masses." This entailed hosting meetings with different individuals and organizations throughout the community to inform them about DCF and the importance of fathers' and paternal relatives' involvement.

Weekly newsletter. During the FCL BSC, a permanency and adoption caseworker wrote a weekly newsletter with education and tips about engaging fathers. After the FCL BSC, this newsletter was written quarterly because it was too demanding

for staff to write a newsletter every week. The goal was to give workers ideas for creative ways to engage fathers and paternal relatives. Similarly, Region 4 developed a tip sheet on how to engage fathers throughout the life of a case that could be shared statewide.

Hartford office mural. Since beginning the FCL BSC, staff have found that success stories and testimonials about fathers have inspired and motivated staff. To keep fatherhood present in the minds of all staff, the Hartford agency had a mural painted on the front of its office in March 2022. The mural was also credited with helping make agency staff proud of the work of engaging fathers. It also showed the community that father and paternal relative engagement is central to DCF's values.

Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

Café conversations. After the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, both the Hartford and Manchester offices began hosting café conversations with staff on topics related to racial justice. Examples of the topics are workers' personal experience with racism, collaborating with the court system, and implicit bias. Although this strategy began during the FCL BSC, it was sponsored by the offices' racial justice Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) group, which has a structure like that of the FELT teams and was a state initiative before Hartford participated in FCL.

Adjusting licensing requirements. After the FCL BSC was finished, the Manchester legal department began an initiative to seek licensing waivers for kinship families as part of the office's racial justice work. Current licensing regulations sometimes prevent the agency from placing children with otherwise suitable fathers and paternal relatives—particularly those who have low incomes. For example, one regulation requires residences to have a living area and a separate bedroom with a door for each resident. Fathers and paternal relatives with low incomes who live alone may not have the resources to rent an apartment with more than one bedroom. Even if the adult is willing to forego using the bedroom and let

the child have it, the regulation prevents the relative's home from being a placement option for the child. According to staff, men with low incomes in Region 4, who may be affected by such regulations, are more likely to identify as non-White.

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Timely contact with fathers. Before the FCL BSC, Region 4 established intake guidelines for the first contact with fathers. These include trying to contact fathers within five days of the case being assigned, asking the mother or guardian for contact information at first contact, requesting a search in a public records database for the father's identity and whereabouts, and speaking with the children about their father. During the FCL BSC, Hartford adapted a form for intake workers to use to provide all the father-related information in one place when the case was eventually transferred. After the FCL BSC, some caseworkers continued to use the form and have discussions about fathers' identity, whereabouts, and contact attempts when cases are transferred.

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Fatherhood Engagement Services (FES). Region 4 established the FES program in 2017. Recognizing that community agencies may be less threatening to men and more approachable than DCF, the FES program contracts with community partners to help locate and engage fathers. FES helps fathers understand their rights, advocate for themselves, and navigate the systems around them, including DCF. The Region 4 FES providers are strength-based in their approach. FES providers also offer services for fathers, including parenting classes and economic security services. Although the program existed before the FCL BSC, some FES providers were members of the BSC Improvement Team, which strengthened the connection between community partners and DCF.

Ensuring a strength-based approach in FES. As a result of input and feedback from one FES provider during the FCL BSC, Region 4 created an annotated FES referral form to improve the quality of referrals. These annotations encourage staff to include fathers' strengths, not just their needs, and include facts only, as opposed to judgments or opinions.

Safety assessments on both homes. Before the FCL BSC, Region 4 implemented a practice of conducting a safety assessment on the noncustodial parent's home (typically the father's) before a "considered removal" meeting occurs to determine whether a child needs to be removed from their home. Previously, only the home where the child resided was assessed. Region 4 assesses the noncustodial parent's home to determine whether it is a safe place for the child instead of placing them in foster care.

Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children's lives

Letters for fathers. During the FCL BSC, Hartford developed a detailed letter sent to fathers along with a brochure about the child welfare process and system. The letter and brochure were both designed to be father-specific and provide information such as parents' rights, the impact of a father on a child's well-being, and contact information for local services.

Efforts to encourage fathers to attend and participate in ongoing case planning activities. Since the FCL BSC ended, Region 4 has continued to use a strategy developed through a PDSA cycle called "Why Not Father," in which DCF staff met to discuss all information relevant to the father before a considered removal meeting. The group reviewed where the father was, what needs and safety concerns had already been assessed, and how to engage the father during the considered removal meeting while making him feel comfortable. The Why Not Father PDSA cycle also resulted in a form workers used to document all attempts to contact the father, including detailed notes on all placement options that were explored.

Administrative case reviews. During the FCL BSC, Hartford tested a strategy through a PDSA aimed to increase fathers' participation in administrative case review meetings. As part of this strategy, caseworkers were required to call fathers to invite them to the case review meeting 30 days before it happened. They also had to set up a pre-meeting with the father to introduce themselves, explain the purpose of the administrative case review meeting and who would be present, and encourage them to participate. This strategy is a good example of how the two offices partnered. The strategy was developed in the Hartford office as part of the FCL BSC, and then spread to Manchester after the FCL BSC concluded.

Permanency and adoption. During the FCL BSC, Region 4 implemented a strategy where supervisors asked caseworkers about fathers in permanency and adoption case reviews. Questions included "When was the last time you contacted them?" "How have you tried to contact them?" and "What was the reception like when you last contacted them?" Caseworkers were also encouraged to review case notes thoroughly when cases were transferred to them to look for previous efforts and history with engaging fathers. According to caseworkers, fathers were often exhausted with DCF by the time the case reached the permanency and adoption stage, but caseworkers were told to be persistent with fathers, even if they said they did not want to be involved.

Dads Matter Too community event. A staple of father and paternal relative engagement at Region 4, the Dads Matter Too community event existed before the FCL BSC. At the annual event, there are activities for fathers to do with their children, giving them an opportunity to connect. DCF staff often attend with their own children, and other community agencies that work with fathers are present. The event can also be used as a supervised visit, allowing the father to spend quality time with their child.

Organizational culture

Region 4 staff and community partners reported that DCF made strides in changing the organizational culture to be more welcoming of fathers and paternal relatives, despite challenges such as staff turnover, gatekeeping family members, and nonresponsive fathers. Since participating in the FCL BSC, changing organizational culture has been slow, but steady and systemwide. Office leaders in both Hartford and Manchester emphasized the importance of changing mindsets throughout the FCL BSC by emphasizing how engaging fathers could benefit children. After the FCL BSC, staff spoke frequently about meaningful individual changes related to overcoming stigma and their own personal biases. More than anything, staff noted that fatherhood engagement and racial justice were discussed at all meetings, demonstrating their importance to staff and the agency overall. Some caseworkers believed this mindset shift led to more children to be diverted from foster care and reunified with their families.

Data

The Hartford and Manchester offices of Connecticut DCF continue to collect and review data on father and paternal relative engagement despite considerable challenges, including a limited and outdated data system and unfilled positions in the CQI unit. Several measures relevant to father and paternal relative engagement are collected, such as attempts to contact fathers at all stages of the case, attendance at various meetings, fathers' and paternal relatives' participation in planning, data on removals, and more. Data are reviewed by supervisors, manager, office directors, and the FELT team. Official reviews include an administrative case review every 90 days, CQI reviews, and Differential Response System reviews. Caseworkers said the administrative case review is particularly important to fatherhood engagement work, describing it as a "self-assessment of where we are and how we're meeting our goals, and what we can do to improve the work that we do." Table A.1 shows the key indicators and metrics for which Connecticut shared data for the descriptive evaluation.

Table A.1. Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC

Indicator	Metrics
Continuous involvement of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of cases in which a child is removed from their home and the father is notified • Proportion of case reviews held in which a father attends • Proportion of considered removal meetings held in which a father attends • Proportion of cases reviewed in which there is sufficient frequency of father-child visits • Proportion of cases reviewed in which there is sufficient quality of father-child visits • Proportion of cases reviewed in which there is sufficient continuity of relationship with father • Proportion of cases reviewed in which there is sufficient engagement of paternal relatives
Meeting fathers needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportion of cases reviewed in which there have been collateral contacts about father • Proportion of cases reviewed in which fathers' needs are being assessed and addressed
Permanency outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of considered removal meetings held in which the father's home is determined to be acceptable for the child to live in

Continued use of BSC elements

The main way that BSC elements have continued at Connecticut DCF is through the statewide FELT. After the FCL BSC concluded, Connecticut DCF decided to replicate a BSC model across the state, making each regional FELT an implementation team that would identify, design, and test strategies using PDSA cycles. Participants in the FCL BSC chaired these statewide efforts by providing

training, implementing a self-assessment tool based on one that agencies in the FCL BSC completed, and requiring offices to develop strategies and test them with PDSA cycles. This model has also spread to the statewide racial justice CQI group. Region 4 continued to conduct PDSA cycles through early 2023, but had to pause because of rising caseloads and staff turnover and burnout.

Endnotes

¹ The FCL study team determined the relevance of the Collaborative Change Framework domains to each strategy. Sites might have classified their strategies differently. Strategies that relate to multiple domains are listed under the domain the study team deemed most relevant.

Appendix B

Denver Human Services

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The Division of Child Welfare within Denver Human Services

The Division of Child Welfare within Denver Human Services (DHS) is a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system in Denver, Colorado. As of March 2023, DHS served about 550 children in out-of-home settings. This overview describes implementation activities as of summer 2022, unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy implementation

Before participating in the FCL BSC, DHS used several strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives. The agency's family search and engagement team implemented state mandates to locate and contact fathers. DHS also offered voluntary fatherhood classes to fathers whose families were involved in child welfare. Ongoing efforts to engage fathers and paternal relatives have been reinforced and enhanced after the FCL BSC. For example, hotline workers continue using a protocol to identify fathers and paternal relatives. After the FCL BSC, the agency was selected as an implementation site for Colorado's Office of Early Childhood Fatherhood FIRE (responsible fatherhood) grant. Throughout the FCL BSC, DHS employed newly developed strategies and continued strategies they were already using. These strategies are described here, organized by the relevant domain and goal in the Collaborative Change Framework, which informed the BSC and is described in detail in Chapter I.¹

Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

Father-forward templates and forms. During the FCL BSC, DHS edited existing forms and templates

to prompt workers and supervisors to engage fathers and paternal relatives. DHS also updated case closing summaries and supervision protocol templates to include more discussion about fathers.

The father's perspective. This strategy started during the COVID-19 public health emergency as part of the FCL BSC. DHS staff filmed interviews with fathers telling their story of involvement with the agency. The videos featured discussions about what went well and what could be improved. The video series also included workers sharing how father engagement made a difference in a case. These videos were mostly aimed toward caseworkers, who described them as being emotionally affecting and said they contributed to culture change.

Fatherhood newsletter. During the FCL BSC, DHS developed a monthly fatherhood newsletter that went to all staff. The newsletter described different methods for contacting fathers, provided updates from the FCL BSC, and included tools for staff—such as best practices for engaging fathers and paternal relatives, and links to training videos related to father and paternal relative engagement. Each newsletter cited data showing areas that still needed improvement.

Expanding fatherhood trainings. During the FCL BSC, DHS expanded available trainings about fatherhood to build staff capacity to address fathers' needs. As a result of these expanded trainings, several staff received training on several curricula for fatherhood and parenting interventions including Love and Logic, Caring Dads, Nurturing Fathers, and Partnering for Safety.

Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

Racial and cultural competency. DHS employed several strategies to consider racial and cultural norms in its practice. During the FCL BSC, these strategies focused on intake, family team meetings, and placement. For example, when children were taken into care, workers asked fathers and paternal relatives what was important to them, such as caring for Black children's hair properly.

Language accessibility. Caseworkers also prioritized finding providers who could speak the families' language, such as Spanish-speaking therapists. DHS staff said they tried to implement this before the FCL BSC, but staff offered this support to fathers more often when they started participating in the FCL BSC. DHS also made its standard paperwork available in more languages, and revised local television ads to air in different languages and to increase awareness of the agency's role in investigating potential abuse and neglect.

Implicit bias training. In May 2022, DHS, along with five other counties in Colorado, piloted a training on implicit bias and fatherhood engagement. The president of a community organization that served fathers led the training. After the training, DHS leadership began to explore how to provide it to more staff.

DEI learning circles. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and other racially motivated violent acts, child welfare staff organized affinity or topic groups related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Although not part of the FCL BSC, these learning

circles were offered both in person and virtually to promote staff participation. Group discussions emphasized how staff could be more mindful and supportive of other people, including fellow colleagues and families they serve.

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Enhanced father identification. During the FCL BSC, Denver developed a protocol that gave hotline workers access to additional methods to identify and locate fathers. These included access to public records, and judicial and child support databases, as well as reaching out to schools. The hotline worker who initially tested this strategy had success identifying more fathers, so the strategy was spread bit by bit and eventually used by the entire hotline team and after-hours team.

After the FCL BSC, Denver reviewed state reports on cases with unidentified parents to identify other teams that had challenges identifying and engaging fathers. Based on this review, DHS began providing expanded support to increase their identification and engagement with fathers.

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Fatherhood program. DHS's fatherhood program existed before the FCL BSC, but according to staff, the FCL BSC helped the agency focus on amplifying the work, increasing referrals, and increasing participation in the program. The fatherhood program included group workshops and trainings for men, certifications of placements with paternal relatives, and one-on-one mentorship from fathers who have had experiences with the agency. The program also included fatherhood specialists who worked with fathers to get them into trainings, help them find work, and support them in court.

Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children's lives

Systematic invitation of fathers to family team meetings. First tested in a PDSA cycle during the FCL BSC, this strategy involved the family-team meeting facilitator calling the father to see if they knew about the meeting and emphasize the importance of their attendance. After the PDSA cycle, DHS decided to make the strategy a part of usual practice. According to agency staff, fathers participated in more of these meetings because of this strategy.

Father engagement measure. During the FCL BSC, DHS developed a father engagement tool to track all father and paternal relative engagement throughout a case. This tool also reinforced the importance of documenting diligent searching and contacts for caseworkers. DHS consulted the tool to gain insight on the sources that were most useful for locating fathers and provided access to those sources, such as public records databases. DHS staff continue to use this tool.

Parenting time debriefs. During the FCL BSC, the Kinship and Parenting Time unit developed a strategy to increase fathers' satisfaction with visitation and parent-child activities. DHS expects caseworkers to have discussions with both parents about the physical location, comfort, and planning for the visit.

Organizational culture

Staff of all levels at DHS reported that the agency had made positive strides in creating a more father-friendly organizational culture. Despite challenges such as staff turnover, organizational restructuring, and outdated systems, they reported that fatherhood engagement had become integrated into everyday practice since participation in the FCL BSC. Many staff noted that Denver's increased emphasis on fathers during the FCL BSC started with hotline and intake workers providing more information to both parents about the importance

of the father's involvement. Staff reported that DHS leadership consistently elevated the importance of father and paternal relative engagement through formal and informal messaging. This gave staff a sense of urgency and helped increase their awareness of the need and value of engaging fathers and paternal relatives. Because staff were more aware, they looked for options to support families in different ways rather than just focusing on mothers or maternal family.

Although some practices and strategies existed before the FCL BSC, staff believed the FCL BSC provided the focus needed to make staff more proactive about engaging fathers and paternal relatives and help spread father engagement efforts. As a result, they reported that more fathers were more consistently engaged in their child's case. Staff observed increased family reunifications and fewer children placed in foster care. The cultural change was also reflected in the observations of a judge who found that there had been a change in how fathers are more likely to be identified and considered at the start of a case.

Data

During the BSC, Denver staff developed programming code to create and add new reports in its data system that were specifically about engagement of fathers and paternal relatives. Staff received training on using new prompts and dedicated fields so they could enter data appropriately in the existing systems. Supervisors found this improved the accuracy of data on father engagement. According to agency staff, increased reporting of father-specific data and more focus on things like identifying fathers and tracking attendance at meetings led data collection and entry to become more ingrained in daily practice. Despite experiencing staff turnover and limited staff capacity, which restricted its ability to regularly generate and review reports, DHS planned to update the code and continue using it to assess father and paternal relative engagement.

Table B.1. Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC

Indicator	Metrics
Identification of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of fathers identified at the start of the assessment process • Number of fathers identified by the end of the assessment process
Continuous involvement of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of fathers successfully contacted during the assessment process • Number of family-team meetings to which a father was invited • Number of family team meetings held in which a father attended

Continued Use of BSC Elements

In addition to continuing to use data reports created during the FCL BSC, Denver has continued to use PDSA cycles to develop and test father engagement strategies. Throughout the FCL BSC, staff who implemented PDSA cycles said they appreciated the PDSA approach of trying something

small to make change feel more feasible. Agency leaders reported that the PDSA model taught them the value of learning from failure, because the PDSA cycles they conducted were small in scale and therefore low risk. Members of the BSC improvement team continue to oversee the implementation of PDSA cycles across the division.

Endnotes

¹ The FCL study team determined the relevance of the Collaborative Change Framework domains to each strategy. Sites might have classified their strategies differently. Strategies that relate to multiple domains are listed under the domain the study team deemed most relevant.

Appendix C

Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services

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The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is responsible for ensuring the safety of children in Los Angeles County, California. It is a state-supervised, county-administered system. Two of 20 regional Los Angeles County DCFS offices—Palmdale and Vermont Corridor—participated in the FCL BSC and the descriptive evaluation. As of December 2022, the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices were serving 2,282 children in out-of-home settings. This overview describes implementation activities in the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices as of summer 2022 unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy implementation

The Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices used several strategies to improve father and paternal relative engagement. The strategies were collectively known as Father Strong. At the start of the FCL BSC, DCFS leaders decided to make Father Strong a part of the Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparities (ERDD) initiative because so many fathers involved in child welfare in the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices were men of color. The ERDD initiative was a partnership between the Los Angeles DCFS and Casey Family Programs. It was designed to address the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system. A description of the Los Angeles father engagement strategies follows, organized by the relevant domain and goal in the Collaborative Change Framework.¹

Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

Policy work group. During the FCL BSC, DCFS formed a work group of administrators, supervisors and caseworkers to examine policies and make rec-

ommendations to office leadership to ensure fathers were engaged at all stages of a family's involvement in child welfare. The policy work group remained in place after the FCL BSC ended, continuing to assess and make policy recommendations. For example, as a result one of its recommendations, Los Angeles created a new policy clarifying that DCFS could release a child into a non-offending father's care if they deemed his living situation safe and appropriate.

Environmental changes promoting the importance of fathers and paternal relatives. During the BSC, the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices made deliberate efforts to create an environment that emphasized the value of fathers and paternal relatives in their children's lives. For example, the offices made visitation rooms more father-friendly and decorated office walls with posters promoting Father Strong. In the Vermont Corridor office's break room, a poster board for ERDD displayed tips and newsletters on how to better engage fathers.

Community partnerships. In the FCL BSC, DCFS leaders furthered their commitment to promoting fatherhood engagement by strengthening existing

partnerships and establishing new partnerships with community leaders who advocate for and support deeper fatherhood engagement. These partnerships include members of the faith-based community who provided supports that promoted fathers' involvement in their children's lives. In the Vermont Corridor office, partners participated in a weekly work group to discuss what was working well, challenges, and opportunities with general office practices related to engaging fathers and paternal relatives. Partners also participated in ERDD roundtable meetings. (More about the meetings can be found under Domain 2.)

Father engagement training. Staff in the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices participated in a three-day fatherhood engagement training developed by a community partner during the FCL BSC. In the Palmdale office, several staff that attended this training were certified to facilitate Father Strong groups. After the end of the FCL BSC, agency leaders created a one-day version of the training for new staff. In late 2022, DCFS leaders made this training mandatory for all staff in Los Angeles County.

Fatherhood champions. During the FCL BSC, Los Angeles recruited some staff to serve as "fatherhood champions," supporting their peers and motivating them to change practices related to engaging fathers. Fatherhood champions take part in meetings and officewide efforts focused on engaging fathers more effectively, and look for ways to directly help their peers, such as by providing information about resources for fathers.

Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

ERDD roundtable meetings. The practice of ERDD roundtable meetings illustrates the close relationship between Father Strong and ERDD. For example, when Vermont Corridor and Palmdale staff consider placing a Black child in foster care, caseworkers and their supervisors examine the need for placement and determine whether to hold an ERDD roundtable meeting. Caseworkers, other agency staff, and "cultural brokers"—community partners that serve communities of color—participate in the ERDD

roundtable meetings and help staff engage families to attend these meetings. A key focus of these meetings is to explore opportunities to involve fathers and paternal relatives. Caseworkers share information about fathers' whereabouts and involvement and their efforts to locate and engage them. The practice of holding ERDD roundtable meetings existed before the FCL BSC, but as a part of the FCL BSC, Los Angeles began focusing more intentionally on inviting fathers to meetings and asking questions about the whereabouts and involvement of fathers in the life of the child being discussed.

Implicit bias training. As a part of the FCL BSC, the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices began requiring staff to participate in implicit bias training annually.

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Upfront family finding. As a part of the FCL BSC, the Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices dedicated resources to "upfront family finding" by giving staff access to search engines and hiring retired staff as consultants to help find family members to engage. These consultants helped staff find extended family, including fathers and paternal relatives, for new referrals, new cases, and cases in which children were in permanency placement or long-term care. According to Los Angeles managers, the agency was able to avoid placing some children in foster care because upfront family finding helped identify fathers that children could live with when they had to be removed from the other parent's care. Managers also described upfront family finding as instrumental in locating other family members, including paternal relatives.

Father inclusion form. The Vermont Corridor office developed and tested a fatherhood inclusion form during the FCL BSC. The intent of the form was to encourage staff to identify and document their efforts to find absent fathers and paternal relatives throughout the life of the case, and to foster better awareness of these efforts as the case responsibility shifted from the investigation staff to the ongoing

services staff. Caseworkers used the form to document all information they had about the identity and whereabouts of fathers and paternal relatives, including the last known time the father was seen and any efforts made to locate fathers and paternal relatives. Some caseworkers continued to use the form after the FCL BSC was over.

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Child and family teaming. Before participating in the FCL BSC, Los Angeles used child and family teaming to identify family needs and plan for services. As part of the child and family teaming process, the agency encouraged parents to invite family members and other supporters from their community to participate in the meetings. During the FCL BSC, Los Angeles leaders made intentional efforts to ensure staff were inviting fathers to meetings. Community-based services, including cultural brokers and Father Strong group leaders, supported this effort. Staff in the Vermont Corridor office also received case consultation services from Casey Family Programs to help make the child and family teaming process more inclusive of fathers.

Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children’s lives

Father Strong parenting group. The Father Strong parenting group used a parent education curriculum for men. The curriculum involves 12 meetings covering topics to help fathers address past trauma, build skills to become responsible fathers, advocate for themselves, and have positive involvement in their children’s lives. The court system approved this curriculum to satisfy court-ordered parenting classes. Los Angeles has offered parenting groups using this curriculum since 2018, a year before participating in the FCL BSC. Since that time, nearly half of fathers who completed the group have been reunified with their children. During the FCL BSC, Los Angeles renamed the parenting group Father Strong to align with all other fatherhood efforts in the agency.

Organizational culture

Los Angeles leaders said the FCL BSC helped the agency focus on father engagement. Although challenges remained—such as staff members’ implicit bias toward fathers, mothers’ resistance to provide information about fathers, and limited time—many DCFS staff noted that engaging father and paternal relatives had been prioritized since the agency participated in the FCL BSC. Staff shared that intentional leadership was a primary driver of cultural shifts. For example, they talked about how leaders modeled engaging fathers and paternal relatives by making father engagement a part of normal everyday conversation in the office. These efforts trickled down. Some staff noticed supervisors began to consistently ask whether fathers were being referred to Father Strong parent groups and child and family team meetings. Staff noticed signage in their offices about Father Strong and the importance of engaging fathers. They described how father engagement training has been implemented into core training and has influenced staff’s value for fathers, and how they have prioritized making diligent efforts to identify fathers and paternal relatives.

Data

Using data to strengthen father and paternal relative engagement was a challenge for Los Angeles DCFS. Staff noted a lack of time and heavy workloads as barriers to collecting data. Leaders said it was difficult to track qualitative data, and that the portal for entering case notes was not user friendly, so that notes did not always save correctly. Leaders also said it was hard to isolate what they were looking for in their current data system. Most of their data for tracking fathers was in narrative format, which would have required pulling and analyzing qualitative data. Therefore, the data they did have did not always reflect the progress they had made. Table C.1 shows the key indicators and metrics for which Los Angeles shared data for the descriptive evaluation.

Despite its challenges, Los Angeles County DCFS continued to try to use data as a tool to strengthen

fathers’ and paternal relatives’ engagement. For example, DCFS tracked the number of fathers the agency attempted to reach and engage and whether attempts to reach fathers during initial investigation were successful. Los Angeles County also began tracking when fathers had been referred to and participated in Father Strong and ERDD roundtables.

Los Angeles County interviewed fathers with open cases to understand their experiences with engagement during the investigation and ongoing services phases of their case, such as going through the court process. These qualitative interviews with fathers also were designed to understand their experiences with their caseworkers and with child and family team meetings, and whether their cultural needs were met.

Continued use of FCL BSC elements

After the end of the FCL BSC, DCFS leaders shared that specific elements of the FCL BSC, such as testing strategies using PDSA cycles, were hard to sustain without the support of the FCL BSC. As a result, Los Angeles has not continued using specific FCL BSC elements as a part of its continuous quality improvement processes. However, leaders also stated that the FCL BSC had influenced their approach to continuous quality improvement. In particular, DCFS leaders cited opportunities to learn from other jurisdictions through the shared learning environment and meetings, and the power of convening small groups to tackle a challenge.

Table C.1. Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC

Indicator	Metrics
Continuous involvement of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of ERDD meetings held with a father in attendance • Number of cases in which the caseworker attempted to contact the father • Number of cases in which the caseworker successfully contacted the father
Meeting fathers needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of fathers attending parenting classes

Endnotes

¹ The FCL study team determined the relevance of the Collaborative Change Framework domains to each strategy. Sites might have classified their strategies differently. Strategies that relate to multiple domains are listed under the domain the study team deemed most relevant.

Appendix D

Prowers County Department of Human Services

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Prowers County Department of Human Services

Prowers County Department of Human Services (DHS) is a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare agency serving all of Prowers County, Colorado, a rural county in the southeast part of the state. The department is located in the county seat of Lamar, Colorado. As of April 2023, Prowers County served four youth in out-of-home settings. This overview describes implementation activities as of summer 2022, unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy implementation

The Prowers County DHS team used various strategies to improve father and paternal relative engagement. Many of their strategies started before the FCL BSC but were formalized or strengthened due to their participation in the process. During the FCL BSC, Prowers County implemented new strategies in addition to those already underway. These strategies are discussed here, organized by the relevant domain and goal in the Collaborative Change Framework, which guided the sites' work during the FCL and is described in detail in Chapter I.¹

Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

Community campaigns. Prowers County created community campaigns during the FCL BSC. One campaign, #ImADad, promoted the importance of fathers. Prowers County made videos about fatherhood with various community members, including influential community members such as judges. As part of the campaign, fathers received royal blue shirts with #IMADAD printed on them. In the videos, fathers shared responses to questions about favorite things about being a dad, advice about

being a dad, and favorite memories. The videos were shared on Prowers County's social media, and community members were encouraged to share them with their networks. The #IMADAD campaign was part of a larger goal for the department to move from a culture focused on working with mothers to one that serves both parents. As part of another campaign, the county hired a photographer to take pictures of fathers with their children at a community event with the police department.

Father-friendly environment. Prowers County leaders made it a priority throughout the FCL BSC to ensure fathers felt valued at the department and in the community. The campaign provided posters and other materials highlighting father involvement to community partners such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) office, local pediatricians' offices, and schools. Prowers County also made intentional changes to how it valued fathers within the agency— for example, by moving away from terms such as "visitation plan" and toward "parenting plan" Using the term "parenting plan" reinforced that the father had a role in parenting the child, whereas "visitation plan" implied that fathers who had maltreated their child needed a plan for supervised visits.

Court representation. Aiming to extend its efforts to include fathers beyond the agency, Prowers County also worked with the court system to ensure fathers were engaged and considered. From the beginning of the FCL BSC, Prowers County chose to include its guardian ad litem (GAL) in the county's improvement team. The GAL's role is to advocate for the child's best interest in court proceedings. The GAL's involvement in the BSC enabled them to better understand fatherhood work and the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives. The GAL used this understanding to help prioritize efforts to locate the father and consider the father for placement options whenever possible.

Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

Implicit bias. Prowers County leaders led conversations with staff about implicit biases that may inform how they view fathers and their roles and how they could acknowledge and work against these biases. Prowers County staff also completed the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#), which was used to guide these conversations.

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Location services. Before the FCL BSC, Prowers County made intentional efforts to identify and locate fathers. During the FCL BSC, Colorado clarified policies that hotline staff ask about the father's whereabouts in each intake call. Prowers County leadership reinforced the expectation for frontline staff to ask about the father during these calls. If the hotline caller could not fully determine the identity or whereabouts of the father, a team of child welfare staff called the RED (Review, Evaluate, Direct/Decide) team worked to come up with steps to identify and locate the father in their initial team meeting. Because Prowers County is such a small community, the process was often informal, with staff talking with each other and their networks to get information about a father. Staff sometimes asked other

known relatives or used Facebook to support their search. If fathers missed court hearings or a team meeting, caseworkers might go to their last known address to keep trying to make contact.

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Father advocate. Shortly after the wrap-up of the FCL BSC, Prowers County was selected as one of the seven Colorado implementation sites for its Office of Family Assistance Fatherhood FIRE (Family-Focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential) grant. Colorado Department of Human Services received the five-year grant to provide wraparound supports to fathers participating in various human services agencies. Prowers County was selected as one of the implementation sites in May 2021 and used the grant as an opportunity to hire a father advocate. The father advocate runs a fatherhood workshop; attends court hearings, RED team, and important school meetings; assists with housing and employment services; provides financial education through Financial Health Institute; completes domestic violence screenings and makes appropriate referrals; completes home visits; does individual case management; runs a Circle of Father group; and serves as a resource for fathers involved with the agency. Before Prowers County hired the father advocate, the agency's special programs supervisor supported fathers throughout the child welfare process. Hiring a staff member solely dedicated to fatherhood work increased the agency's capacity to serve fathers. Child welfare and child support staff can refer fathers to the father advocate, and he begins working with a father as soon as the father becomes involved with the child welfare system. The fatherhood program is open to all members of Prowers County on a voluntary basis. This allows fathers from all walks of life to be supported and represented. Referrals can come from anywhere or anyone. The father advocate assesses fathers' needs and strengths and refers them to many different services, including fatherhood classes, employment services, or mental health services.

Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children's lives

Including fathers throughout the child welfare process. During the FCL BSC, Prowers County developed guidance for staff on how to engage fathers throughout a family's involvement with the child welfare agency. Once located, fathers are invited to the family engagement meetings, which they attend with the support of the father advocate. Facilitators track whether or not the fathers attended the meeting. The purpose of the team meeting is to create a plan for the family that considers barriers and next steps for reunification and permanency. Prowers County has also worked to make sure fathers have someone in a supportive role with them in court, such as the father advocate or special programs supervisor. The father advocate attends most court hearings in this role. This strategy is designed to ensure fathers know they have someone supporting them throughout the judicial process.

Organizational culture

Prowers County staff talked about the department's commitment to engaging fathers and improving engagement as a way to support the whole family. Prowers County's leadership sets the expectation that staff at all levels of the department prioritize and buy in to the value of engaging fathers. Staff also reported that hiring a dedicated father advocate has helped fathers feel more comfortable engaging with the department and coming to them for services. Staff in different roles in the department noted the father advocate's ability to engage fathers and talked about how much fathers trust the advocate.

Many staff also pointed out the value of having all four caseworkers be male. Many of the all-male caseworkers are fathers themselves, which allows them to build trust with the fathers the agency

serves. Some staff noted that, since Prowers is such a small community, the caseworkers can act as role models for the fathers because they attend many of the same events in the community, such as children's sporting events. The department's partners also reported an increased engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in Prowers County and at their respective organizations. Prowers County leaders are committed to "prompting their partners to ask how they are connecting the dad," and many said they'd seen a change in how many programs support fathers and the whole family.

Data

Prowers County continues efforts to collect and use data to measure and learn about father and paternal relative engagement. The agency uses the state's child welfare information system, TRAILS, to track if the father or paternal relatives were identified during intake calls and if caseworkers had contact with them throughout the family's involvement with the child welfare agency. They can use the data from this system to go through each case to see if and how the father is involved. To track engagement in fatherhood services provided as a part of the FIRE grant, the department tracks attendance in the fatherhood classes and how many fathers the advocate works with each month. Table D.1 shows the key indicators and metrics for which Prowers County DHS shared data for the descriptive evaluation.

Continued use of BSC elements

Though Prowers County has not maintained specific elements of the FCL BSC, its participation has continued to shape aspects of how it engages fathers and paternal relatives. Staff involved with the FCL BSC continue to drive engagement efforts for fathers and paternal relatives. Prowers County DHS has maintained relationships with community agencies that it developed or enhanced during the FCL BSC.

Table D.1. Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC

Indicator	Metrics
Identification of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Number of initial calls in which a father was identified · Number of assessments made with a father identified · Number of newly opened cases in which diligent efforts were made in the first month of the case to reach the father
Continuous involvement of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Number of contacts attempted with fathers during new assessments · Number of contacts made with fathers during new assessments · Number of newly opened cases where there was contact with fathers and paternal relatives during the first month
Meeting fathers' needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Number of fathers enrolled in fatherhood program · Number of fathers attending fatherhood program meetings · Number of monthly contacts with fathers enrolled in fatherhood program

Endnotes

¹ The FCL study team determined the relevance of the Collaborative Change Framework domains to each strategy. Sites might have classified their strategies differently. Strategies that relate to multiple domains are listed under the domain the study team deemed most relevant.

Appendix E

Wake County Department of Health and Human Services

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Wake County Department of Health and Human Services

Wake County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is a state-supervised, county-administered system serving Raleigh, North Carolina's state capitol, and the surrounding county. As of March 2023, Wake County served 435 youth in out-of-home settings. This overview describes implementation activities as of summer 2022, unless otherwise indicated.

Strategy implementation

The Wake County DHHS team tested various strategies to improve engagement of fathers and paternal relatives. DHHS started many of these strategies before the FCL BSC, but was able to continue and strengthen them by participating. During the course of the FCL BSC, DHHS added new strategies. These strategies are described here, organized by the relevant domain and goal in the Collaborative Change Framework, which guided the sites' work during the FCL and is described in detail in Chapter I.¹

Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives

Father-friendly environment. As part of the FCL BSC, DHHS created a father space in its child welfare offices and renovated Wake House. Wake House is a visitation center set up to look like a house. Families can meet in visitation rooms, play games in spaces set up like living or recreation rooms, and cook and eat meals together in a kitchen. DHHS intentionally designed and decorated the visitation center to be father-friendly by painting inclusive

murals on the walls and creating a "man-cave" type of space with couches and games. The visitation center provides opportunities for fathers and parents to engage with their children in different ways, such as buying and preparing food for their children. There are also parenting classes at Wake House, such as Parenting 101, anger management classes, and classes on parenting teens and toddlers. Staff from Wake House described the center as a "one-stop shop," providing outpatient treatment, legal services, and more.

Domain 2. Achieve racial justice for men of color in the child welfare system

Racial Equity Change Team. To prioritize conversations about racial equity, the department created the Racial Equity Change Team (RECT). RECT facilitates all-staff conversations on topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, which take place on the last Friday of every month and cover issues such as disparities in education and how to better engage fathers and paternal relatives. DHHS started this strategy during the FCL BSC to respond to concerns about racial injustice in protests happening across the country in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd.

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Genetic marker testing. Before the FCL BSC, child welfare partnered with child support to administer paternity tests to putative fathers. Using genetic marker testing allowed the department to identify fathers sooner, entitling them to more rights in the system and enabling them to be reunified with their children. During the FCL BSC, the department hired a new dedicated staff person to conduct genetic marker tests and partnered directly with LabCorp, the contractor that provides the tests.

Defining diligent efforts. Before the FCL BSC, the department developed county-specific guidance on what constituted “diligent efforts” to identify and engage fathers. The state of North Carolina requires diligent efforts, but does not define them. DHHS wanted to strengthen the requirements for its own county, so it defined these efforts explicitly. For example, DHHS requires that a staff member ask about the father right away during a hotline call and follow up within a 45-day timeline. Assessment staff work to learn the father’s identity and whereabouts at the beginning stages of the assessment process. They have additional resources, such as child support and federal locating services, if they are unable to get all of the information on their own. Staff are required to document these diligent efforts for each case. Since the FCL BSC, DHHS has continued to emphasize the importance of conducting and documenting diligent efforts to identify fathers.

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Father engagement coaches. Before the FCL BSC, the department created positions for father engagement coaches who provide one-on-one support to fathers and help the fathers participate in ongoing case planning meetings. In these meetings, father engagement coaches act as the father’s advocate in the room and can explain the fatherhood program to the father at that time. The father engagement coaches are Wake County employees, so caseworkers in the department

can refer fathers to the engagement coaches for services and can share information with the coaches, ensuring a smooth hand-off.

Domain 5. Continually involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout their children’s lives

Don’t forget about dad. Before the FCL BSC, DHHS coined the phrase “Don’t forget about dad” to name its agency-wide initiative to make locating and engaging fathers a priority for the department. As part of this strategy, the agency required supervisory conversations to explicitly focus on fathers and their engagement throughout the child welfare process.

Child-family team meetings. During the FCL BSC, DHS employed a strategy to increase the involvement of fathers by inviting them to child-family team meetings and required staff to track whether they also invited a father engagement coach. Ensuring the father’s attendance at this meeting brings them in from the beginning of the case so they are involved throughout its lifecycle of the case. If a father is at this initial meeting, it is easier for staff at DHHS to engage them or refer them to other services.

Organizational culture

Staff at Wake County DHHS noted that the agency had made improvements in its organizational culture to support fatherhood work. Despite challenges such as high caseloads and staff turnover, many staff pointed out that fatherhood work was prioritized more since participation in the FCL BSC and supported other organizational values, including being “family focused and person centered.” For example, some staff spoke to the fact that the department has moved away from focusing on the mom in permanency decisions to include fathers’ perspectives and consider them options for reunification.

Data

Wake County DHHS continues to review data on engaging fathers and paternal relatives. In alignment with its diligent efforts guidance, the department tracks whether attempts were made to contact the father and whether the father was invited to child

and family teaming meetings. Since the FCL BSC, DHS has used data visualization through Power BI to create data dashboards that can be used to filter data for analysis. DHHS leaders expect caseworkers and supervisors to review these data in their meetings together. The continuous quality improvement team has been able to review aggregate data on reunifications to track whether more fathers are being reunified with their children. Several staff said data collection can be difficult because they work with multiple systems that are old and not easily compatible with one another. Table E.1 shows the key indicators and metrics that Wake County shared data on for the descriptive evaluation.

Continued use of BSC elements

Though DHHS has not continued specific elements of the FCL BSC, it has continued partnering with the community and put more emphasis on continuous quality improvement. During its participation in the FCL BSC, Wake County DHHS consolidated its work on continuous quality improvement in a new unit. The goal was to coordinate case reviews and training, and improving the department's use of data. The department saw the increasing focus on continuous quality improvement as an outgrowth of its participation in the FCL BSC.

Table E.1. Father and paternal and relative engagement metrics tracked after the FCL BSC

Indicator	Metrics
Identification of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of initial calls in which a father was identified • Number of cases with outreach made to outside partners to identify father
Continuous involvement of fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of fathers invited to case planning meetings • Number of fathers attending case planning meetings • Number of Wake House visits that involved a father and his child
Meeting fathers' needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of referrals to father engagement coaching • Number of fathers completing father engagement coaching
Permanency outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of youth reunified with father or paternal relative

Endnotes

¹ The FCL study team determined the relevance of the Collaborative Change Framework domains to each strategy. Sites might have classified their strategies differently. Strategies that relate to multiple domains are listed under the domain the study team deemed most relevant.

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