

**breakthrough
series**
collaborative

**Timely Permanency
through Reunification**

who we are

About Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused entirely on foster care and improving the child welfare system. Founded in 1966, we work to provide and improve – and ultimately prevent the need for – foster care in the United States. As champions for change, we are committed to our 2020 Strategy for America's Children – a goal to safely reduce the number of children in foster care and improve the lives of those who remain in care. We have decades of front-line experience in foster care and are committed to helping states, counties and tribes implement effective child welfare practices. We provide nonpartisan research and technical expertise to child welfare system leaders, members of Congress and state legislators so they may craft laws and policies to better the lives of children in foster care, children at risk of entering the system and their families. The foundation, established by United Parcel Service founder Jim Casey, is based in Seattle.

For more information about this report, contact Casey Family Programs at info@casey.org or visit our website at www.casey.org.

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Breakthrough Series
on Timely Permanency
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**Executive
Summary**



Executive Summary

Casey Family Programs recognizes that increasing children's exits to permanency is a vital component in the effort to safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 50 percent by the year 2020. The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is one of several innovative methodologies being used to support Casey's 2020 permanency and safe reduction strategies. The BSC on Timely Permanency through Reunification was framed using empirical and best practice data – as well as federal legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 – that support family reunification as the best outcome for children in care.

The Search Institute lists family support as an essential building block of healthy development for children of all ages.¹ In response to this and other comparable findings, child welfare is evolving from its original purpose of “saving” children from abuse, neglect, and poverty into a system in which the achievement of permanency through family is an outcome equivalent to that of safety. With this in mind, public and tribal child welfare agencies representing nine states partnered with their respective court systems and engaged birth parents with first-hand experience of the child welfare system, alumni of the foster care system, and community partners. Together they embarked on a two-year journey that resulted in:

- 727 children being reunified with their families across the teams' target sites.
- Over 150 small practice changes being tested at the target sites.
- Over 22 successful practices being spread beyond the teams' target sites.
- Every team experiencing significant increases in the strength and depth of cross-systems relationships.
- A paradigm shift related to partnership between the public or tribal child welfare agency, the court system, birth parents, alumni, and community partners.

This report describes the Timely Permanency through Reunification Breakthrough Series Collaborative process, starting with an overview of the BSC methodology and the Change Package that guided the work of the teams. The report also highlights the promising practices, outcomes, and lessons learned that resulted from the teams' application of the methodology. Finally, the appendices include practical tools and resources developed during the course of their work that can be used to implement improvements related to timely permanency through reunification.

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Introduction:
Making the Case for
Timely Permanency
and Family



Introduction: Making the Case for Timely Permanency and Family

Recent data from the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting and Analysis System (AFCARS) provides a snapshot of the national landscape as it pertains to reunification. Here are some key findings:²

- On September 30, 2009, there were an estimated 423,773 children in foster care.
- Almost a quarter (24 percent) were in relative homes, and nearly half (48 percent) were in non-relative foster family homes.
- Almost half (49 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their families.
- The majority of children who exited foster care in fiscal year (FY) 2009 were reunited with their families (51 percent).
- Close to half of the children (46 percent) who left foster care in FY2009 were in care for less than one year.
-

These findings support the positive trends in child welfare observed during the last decade, namely, a decrease in the number of children in care, a decrease in the number of entries into care, and an increase in the number of exits from foster care.



In every conceivable manner, the family is a link to our past, a bridge to our future.

—ALEX HALEY



A closer look at outcomes for the 276,266 children who left care in 2009 emphasizes the need for continued focus on timely permanency through reunification.² First, FY2009 data reveal a decrease in the number of children leaving the system to be reunited with family. Second, while almost half of children who enter foster care are able to leave within one year, and fewer children enter the foster care system for less than one month or remain in care beyond three years, increasing percentages of children are remaining in care for two or three years.

Over all, timely permanency outcomes data for children in care suggest improvement. However, a deeper analysis of these positive trends makes a clear case that there is room for continued progress related to reunification outcomes and the timeliness in which reunification is achieved.³

Several determinants for timely reunification are well documented in the literature. Among other factors, the probability of reunification is correlated with the following:

Age: Children under the age of 1 year when entering care are less likely to be reunited with their parents than those entering after their first birthday.⁴

Introduction: Making the Case for Timely Permanency and Family

Length of stay: Reunification is much more likely to take place early in a placement rather than later. With every year a child remains in foster care, the likelihood of reunification declines.⁵

Race/Ethnicity: According to AFCARS data,² of the national foster care population (427,000) on September 30, 2009:

Black children comprised 33% in foster care compared to 14% of the child population (2.3x).

Hispanic children comprised 18% in foster care compared to 22% of the child population (0.8x).

White non-Hispanic children comprised 40% in foster care compared to 56% of the child population (0.7x).

American Indian children comprised 3% in foster care compared to 1% of the child population (3x). (Note: This is public child welfare data only; no tribal data were available.)

The Charge

Based on prevailing data and national trends associated with timely permanency and reunification, the BSC's charge to participating teams was to develop practice changes that would positively impact the rate of timely reunification. This charge was framed by a *change package* that outlined key practice areas that are associated with positive reunification outcomes.

Outcomes

By the close of the BSC, 727 children had been reunified with their families across the 11 teams' target sites.

During the course of this two-year collaborative, 11 participating teams tested strategies around key practices that were identified by experts in the field as vital components of family reunification. By the close of the BSC, 727 children had been reunified with their families across the 11 teams' target sites (for a description of target sites, see Section IV). This figure reflects data collected during the period January 2009 through May 2010. What's more, teams celebrated qualitative successes that were transformative to their systems, including shifts in the way they partnered across systems to achieve improved reunification outcomes.

Introduction: Making the Case for Timely Permanency and Family

This report highlights aspects of the Collaborative experience and the most promising of the teams' work efforts. The following color-coded sections offer a closer look at:

Background and Overview of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative

The Change Package

Preparing for the Work

Outcomes—Promising Practices

- a. Timely permanency
- b. Constituency engagement
- c. Cross-systems engagement
- d. Disproportionality and disparate outcomes

Data and Measurement

Lessons Learned

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**Background
and Overview**
of the Breakthrough
Series Collaborative



Background and Overview of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative

The Breakthrough Series Methodology

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) was developed in 1995 by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and Associates in Process Improvement (API). This quality improvement method has grown into an international movement in healthcare. Based on the success of IHI, Casey brought the BSC methodology to the field of child welfare. In 2001, Casey launched its first BSC on Improving Health Care for Children in Foster Care in collaboration with IHI. Since then, Casey has led seven other BSCs to address significant issues facing agencies serving children in foster care:

- Improving Health Care for Children in Foster Care (2001-2002)
- Recruiting and Retaining Resource Families (2003-2004)
- California State Differential Response (2004-2005)
- Supporting Kinship Care (2004-2005)
- Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System (2005-2006)
- Improving Educational Continuity and School Stability for Children in Out-of-Home Care (2006-2007)
- Timely Permanency through Reunification (2008-2010)
- State of Iowa: Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes for Children and Families of Color in the Child Welfare System (2009-2010)

In addition to these BSCs, Casey Family Programs has sponsored collaboratives in partnership with the following external partners:

- American Humane Association: Safety and Risk Assessments (2007-2010)
- Georgetown University Center for Juvenile Justice Reform: Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Integration (2008-2010)
- State of California: CA Disproportionality Project (2007-2010)
- State of California: Independent Living Transformation (2007-2010)
- New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners and Directors: Safety and Risk Assessments (2008-2010)

Key Aspects of the BSC Methodology

The BSC brings teams from public and tribal child welfare agencies together from across the country to rapidly test strategies to improve prevailing issues in child welfare. Each team is guided and mentored by experts in the field as they develop, test, improve, and spread their successful strategies. Teams share lessons learned via telephone conferences, four in-person meetings called *learning sessions*, and a secured Internet site, referred to as the *Extranet*. The BSC process takes approximately 18 to 24 months from planning to completion.

The BSC methodology differs from a standard pilot or implementation project in several ways. The key aspects that set a BSC apart from other systems-change initiatives include the following six characteristics.

- **Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles are the catalyst for rapid change.**

Instead of spending a long time planning for massive changes, teams test ideas as soon as they occur. They are encouraged never to plan more than they can actually do—and if they can't complete their test “by next Tuesday,” they need to make their test even smaller.

- **Anyone can have and test ideas.**

Change occurs from the bottom up. Ideas to test should come from every team participant. Frontline workers, youth and family members previously involved with the system, community partners, judges, and management all have a great deal of experience and knowledge; thus, all are recognized as a source of good ideas that can be tested.

- **Consensus is not needed.**

The BSC encourages participants to test their ideas in the field instead of talking about their ideas in a meeting room. Team members do not need to be in agreement for an idea to be tested.

- **Ideas are openly shared.**

This methodology has the word *collaborative* in its title for a specific reason. Each participating team in the BSC benefits greatly from the successes, discoveries, and challenges of the other teams. There are several levels of collaboration necessary for teams to be successful in a BSC: inter-team, intra-team, and community.

- **Intra-team collaboration**

The first type of collaboration exists within each jurisdiction's BSC team. BSC core team membership represents different levels of the public or tribal child welfare agency, courts, and community-based organizations, in addition to parents and youth who have had direct involvement with the child welfare system. The extended team membership also varies across jurisdictions, but it typically includes a broad representation of stakeholders. BSC faculty members coach these inclusive teams on how to value the voice of each team member and honor the voices of youth and families.

- **Inter-team collaboration**

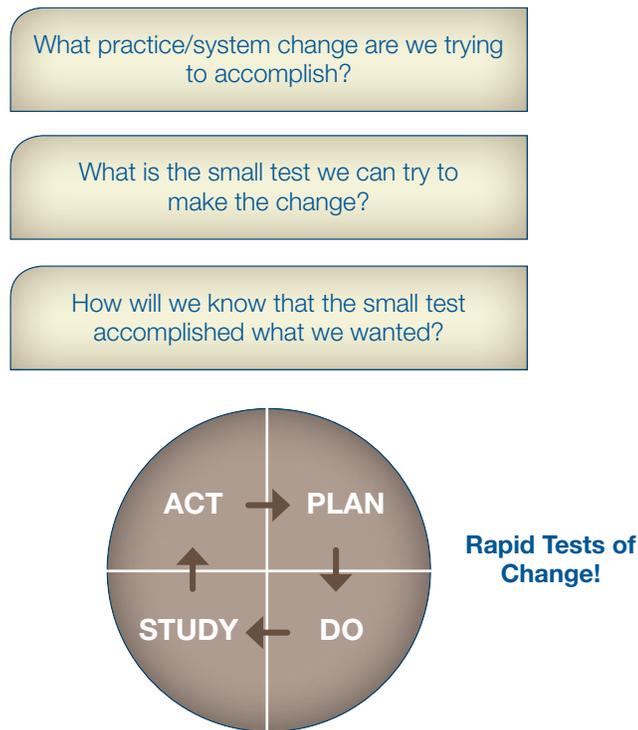
At the broadest level, a BSC is a collaboration of teams from across the country. While Casey supports the teams by providing access to expert faculty, we have found that teams learn best from one another. Cross-team sharing is encouraged through regular conference calls, the secured Extranet, a newsletter, and four in-person 2-day learning sessions.

- **Community collaboration**

The final level of collaboration challenges jurisdictions and/or tribes to improve the way they partner with the community and other systems in their efforts to address a specific issue. This collaboration is independent of the BSC organizational structure, reflecting a change in agency and court practice.

- o **Successes are spread quickly.**
Many pilot projects begin and remain in a pilot site. Or worse yet, once a “project” is completed, the pilot somehow disappears. The BSC methodology tries to prevent this from happening. Once a change has been tested successfully in the pilot site, the team is responsible for spreading that change throughout the agency, jurisdiction, and/or tribe.
- o **We measure to gauge improvement.**
The BSC strives to demonstrate improvements over time. Each participating team is encouraged to track and report on specific measures each month for self-evaluation. By looking at the progress in these measures as well as documenting small-scale practice changes, teams can monitor their progress and improvements over time. Measurement is not expected to support research.

Figure 1: The Model for Improvement



The BSC emphasizes rapid, small-scale tests of change using the Model for Improvement developed by Associates in Process Improvement. Teams conduct Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles geared toward addressing specific changes they would like to see happen in their systems. Using small tests minimizes the time spent planning and reduces the consequences of unsuccessful ideas.

Critical aspects of a successful PDSA process are defining the hypothesis of the small test of change and taking the time to determine if the intended outcome occurred. Teams who are most successful using the Model for Improvement understand the importance of not over-planning, of developing a clear “prediction” of what they hope will occur during the test, of keeping tests very small, and, immediately following the test, determining whether their prediction was accurate.

What Makes Teams Successful in Using the BSC Methodology?

Casey Family Programs strives to use the Breakthrough Series Methodology as a means to help teams identify promising practices and use them to create systems change that begins at the practice level. As a result of lessons learned from all the BSCs convened to date, Casey’s Systems Improvement Technical Assistance Unit has identified several key factors that impact team success.

- o **A dedicated core team**

While teams are selected from jurisdictions and tribes that are progressive leaders in understanding and addressing issues in child welfare such as timely permanency through reunification, ultimately their successes depend on the capacity of each of the individual team members to fully participate in the process. Balancing the dual responsibilities of each participant’s regular assignments, whether that is managing cases, supervising others, sitting on the judicial bench, or in the case of constituent members, working or going to school outside the sphere of child welfare, working toward systemic change can be overwhelming. While team members must be granted the time and flexibility to focus on BSC work efforts in addition to managing their primary job duties, each team member must make an individual commitment to do so.

For teams to fully benefit from the BSC experience, they must be able to access and participate in team collaboration. Teams that join all the Collaborative calls, access the secured Extranet site, and attend all learning sessions are able to fully benefit from the experience of peer-to-peer learning.

Special credit must be given to teams that give day-to-day managers the time and flexibility they need to carry out their many BSC-related duties. These are often the individuals most responsible for overseeing the multitude of tasks necessary to get their teams to the table on a regular basis, develop and facilitate meaningful agendas, and shepherd the work of the team from the initial PDSA idea through to the assessment of results and posting on the Extranet.

- o **Committed leadership**

Strong, committed senior leadership plays a significant role in the success of BSC teams. Strong leaders are needed to provide teams with the resources, including time, materials, equipment, access to local experts, and support to test practice changes. They are also needed to remove organizational barriers that impede progress from occurring on a practice level and to support and expand successful practice changes from the target site throughout the jurisdiction.

Leadership Strategies

Some of the individual steps senior leaders in the Timely Permanency BSC took to support their teams and promote success included:

- Securing federal stimulus money to hire new parent partners in support of constituency engagement.
- Convening meetings with staff and stakeholders to explain the work their teams were doing, demonstrating their commitment to the work and the process of bottom-up change, and engaging additional staff in the work of practice improvement.
- Sharing their experiences and successes with leadership within and across systems.

With two senior leaders on each team, this BSC presented twice the opportunity for leaders to assert the qualities necessary for team success. In this BSC, success was amplified when senior leaders from both systems were open to working together toward the same goals.

Teaming Across Systems

One example of the ways in which leaders worked together to amplify small practice change into large systems improvement was in the Washoe County, Nevada work on parent-child visiting. While team members were engaged in small tests of change around keeping children and parents connected during out-of-home placement, the court was engaged in examining visitation practices through the Model Court. Court and agency senior leaders engaged in difficult conversations about their different perspectives on how well the agency was implementing visitation plans. Supportive leadership in both systems enabled the county to develop practice guidelines for social workers that include documentation for court hearings.

o [Integration of BSC work with agency/court priorities](#)

The most successful teams find explicit ways of integrating the work of the BSC into their agency's and/or their court's strategic plan and priorities. The BSC methodology cannot be perceived as a new initiative; it must be viewed as a means to achieve what the system already wants to do in a more efficient and rapid manner. By understanding the priorities of the agency and court, teams are more successful at prioritizing the small tests of change and concentrating on the key areas that will result in maximum system improvement.

Integrating Work Efforts

In this BSC, several jurisdictions chose to focus their small tests of change in areas of practice that supported larger initiatives already underway.

Examples of the ways in which jurisdictions did this include the following:

- Los Angeles County previously implemented a point-of-engagement (POE) service delivery strategy, aimed at reducing entries into out-of-home care. LA County's Pasadena team tested communication/language use strategies that enhanced their interactions with both community partners and families in meetings already implemented under POE. LA County's Compton team worked on practices in collaboration with community partners, another focus of POE. By keeping many of their PDSAs centered in practices that fit into the POE service model, both teams were able to further the work of both initiatives at the same time.
- In Washoe County, Nevada, family solutions team (FST) meetings had been implemented as a family engagement process in mid-2008. Participation in the BSC gave this team the opportunity to vary the timing and/or content of FST meetings, testing new ways to use this existing process.
- The state of Virginia has been developing a practice model, Virginia Children's Services System Transformation, that is based on engaging families with agencies and community partners. The Fairfax County team tested a number of practices, both in the agency and in the court, that sought to improve the engagement of children and parents with both systems.

o **The capacity to track and report successes**

Working to change practice or to change entrenched systems is difficult. Small changes in outcomes for children and families can motivate teams to "keep up the good work." While teams vary in their ability to track data, teams that regularly track the progress and success of PDSAs are better able to adjust their focus if needed and communicate their improvements effectively. Section VI of this report takes a closer look at teams' successes and challenges related to data and measurement.

o **An engaged extended team**

The ultimate goal of a BSC is to spread successful tests of change throughout the organization and community. The core team is a small group of individuals committed to the issue – in this case, promoting timely permanency through reunification. The core team alone is not sufficient to spread and sustain changes in practice. Others within the agency and community must be brought into the change process.

Developing the Extended Team

- The Compton, California team began recruiting its extended team before the first learning session. Their extended team included representatives from systems as diverse as probation, mental health, foster care, and workforce training. Moreover, Tamar Village, a community agency that provides visitation services for parents in jail, was also part of this early extended team-building effort and became a lynchpin in the development of an extremely successful practice built on cross-system collaboration that helped reunite incarcerated mothers with their children more quickly than in the past. (For more details, see Section V.)
- The Michigan Sault Ste. Marie Tribe developed a PowerPoint presentation about halfway through the BSC and used it to explain the work they were doing to a mixed group of guardians ad litem, attorneys, prosecutors, caseworkers, and child welfare committee members. All core team members participated in the lunch-time presentation and solicited feedback and suggestions from the audience. Not surprisingly, the meeting resulted in an expansion of their extended team through volunteers who wanted to become involved in the work.

o **Engagement with other teams**

Taking advantage of the many opportunities to interact with, learn from, and teach other teams is one of the essential elements of the BSC process in that there is a wealth of practice knowledge residing in each court and agency and it makes little sense for every jurisdiction to have to create its own knowledge base. Teams that make the most of collaborative learning sessions, phone calls, and Extranet postings greatly expand their knowledge of what works and what doesn't based on other teams' successes and challenges.

In the Timely Permanency BSC, there were several practice areas in which multiple teams were testing similar PDSAs. Connecting with their peers enabled these teams to learn from each others' experiences, test ideas they had not thought of themselves, and compare notes on what worked and what needed tweaking. Teams reported making significant progress on their own tests of change based on input from other teams in areas as diverse as parent and youth mentoring, parent-child visitation, and the consistent use of clear, meaningful language.

Sharing Knowledge Across Teams

- Several teams were particularly interested in finding ways for birth parents and foster parents to work together towards timelier reunifications, but they were unfamiliar with successful strategies to make that happen. Fairfax County, Virginia, was already engaged in an initiative called Bridging the Gap, which builds relationships between the various persons involved in a child's life, with the focus on reunification or other forms of permanency. By sharing their experience, Fairfax helped the Iowa and Washoe County, Nevada teams develop tests of activities such as icebreaker meetings (for more details, see Section V).

- o **Employing Support from Faculty and Staff**

The BSC leadership consists of Casey staff, who are knowledgeable about the BSC methodology and experienced in varying aspects of child welfare, and a faculty drawn from national experts in the subject of each collaborative. Together, these individuals hold a tremendous wealth of knowledge that helps teams move forward in their systems improvement efforts. Teams that are open to discussions of their practice ideas in open forums such as collaborative calls and in individual meetings with faculty members at learning sessions are able to receive ideas, challenge their own assumptions, and move into new areas by virtue of their exposure to individuals with a broad base of experience. Those teams that fully embrace the coaching, encouragement, and support offered via phone calls and emails are better equipped to sustain their work efforts during difficult times.

The seven variables called out in this section are among many elements identified over the years as foundational to the success of teams throughout the Collaborative process. Each successive BSC reveals additional insight into what attributes to team success. In Section VII: Lessons Learned of this report, additional insights regarding team success are explored.

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The Change Package



The Change Package

In the Breakthrough Series Collaborative, the Change Package is the key guiding document that outlines the areas of focus for the development and testing of practice change strategies.

The Change Package:

- Describes best, evidenced-based, and promising practices.
- Provides an assessment model against which teams can measure their practice in each component area.
- Provides an opportunity for prioritization of the work based upon ongoing team self-assessments throughout the course of the Collaborative.
- Creates an umbrella for focused small tests of practice change.

Overview of the Timely Permanency Change Package

The development of the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC Change Package (see Appendix A) was informed by the convening of 60 experts including parents and youth, workers, supervisors, administrators, judges, policy analysts, and others. The final product outlined the purpose of the BSC, defined key issues and challenges impacting timely reunification, and identified nine key component areas that guided the innovation of practice improvements that can influence timely permanency through reunification.

9 Key Component Areas of Timely Permanency through Reunification

- Committing to reunification as the most desirable permanency outcome
- Recognizing and reducing disproportionality and disparate outcomes
- Making sound decisions on permanency
- Engaging the family network as partners
- Using out-of-home placements to support reunification
- Using services and supports as a foundation for reunification
- Recruiting, preparing, and supporting a qualified workforce
- Continuing to support the family after reunification
- Collaborating with cross-systems and community partners

The nine component areas included in the Change Package were designed to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words, each component guided the work by identifying a broad practice area in which strategies for improving practice could be tested. Participating teams were free to determine which areas to focus their change efforts in, based on their assessment of their own current practices and needs. However, all teams were encouraged to address all nine component areas over the course of their BSC involvement.

In addition to the key component areas, the Change Package offered guiding principles and values that framed the work of the Collaborative. These fundamental beliefs about engaging children, families, tribes, and communities were promoted in collaborative activities.

Guiding Principles and Values

- The most desirable place for children is in their own families.
- Parents, children, youth, kin, communities, and tribes have strengths, resiliency, and natural support to offer.
- Active engagement of constituents is fundamental.
- Beliefs, values, and family practices of cultural, racial, religious, and ethnic groups are respected; services and support are culturally responsive.
- Strategies maintain, honor, and support relationships and connections.
- All staff are committed to partnering with families and children.
- Communication is honest, respectful, and direct.
- Agencies, tribes, and courts assume responsibility and provide support for compliance with Indian Child Welfare Act.

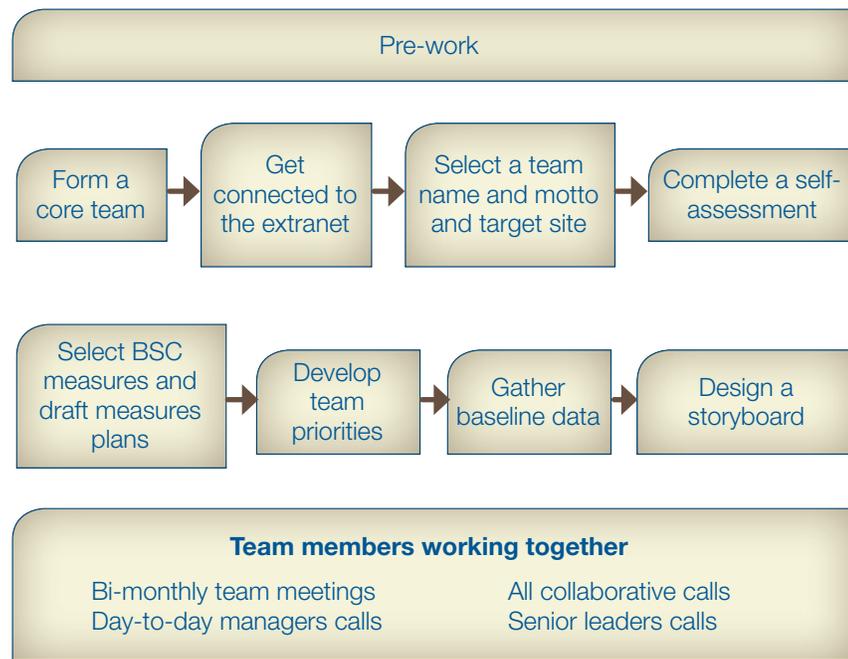
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Preparing for the Work



Preparing for the Work

Figure 2: The Pre-Work Process



The Pre-Work Process

Team Selection

Public and tribal agencies and their corresponding court systems were recruited to participate in the BSC through a national effort. The application process required agencies and their court systems to demonstrate interest and commitment to collaborating on the implementation of rapid and widespread practice changes across their systems. A critical component of the application was a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by both the agency and court senior leaders. In signing the MOU, agency and court senior leadership committed to supporting their teams' engagement in the BSC; to make necessary human and material resources available; and to provide unequivocal support to their teams as they tested and implemented successful practices.

The selected jurisdictions along with one tribe each built a core team composed of nine key stakeholders: two senior leaders representing the public/tribal child welfare agency and court system; a day-to-day manager, typically a mid-level manager in the child welfare agency; a supervisory social worker from the agency; a line social worker from the agency; a community partner representing the private child welfare sector; a court partner, who could be an attorney, court administrator, or court appointed special advocate (CASA); and young adult and birth parent team members with previous direct involvement in the child welfare system.

The core team was complimented by an extended team, whose primary purpose was to support the work by contributing to innovation and the ultimate spread of practice improvements. The extended team, composed of additional representatives from the agency, court, community, and constituents, was built over the course of the two years. For a list of participating teams in this BSC, see Appendix B.

Identification of a Target Site

The target site is the location within the public/tribal child welfare system or court systems jurisdiction where teams initially focused their systems change efforts. Each participating team had the flexibility to identify their target site in a way that suited their organizational structure. Some teams defined their target sites as a geographic area served by the agency or court; others used a specific unit, department, or regional office as the testing ground for their change efforts.

Self-Assessment and Baseline Information

At the start of the Collaborative, teams rated their strengths and challenges based on the nine key component areas identified in the Change Package. They used these ratings to prioritize and guide their work efforts. Over the course of the two years, teams revisited their self-assessments to track and monitor their progress and inform the focus of their systems improvement efforts.

Data and Measures

The BSC used measurement to capture the positive impacts that the small tests of change had over time on the children and families that the jurisdictions serve. BSC measures and data are not for empirical or scientific research; instead, they support and capture practice improvements.

The measures tracked and reported by BSC teams were defined by a measures packet. Teams collected and posted the following information:

1. Specific monthly measures related to the children, youth, and families in their target sites
2. Specific quarterly measures related to the children, youth, and families in their jurisdiction or tribe
3. Data related to small tests of practice change, i.e., Plan Do Study Act [PDSA] cycles tested in their target sites

Data collected from monthly and quarterly measures provided hard evidence of success, which drove the spread of practice improvements through the target sites, jurisdictions/tribes, and beyond.

Support Available to BSC teams

BSC Faculty and Planning Team

Teams benefited from the support of a national faculty and planning team composed of experts from public child welfare, the court system, the community, and birth parents and alumni with first-hand experience of the child welfare system (see Appendix B). The faculty and planning team composition mirrored that of the participating teams. The faculty co-chairs brought agency and judicial leadership insight and expertise. The remaining faculty and planning team members were renowned national experts who offered experience from perspectives including public, tribal, and private child welfare; the court system; the community; and the constituents. Their contributions were invaluable to the Collaborative.

BSC Staff

The Casey BSC staff guided the faculty and planning team to develop and execute activities to augment the teams' understanding and application of the BSC methodology during the various phases of the Collaborative. Staff also ensured that the integrity of the methodology was upheld while simultaneously exercising the flexibility to evolve the work in a way befitting the teams' unique challenges and needs.

BSC Activities and Communications

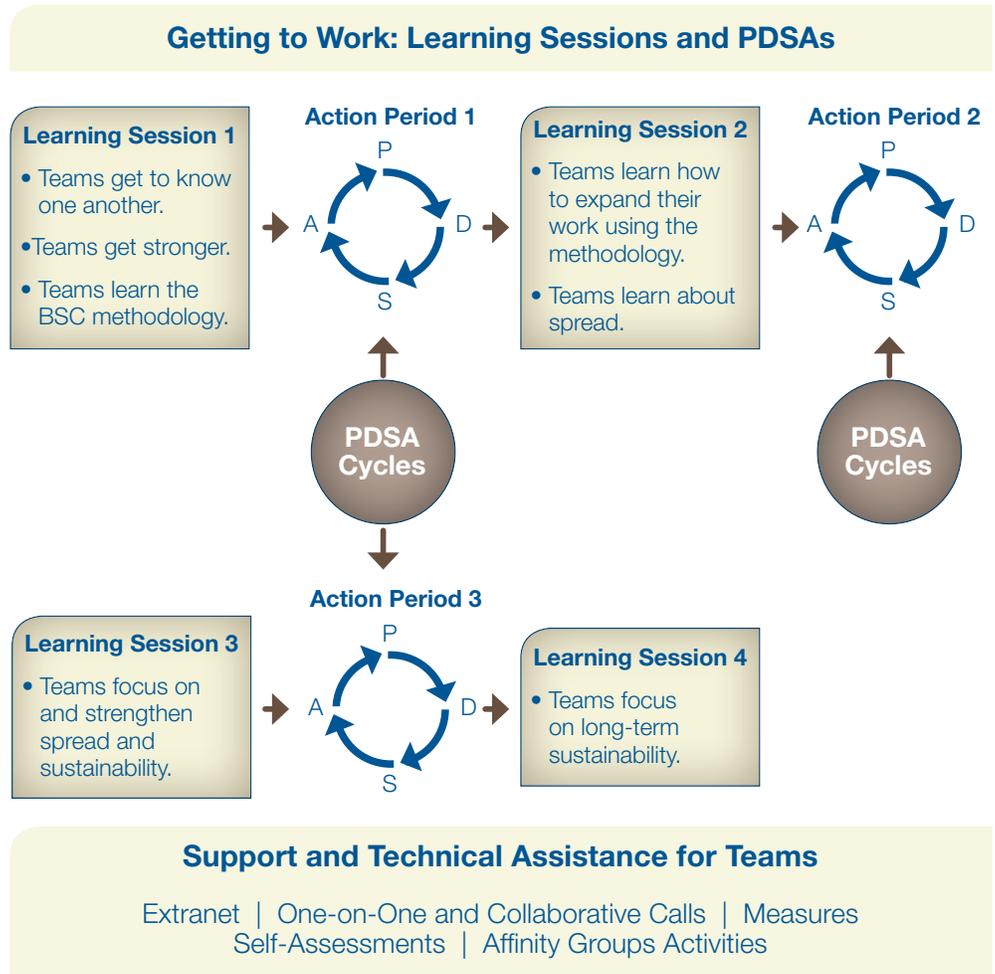
Learning Sessions

During the course of the two years, teams came together for four in-person learning sessions. Learning sessions were dynamic 2-day meetings that provided participating teams the opportunity to exchange their learnings and successes around achieving timely permanency through reunification. During these meetings, teams had direct access to the faculty, planning team, and Casey staff, who offered group activities, technical support, and individualized consultation around specific challenges.

Action Periods

The time between learning sessions, referred to as *action periods*, offered teams the opportunity to implement strategies and apply new learning about the methodology acquired during learning sessions. During action periods, cross-team learning continued via monthly teleconference calls, the reporting of data and measures, staff and faculty feedback to teams, Extranet postings, and a Collaborative newsletter.

Figure 3: Learning Sessions and PDSAs



The Extranet

The Extranet is a secured website that can only be accessed by BSC participants. It served as a vehicle for exchanging information across teams. Teams posted PDSAs, data, tools, and resources that were beneficial to forwarding the work of improving timely permanency through reunification. Moreover, the Extranet housed an extensive bibliography of relevant literature and research.

Affinity Group Activities

A noteworthy element of the Collaborative learning experience was the opportunity for team members to form relationships with peers from across the country who serve in similar capacities. Through the lens of their specialized professional and personal expertise, court and agency senior leaders, public child welfare personnel, court personnel, community agencies, birth parents, young adults, and attorneys worked with their peers to develop strategies to advance timely permanency through reunification.

Breakthrough Series
on Timely Permanency
through Reunification

Outcomes – Promising Practices



Outcomes: Promising Practices



From day one, child welfare workers need to be thinking about reunification—it's the number one permanency option.⁶

—MILLICENT WILLIAMS

BSC faculty quoted in *Giving the Family a Chance: Working towards Reunification*



Overarching Themes in the Work

The work accomplished by teams was categorized into four major thematic areas:

- Timely reunification
- Constituency engagement
- Cross-systems engagement
- Disproportionality and disparate outcomes

These four thematic categories served as the lens through which the most promising practices developed by teams were examined. It is important to recognize that these four focus areas are inextricably connected to the nine component areas listed in the Change Package. That is to say, any given promising practices almost always addressed several of the nine component areas simultaneously, which makes it difficult to examine any one component area in isolation.

During the development of practice changes, teams were asked to be very intentional about considering the component areas that the strategy had the potential to address. Moreover, at this stage, teams were also encouraged to take into account how disproportionality and disparate outcomes could be impacted by the practice change they were developing.

The following sections look at promising practices that emerged through the lens of the four focus areas. This exploration includes promising practice changes that came out of the PDSA methodology, i.e., incremental practice changes resulting from small, rapid tests of change, and practice changes that emerged as a result of larger initiatives.

Timely Reunification

Change Package Components Related to Timely Reunification

Component 1: Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome

Component 3: Making Sound Decisions on Permanency

Component 5: Using Out-of-Home Placements to Support Reunification

Component 6: Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification

As evidenced by the name of the Collaborative, the belief that the best outcome for children in care is their safe and timely return to their families of origin was the underpinning of every practice change that teams tested. Whether directly or indirectly, all practice innovations were designed with the ultimate goal of timely reunification of the children in mind. The following overview of promising practices provides a snapshot of the ideas that showed the most potential to influence the achievement of timely reunification.

A Closer Look at the Development of PDSAs

Because the BSC methodology encourages the sharing and replication of promising practices among teams, these teams regularly borrowed promising practice strategies from their peers, often making adjustments in order to address unique regional nuances. Consequently, variations of similar practice changes were simultaneously tested, implemented, and spread across participating jurisdictions. In planning for practice changes, teams were strongly encouraged to complete a Plan Do Study Act (PDSA) planning form. The form supported the development of strategies with a well-defined end in mind by prompting teams to think about their rationale for testing a specific practice change and to anticipate expected outcomes and/or barriers to instituting the practice with one child or one family.

Promising Strategies and Practices

Some of the most successful practice changes impacting timely permanency through reunification were the following:

- Facilitating and supporting family and sibling visitation
- Communicating in language that is understandable and meaningful
- Preparing and supporting the family for the transition to reunification
- Reducing time to reunification
- Engaging families in planning and decision making

The following sections highlight a selection of the listed promising practices. For additional examples, please see Appendix D.

Supporting Visitation

A review of the literature reveals that parent-child visitation is a key predictor of reunification.⁷ A 1996 study of reunification by Davis, Landsverk, Newton, and Ganger found that in a sample of 922 children, those who were visited by their mothers were 10 times more likely to be reunited.⁸ What's more, in the first round of child and family service reviews (CFSRs; 2001-2004), a child's visits with his or her parents and siblings in foster care was one of six factors most closely associated with a "strength" rating on length of time to achieve reunification.⁸ Consequently, during the Collaborative, visitation emerged as a common focus across teams as they strategized towards timely reunification. The goals of practice changes related to family visitation included enhancing the quality of visits by securing family-friendly visitation sites, soliciting family input as to the location and nature of visits, and being intentional about moving from supervised visitation to safe unsupervised visitation.



Family visitation is often viewed as the heart of family reunification.

— F. WULCZYN⁵



Promising Visitation Practices

- The Fairfax County, Virginia team recognized visitation as one of the single most important factors in achieving reunification. They endeavored to promote a more family-friendly environment for visits by moving visits from the office into the community. The agency collaborated with a community partner to secure a house that they would transform into a family visitation site called “The House.” The House is located in a quiet neighborhood and provides a child-friendly environment for family visits. During visits, staff are present to assist with parenting skills and provide supervision when needed. By hosting visits in a more relaxed family environment, the team sought to maintain the bond between parent(s), siblings, and children in care; moreover, they hypothesized that parents would become more motivated to visit, engage in services, and ultimately achieve reunification.
- The Pasadena, California team tested and spread a similar practice that sought to increase visitation by securing community venues and identifying monitors from the community to supervise visits. They called this PDSA *Intentional Visitation in the Community*. The practice change focused on using visitation activities as opportunities to help parents build protective capacities and change the behaviors or conditions that caused the children to be considered unsafe or at risk. With the help of community partners, the team identified community visitation centers and trained neutral visitation monitors to identify safety concerns and to provide parents with coaching around concrete skills in order to remediate safety and risk concerns. This practice enables families to transfer learning from their counseling and other programs to their interactions with their children.
- The Clay County, Minnesota team’s *Supervised Visitation* PDSA was designed with the goal of moving family visits more expeditiously from supervised to unsupervised. All cases with supervised visitation in a particular work unit were reviewed during weekly unit meetings. During the meeting, workers examined each case to identify persistent safety reasons that necessitated visits remaining supervised. The team refined the review process by developing standardized questions to use during the case reviews. After testing this practice for five weeks, the team saw that by assessing the need for supervised visits on an ongoing basis, workers were able to recommend unsupervised visitation more quickly. The ongoing review of supervised visitation became a consistent practice during unit meetings. Agency social workers report having more clearly defined safety reasons for recommending supervised visitation.

Communicating in Language That Is Understandable and Meaningful

Promising Communication Practices

- The Adams County, Colorado team recognized that service providers sometimes assume everyone understands social services language in the same way. They anticipated that they would see more progress toward remediating the safety concerns that bring children into care if they ensured that there was mutual understanding between families and workers about expectations by using clearer language in their communications. Therefore, the team simplified concepts such as *safety*, *risk*, and *protective capacities*, aligning them with concrete observable behaviors. Caseworkers and other service providers met with parents to test the simplified definitions that they developed during case-related proceedings. As a result of explaining these key concepts, providing specific examples, and setting clear goals, the team reported that

For the last three months of data reported,

100% of children in the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe's target site received visits with their parents as expected, **100%** of parents received visits with their caseworkers as expected, **100%** of adjudicatory hearings were held within 65 days, and **100%** of families/youth reported feeling that their voices were heard while they participated in agency and court meetings/hearings!





If we truly want to improve our outcomes and the work we do with children and families, we must listen and get feedback and input from those who have received child welfare services. We must be willing and ready to listen to all of the feedback, the good, bad, and the indifferent because they are real experiences that can inform the work.

—CHAUNCEY STRONG
BSC Faculty Member



all around there was a clearer understanding about how success would be measured and achieved. The team also tested the efficacy of these definitions by exploring two important questions from the perspectives of the parent and the worker, respectively:

- o What specific protective behaviors are we looking for that will let us know that you can and will keep your child safe?
- o What will we hear or observe that will let us know that the parent is making progress toward developing the specific parental protective capacities we've discussed?

Initial tests of this practice resulted in parents expressing a clearer understanding of specific issues that needed to be addressed for their children to safely return home. (See Appendix E Tools and Resources.)

- The Pasadena, California team developed a tool that clarified definitions for *safety*, *risk*, and *protective capacity* in work they were doing in the BSC on Safety and Risk Assessments. As a result of further refining this tool during the Timely Permanency BSC, they benefited from a longer-than-usual opportunity to observe the effectiveness of this practice change. The team anticipated that the standardization of these important concepts during interactions with families would ensure that all parties understood what needed to happen in order to achieve safe reunification. They found this to be the case as families, community partners, and staff all began using the same definitions in their work.

Constituency Engagement

Change Package Components Related to Constituency Engagement

Component 4: Engaging the Family Network as Partners

Component 8: Continuing to Support the Family after Reunification

Component 9: Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners

A literature review of practices that promote successful and timely reunification suggests that common elements of successful reunification practices include involving birth families in planning and decision making, encouraging foster parent support of birth families, and facilitating visits with birth parents.⁷ Further, 2004 CFSR final reports noted that the lack of parent involvement in case planning and decision making that had been observed nationwide were among common hindrances to timely reunification.⁹

Family engagement was a focal point of the Collaborative's work efforts. Component 4 of the Change Package charged collaborative participants to value and respect constituents' perspectives and input in the systems reform process. Collaborative teams were encouraged to develop practice strategies that actively engaged youth, kin, and resource families as true partners in assessment, decision making, and case planning.

At the outset, the BSC faculty and planning team formed a subcommittee to promote a culture of constituency engagement in the Collaborative. The subcommittee created resources and learning opportunities that involved youth and birth parents as equal partners. In addition, Collaborative activities provided a prototype for constituency engagement that could be replicated by teams in their respective systems. The committee developed substantive activities that went beyond constituent team members simply sharing their personal stories. Casey

During first 5 months of reported data,

47 children were reunified from Oklahoma's target site. During the last 5 months of reported data, **95** children were reunified from Oklahoma's target site! During the first 3 months of reported data, 60% (188 out of 313) of children in the target site visited with their parents as expected. During the last 3 months of reported data, **99%** (153 out of 154) of children in the target site visited with their parents as expected!



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Our parent partner helped to motivate many of our PDSAs, and her insight has helped to improve not just the information we share with our parents but how we relay the message.

— COMPTON
California Team



resources, such as the Better Together program, equipped constituent team members with tools and strategic sharing skills that enhanced their ability to partner with other leaders in their jurisdictions and tribes. Beyond strategic and purposeful sharing, the value of constituents' contributions to the development of effective practice changes was emphasized as critical in child welfare system reform efforts. Consequently, some of the most promising practice changes were ideas offered and tested by youth and birth parent team members. The following family engagement practices emerged as most promising.

Goals and Challenges of Constituency Engagement in a BSC

- Identifying, recruiting, orienting, and retaining team members
- Bringing on constituent team members as full and equal partners, including having them serve in leadership roles
- Having mechanisms in place that both encourage and support full constituent involvement in team work throughout the life of the Collaborative
- Clarity regarding the roles and expectations of the constituent team members
- Sharing one's story strategically, in a way that concretely informs the work but also protects the sharer's well-being

Promising Strategies and Practices

- Engage parent mentors to support parents.
- Prepare and support birth families and foster families to work together towards reunification.
- Engage youth mentors to support youth.
- Provide information about the court and agency systems to children and families.
- Help families and youth organize information and resources
- Use family team meetings and team decision-making strategies frequently.
- Encourage youth to participate in court

Engage Parent Mentors to Support Parents

Promising Parent Mentorship Practices

- o The practice of employing parent partners who had previous child welfare experience as mentors to birth parents who are actively involved in the system resonated with the Clay County, Minnesota team. This was particularly the case for Clay County's birth parent team member. He played an integral role in evolving an idea inspired by work in other jurisdictions into a flourishing practice that has attracted media attention. Clay County's Parent Mentor PDSA used the birth parent team member, a father with previous experience in the child welfare system, to offer informal support and assistance to birth parents with active foster care

cases. In collaboration with BSC faculty member Nancy Colon, an expert on parent partner and engagement strategies, he developed a framework for reaching out and providing supportive feedback to other birth parents. With the proper release of information and consent of birth parents, he began testing and adjusting this strategy. Parents who were among the first to receive mentorship provided positive feedback about the PDSA. Consequently, the team moved to institutionalize the practice by developing a supportive network of parent partnership experts from around the nation and applying for a grant to begin creating a formal parent partner program for the county. By the close of the BSC, Clay County's birth parent team member was enlisted by the agency to coordinate and develop the parent partner program.

- o The Michigan Sault Ste. Marie Tribe's birth parent team member also successfully tested a practice involving parent-to-parent mentorship. She engaged birth parents during initial team decision-making meetings, leaving them her business card so that parents could follow up if they wished to contact her. At the close of the BSC, the team acknowledged the birth parent team member mentorship practice as one that would be sustained as an ongoing service after the BSC. Moreover, the team acknowledged the team member's instrumental role in transitioning the idea to a reality.

Prepare and Support Birth Families and Foster Families to Work Together towards Reunification

Promising Birth and Foster Family Collaboration Practices

- o Another approach to engaging birth parents enlisted foster parents as support, and, in some instances, mentors. The Iowa team explored holding "icebreaker meetings" between birth parents and foster parents as soon as possible upon a child's entry into the system. The intent of the meeting was to set the stage for foster parents to engage in a mentoring relationship with birth parents. An improved relationship between caregivers would provide children in care with more opportunities for meaningful contact with their parents, leading to more timely reunifications. Moreover, the team aspired to impact disproportionality and disparate outcomes by addressing the culture divide that occurs when children of color are placed with white foster parents. This was of particular concern since due to limited placement resources, the agency frequently places children of color with white families. They anticipated that icebreaker meetings would tear down preconceived notions and stereotypes often held by birth and foster parents about each other, especially when resource families do not share the same racial, ethnic, or cultural identity. This practice change is a good example of how one practice change can simultaneously address multiple themes in the work of timely reunification. The team has spread the icebreaker meeting practice to the extent that the importance of foster parents working very closely with birth parents is emphasized during foster parent pre-service training. Furthermore, a modified version of the icebreaker meeting is being used with relative caregivers to help foster a supportive relative caretaker/birth parent relationship prior to children being placed in relative care.
- o The Birth Parents and Foster Parents United PDSA was created by the Compton, California team to improve relationships between birth parents and foster parents

For the 17 months of reported data,
76% (216 out of 285) of children exited to
reunification from the city of Pasadena!



and to cultivate partnership in transitioning youth from foster care back home. The practice entails social workers coordinating a team decision-making meeting that includes birth parents and foster parents. This meeting serves to formally introduce birth parents to foster parents, clarify their respective roles, and set the stage for an amicable relationship. Foster parents are prepared to use visits as an opportunity to update birth parents about their children, and to exchange information with parents about household rules, routines, and parenting techniques. Moreover, outside of visits, birth parents and foster parents are encouraged to have weekly telephone contact to discuss school performance, behaviors, eating habits, and information about recent medical visits, etc. This practice proved very successful in establishing a partnership between birth parents and foster caregivers. As a result, the team reported fewer foster placement disruptions and fewer complaints from birth parents about foster caregivers.

Engage Youth Mentors to Support Youth

Oklahoma and Fairfax County, Virginia young adult team members came up with similar ideas to establish youth-to-youth mentoring in their respective jurisdictions.

Promising Youth Mentorship Practices

- o In Oklahoma, the young adult team member meets with youth in the shelter in which children are placed immediately following removal. During this meeting, he provides the “youth perspective” regarding children’s rights and what they can expect while in out-of-home care.
- o The Fairfax County team recognized that youth entering foster care are often overwhelmed. The team’s young adult team member proposed that through mentorship, a youth who has experienced foster care can help youth new to the system understand how, when, and where their voices can be heard. It was anticipated that the Youth Helping Youth PDSA would facilitate the adjustment of young people entering care. Moreover, it would equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to self-advocate. The team initially tested this idea by introducing the youth mentor during an initial hearing. After cycle 1, the team received feedback that the court setting was too stressful an environment to meet yet another new person. Consequently, in subsequent tests of this practice, youth were asked in advance whether they wanted to meet with a peer mentor. In addition, the team identified venues outside of court for the initial contact. The team further adjusted this practice by providing training to prepare the youth mentor for his role.
- o The Washoe County team found the Telling It Like It Is DVD produced by California Permanency for Youth Project (see Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources) so impactful that they decided to include a youth’s perspective in foster parent pre-service training. By doing so, they aspired to help prospective foster parents appreciate the importance of maintaining birth family connections. Moreover, they hoped this practice would engage foster parents early on as partners in the reunification process. After an initial test of this practice, the team received positive feedback from prospective foster parents. They continued to test this practice with the goal of expanding the practice to incorporate youth with foster care experience in foster parent training classes.

Provide Information about the Court and Agency Systems to Children and Families

Practices that Help Families and Youth Organize Information and Resources

- o The Iowa team developed a resource folder for distribution to youth entering the child welfare and juvenile court systems. The folder contained resources that equipped young people with the information necessary to take a more active role in decisions and case planning. The contents included resource and referral information as well as an overview of their rights and how the system works. After soliciting feedback from youth in foster care, the team enhanced the folder to include pockets for personal information such as pictures, medical records, and school records. The folder is now referred to as a Memory Keeper. The Memory Keeper became a county-wide practice and is now being spread to other Iowa counties.
- o The Green Folder is another resource that was developed by the Iowa team to provide families with the tools and community support necessary to navigate the system, achieve case plan goals, and ultimately achieve timely permanency. The team's practice change around this tool involved the judge presenting the Green Folder to families during removal hearings. The practice garnered widespread enthusiasm and support. After testing the practice in their target site, the team approached their judicial district summit for additional funding to spread the practice. The summit generously agreed to fund the spread of the Green Folder practice across all of the counties covered by the judicial district. The Green Folder is now a county-wide judicial resource.
- o The Compton, California team came up with a creative PDSA titled Calendaring Your Success. This practice change involves judges disseminating a calendar to parents in court. The calendar serves as a tool to organize important dates and contacts. Moreover, the contents include information about court etiquette, birth parents' rights and responsibilities, definitions and explanations about the court and child welfare systems, how to file complaints, available services and support, and space to record important contacts. The team developed an English and Spanish version of the calendar. The calendars have been a huge success in Compton. Families are reportedly bringing their calendars to team decision-making meetings and other case proceedings. As a result, they are now better equipped to show concrete evidence of their progress. (See Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources.)
- o The Oklahoma team's court and agency collaboratively produced an orientation video targeted to families entering the system. The video was developed by and featured the team's birth parent team member, judge, and line social worker. The video was designed to provide a clear explanation of the agency and court system and to empower parents with knowledge about court and agency processes. After watching the video, parents were given a survey to assess the video's impact. The team reported that an overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicated that the video was very helpful. At the close of the BSC, the state child welfare central office was developing a version of the video to be used state-wide.

Use Family Team Meetings and Team Decision-Making Strategies Frequently

Most teams were already using family team meetings and team decision-making meetings (TDMs) as tools to promote reunification. However, considering the prevalence of research findings pointing to family team meetings and team decision making as valuable family engagement resources, many teams tested practices that engage families in these meetings more frequently.

Promising Team Meeting Practices

- The Iowa team implemented family team meetings every 30 days. Additionally, the focus of the meetings was refined to “what can be accomplished today, within 2 weeks, and by the next meeting (within the next 30 days).” By the end of the Collaborative, the practice had spread to two counties in their service area.
- The Michigan Sault Ste. Marie Tribe was already using team decision making as a tool to support family engagement throughout the life of a case. The meetings engaged birth parents, foster parents, social workers, and other service providers and stakeholders. The team strategized to use TDMs more regularly at key decision points in the life of a case, particularly upon initial placement, prior to reunification, and at transition points.
- Other interesting practices tested by teams include the Oklahoma team’s practice of replacing the permanency planning review with a family team meeting. This change resulted in families having a family team meeting upon initial entry into the system and every six months thereafter. Similarly, the Adams County, Colorado team introduced a family team meeting when cases transition from the intake unit to the ongoing foster care unit. This practice improved the transition and continuum of services.

Encourage Youth to Participate in Court

During the course of the Collaborative process, teams began to recognize the value of the voice of youth throughout the life of a case. Consequently, many strategies they developed focused on engaging and equipping young people to participate in case planning, decision making, and court proceedings as soon as possible upon entry into the system. During affinity group meetings for court senior leaders, judges representing each team engaged in discussions about the advantages and challenges of having youth participate in court proceedings. Most concurred that having young people participate in court could provide valuable first-hand information; however, several valid concerns were raised about the practice of engaging youth in court proceedings. First, there was consideration given to the emotional implications for children participating in hearings where sensitive and emotionally charged issues were being raised. There was also discussion around the tradeoff between having children present during court proceedings versus having children miss time from school or their routine.

Promising Youth Engagement Court Practices

- The San Francisco City and County team came up with a progressive solution to this dilemma. By using Skype technology, the team strategized that they could engage youth in hearings without them having to miss school or disrupt the normalcy of their routines. Moreover, the use of the technology could control for a young person’s exposure to potentially emotionally charged exchanges in court. The team tested this idea by partnering with a youth’s school to set up a Skype connection in the guidance counselor’s office. The same was set up in the court room. When the case was called up, the youth was Skyped into the court proceeding with minimal disruption to his school day. This idea piqued a great deal of interest and enthusiasm across teams, so much so, that the use of Skype technology to support youth and family engagement spread both within San Francisco and to other teams. At the final learning session, the San Francisco team reported that the technology was recently used to connect a birth father who was deployed to Afghanistan into a court proceeding for his child.



You're not scary
at all.

— CLAY COUNTY

Minnesota child speaking to
a judge.

By engaging youth
early in the court
and agency pro-
cess and arming
them with knowl-
edge about their
rights, the youth
feels helped, more
knowledgeable,
and supported
throughout the
process.

— BSC TEAM MEMBER



- Both Clay County, Minnesota and Fairfax County, Virginia teams tested approaches that offered young people an opportunity to speak with their judge during hearings. If the youth was interested in having a conversation with the judge, appropriate steps were taken to ensure that all parties were in agreement with the youth meeting the judge in chambers.

Cross-Systems Engagement

Change Package Components Related to Cross-Systems Engagement

Component 7: Recruiting, Preparing, and Supporting a Qualified Workforce

Component 9: Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners

The literature points to several cross-systems considerations that influence timely permanency: cooperation between court and agencies, tracking permanency timeframes, the number of continuances, crowded court dockets, and extending permanency timeframes beyond ASFA guidelines.⁸

This BSC was intentional about connecting child welfare agencies with their court systems to generate actionable strategies that could improve their systems and ultimately improve timely reunification outcomes. Common barriers to effective court and agency collaboration were called out and subsequently addressed by teams using several approaches. Courageous conversations during the Collaborative unveiled misconceptions held by one system about the other; candid exchanges helped debunk common myths and stereotypes that, though rarely discussed, greatly diminish the potential for cross-systems partnership. Moreover, the Collaborative convened agency and court senior leaders bimonthly for affinity group conversations that provided a forum to exchange successes and challenges related to cross-systems collaboration. The Collaborative also hosted affinity calls for attorneys from every jurisdiction and tribe. These affinity calls focused on how attorneys can affect improved permanency outcomes in their role.

Beyond the court-agency relationship, teams acknowledged the different systems partners that inform and affect permanency outcomes. Every system that touches the lives of children in care was recognized as an essential contributor to the achievement of safe, successful, and timely reunifications.

Promising Cross-Systems Engagement Strategies and Practices

- Enhance agency-court communication.
- Develop a collaborative network of resources.
- Educate and engage partners and the community.

Enhance Agency-Court Communication

Promising Practices

- The Michigan Sault Ste. Marie Tribe convened their court, agency, and community to improve communication and invent practices to improve reunification outcomes. The

All of the children reunified from San Francisco's

target site in 2010 were reunified in less than 18 months! During the first 6 months of the reported data, 30% (13 out of 43) of children who had been reunified six months earlier from San Francisco's target site had a new substantiated abuse/neglect report within 6 months of their reunifications. However, during the last six months of reported data, **3%** (1 out of 36) of children who had been reunified six months earlier from San Francisco's target site had a new substantiated abuse/neglect report within 6 months of their reunifications!



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team hosted a luncheon presentation for guardian ad litem, attorneys, prosecutors, case workers, child welfare leadership, and committee members. Luncheon participants were provided with an overview of the BSC that explained how the team became involved and what they have been doing. The team explained the PDSA process and solicited the help of child welfare system stakeholders with testing and spreading promising practice changes. The team also engaged seven of their BSC core team members to present aspects of the BSC, specifically looking at the Change Package components and describing an associated PDSA that the team was working on in particular component areas. The luncheon cultivated the momentum and buy-in from the community that was needed to build their extended team and advance their systems improvement efforts.

- The Washoe County, Nevada team recognized that the quality of workers' court presentations could have bearing on a family's ability to achieve timely permanency. The team sought to enhance workers' participation in court hearings by training staff to present effectively. They held a court presentation focus group in May 2010. The information acquired during the focus group informed the development of a skills-based court training curriculum for workers.

Enhancing Agency-Court Communication by Establishing Common Language

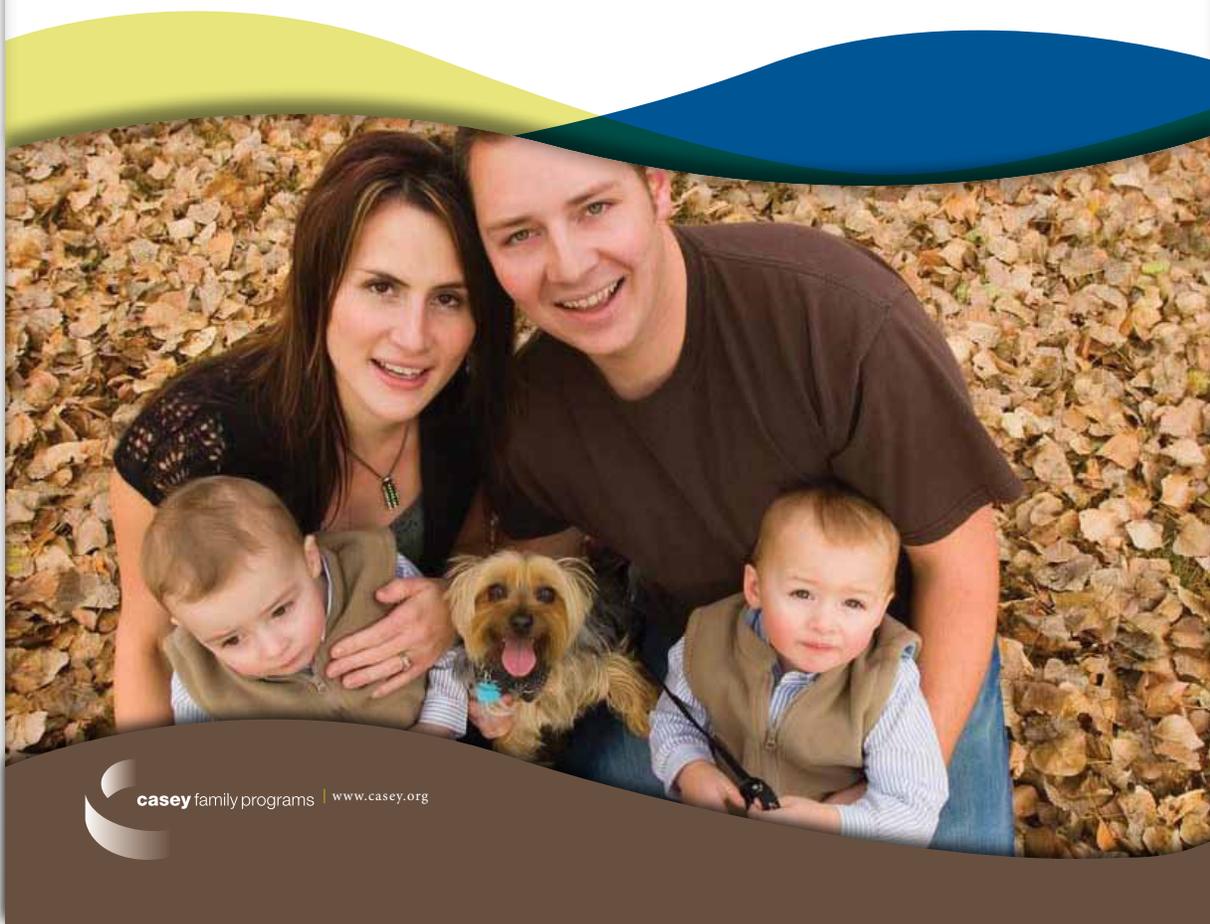
Many of the teams recognized the importance of improving communication between systems and as a result worked on practice changes that would establish a common language that is mutually understood among agencies, court systems, and constituents. Such practice changes were examined earlier in the context of timely permanency (see *Communicating in Language That Is Meaningful and Understandable*). It is important to underscore this as another example of the interconnectedness of component areas. A practice change tested in any one component area often simultaneously impacted other component areas. For instance, teams such as Clay County, Minnesota and Pasadena, California that endeavored to improve timely permanency outcomes by establishing clearer communication with families were also impacting cross-systems engagement in that this required all systems participating in service delivery to families to be on the same page. We see here that team efforts to establish common language across systems introduced opportunities for systems to engage in new ways. Furthermore, the development of cross-systems tools and support enhanced service delivery and in turn enhanced the potential to achieve timely permanency.

Promising Practices

- Building on the concept of using understandable language, the Washoe County, Nevada team worked on ameliorating the communication of safety concerns during probable cause hearings. A safety model developed prior to the Collaborative was the basis for developing definitions that both agency and court personnel could use to relay safety concerns during court proceedings. The team subsequently proposed developing training for agency staff focused on communicating safety concerns using more direct and concise language. After several revisions and adjustments to their tool, the team reported that they had achieved a solid meeting of the minds between the court and agency about safety definitions. By the end of the Collaborative, the team had trained agency staff and was poised to train attorneys and court personnel on using the definitions to effectively communicate safety risks.

For all 17 months of data reported

on Clay County's target site, **every** child's adjudicatory hearing took place in a timely manner (within 60 days of the petition being filed)! 85% (82 out of 96) of children in the target site visited with their parents as expected during the first 6 months of the BSC. **98%** (64 out of 65) of children in the target site visited with their parents as expected during the last 6 months of the BSC!



Develop a Collaborative Network of Resources

Promising Practices

- The Philadelphia team identified shortcomings related to the legal representation of parents who are themselves minors. The *Major Minors* PDSA was developed to ensure that minor parents have access to the quality representation needed to improve their chances of reunification with their children. With the support of a community legal services organization, zealous and competent attorneys were identified specifically to represent minor parents. Through this partnership, the team anticipated that minor parents would have a better chance of achieving timelier reunification.
- Washoe County, Nevada sought to expedite the transition to reunification by working with community partners to modify the process for accessing childcare subsidies for parents whose children are in care. The team recognized that reunification was sometimes delayed due to the fact that parents were not eligible to apply for childcare resources for several weeks after their children's return home. They addressed this barrier by working with community agencies to modify the application process for parents whose children are in agency custody. An adjustment made to the application process enabled parents to apply for subsidy prior to reunification. Now when reunification is imminent, case managers inform the partner agency to initiate the process of securing the childcare subsidy earlier on so that daycare resources are available by the time of reunification.
- Along those lines, the Michigan Sault Ste. Marie Tribe established a community partnership that offers parenting education to address key issues that influence timely and safe reunification. The team's community partner designed parent training that offers parents support around substance abuse and anger management issues as well as parenting skills. She also developed an informative culturally responsive resource booklet to promote this promising practice. (See Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources.)

Tamar Village: Identifying Needs and Voice for Incarcerated Mothers

SHIELDS is an organization that offers programs for Los Angeles' most challenged communities. Tamar Village is a cross-systems collaboration between community agencies, the sheriff's department, DCFS, the public defenders' office, the court system, California State University, and the Substance Abuse Administration to provide residential substance abuse treatment and long-term comprehensive services for women leaving the jail system.

The Tamar Village program offers services to women in prison who have children involved with the Los Angeles County child welfare system. The program helps incarcerated birth mothers understand the agency and court systems; ensures that they have a voice in their case planning; provides treatment services that are seamless during the reunification process; and connects birth mothers to community resources prior to leaving jail. Once mothers are in treatment, visitation and intensive reunification services are provided immediately.

The Compton team built on this successful cross-systems initiative by providing on-site DCFS children's services workers to assist incarcerated birth parents with the reunification process. By doing so, they anticipated that mothers would be enabled to stay connected with their children; that they would be more involved in case planning; and that they would be empowered to achieve reunification more quickly.



We know that our communication is better, our process is smoother, and families begin working immediately toward our shared goal of successful reunification.

— COMPTON
California Team Member



After testing this practice, the team observed success on many levels. The workers' presence on site enhanced accessibility, communication, and collaboration across the different systems that touch the lives of incarcerated mothers. Equipped with a better understanding of each other and the alignment of service delivery and goals, cross-systems partners reported a greater sense of trust between agencies. Most importantly, this collaboration has proven to be a highly effective way to support exits to reunification by creating a safety net for families and linking them to community services that will promote safe exits to reunification. The DCFS workers' presence in the program contributed to families being able to reunify as early as 3 to 4 weeks after a mother's release with visitation beginning immediately upon release.

Tamar Village's cross-systems work has expanded to four Los Angeles County offices. Tamar Village families are eventually transferred to DCFS social workers who are co-located on site. The team has reported continued success in achieving safe and timely reunification vis-à-vis cross-systems linkages and lifetime aftercare services through Shields. Moreover, the agency is now incorporating practices such as meetings between families and the service delivery team whenever concerns or unresolved issues emerge, and engaging with the district attorney and public defender's offices as allies in the reunification process. As a result of these practices, cross-systems stakeholders have a better appreciation for the strengths as well as the limitations that each team member brings to the table, which is the basis for stronger and more authentic collaboration.

Educate and Engage Partners and the Community

Promising Practices

- The community partner from the San Francisco team tested the practice of convening public and private agency personnel for joint training that is designed to improve the private sector's understanding of public child welfare system requirements. The training equipped community service providers with information about public agency policies and legal requirements pertaining to timely reunification. As a result of the joint training, the private sector had a better understanding of the effort to support family reunification as the preferred permanency outcome. Therefore, community providers and child welfare agency staff were better prepared to partner in support of child welfare public policy goals, namely reunification. The team plans to request future meetings between community and public agency staff to continue to explore how the systems can mutually support safe and timely reunification.
- The San Francisco team came up with another cross-systems collaboration idea that involved partnering with the faith-based community to provide support to families. With birth parents' permission, a local church member was invited to participate in team meetings and offer church resources to support a family's case plans, both pre- and post-reunification. The team expected that this strategy would engage multiple church community members to pool their time and resources to meet a family's needs before and after reunification.

Celebrating Family Reunification

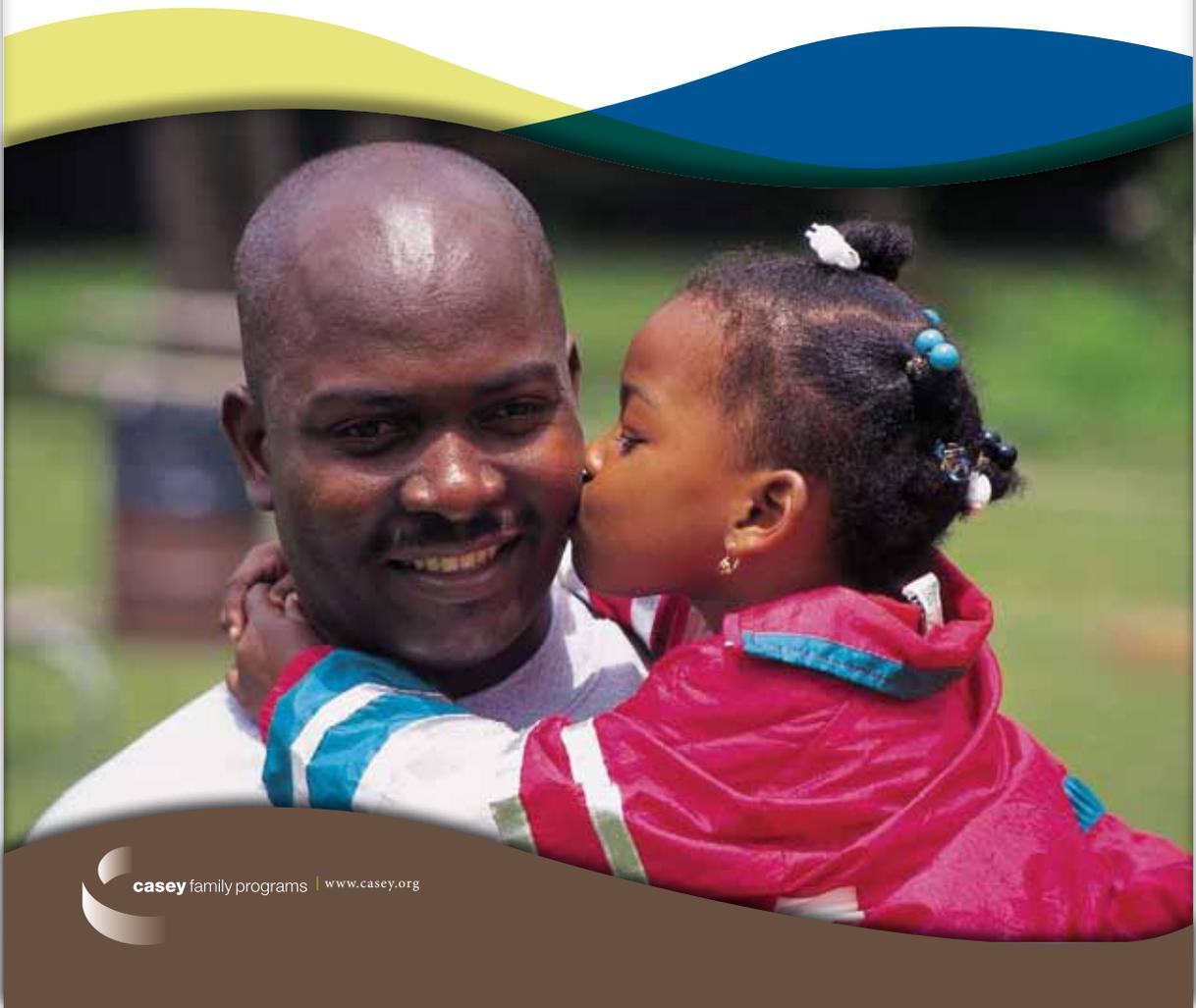
On June 19, 2010, the American Bar Association and a number of national organizations convened the first National Reunification Day designed to celebrate family reunifications. Since the majority of children leave the foster care system to return to their families, the Association

saw it as fitting to formally recognize reunification and all that goes into helping families reunite with their children. This ABA initiative encouraged jurisdictions and tribes from across the nation to organize reunification celebrations throughout the year.¹⁰

- Inspired by this initiative, the Washoe County, Nevada team celebrated reunification by increasing staff and community awareness about successes around family reunification. Internally, the team did so by posting reunification data and photos of reunified families on bulletin boards in the agency. The team hosted the agency's first reunification day celebration on June 17, 2010. They used the butterfly as a symbol of reunification and renewed life. Butterflies were displayed throughout the downtown area to represent every child who was reunified with his or her family between July 2009 and June 2010. The team collaborated with their youth advisory board and community partners including the Girl Scouts of America and the local art museum to plan the event. The County's Reunification Day was an impressive cross-systems effort that engaged the community in creating signage and a local university's photography program to take photos for families to have for their celebrations. Furthermore, they drafted a proclamation for the County Board to officially declare the date Reunification Day for Washoe County. The team is planning for future reunification celebrations and has already started to adjust the practice to ensure the event is not imposed upon families who do not want to be involved and to ensure that the recognition of reunification does not violate families' privacy or confidentiality.
- The practice of celebrating reunification resonated and gained momentum across the BSC teams along with jurisdictions outside of the Collaborative. The Adams County, Colorado team shared that the Governor of Colorado recently declared by proclamation June 19, 2011 as Reunification Day in the State of Colorado. This is yet another example of the efficacy of cross-systems collaboration in gathering momentum in support of reunification-driven initiatives.

Looking at the City of Compton's

target site data from the first eight months to the last eight months of the BSC, there was a **119%** increase (from .88 to 3.25 per month) in the number of reunifications!



casey family programs | www.casey.org

Disproportionality and Disparity

Change Package Components Related to Disproportionality and Disparity

Component 2: Recognizing and Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

Component 7: Recruiting, Preparing, and Supporting a Qualified Workforce

Some children of color such as African American and Native Americans are “disproportionately represented” in the child welfare system at every point along the child welfare continuum, depending upon the community they reside in. Disproportionate representation is the rate to which a population is over or underrepresented in the system in comparison to their numbers in the general population. In the case of children of color, particularly African American and Native American children, they are overrepresented in the system in many communities. Latino children may also face racial disproportionality and disparities in services and outcomes, but those conditions vary by community as well.

Nationally, in many states and counties, children of color are less likely to be reunified than white children, they tend to stay in the system longer. The data show that these disparities in outcomes reveal a relationship between a family’s race and ethnicity. However, the causal factors as to why overrepresentation and outcome disparities exist vary across the country. The causal factors may include poverty, poverty exacerbated by individuals living in resource-poor communities, resource-poor communities having greater needs, individual and/or systemic racial bias. Furthermore, the determination of those causal factors is best determined by the local child welfare jurisdiction, so that more localized rather than universal intervention strategies may be implemented to improve outcomes for all children.

This is still the case today and more recent data convey the need for the continued focus on disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system.

Racial and ethnic group overrepresentation in foster care shows up in this way:¹¹

- African American children represent 30 percent of the children in foster care but only 14 percent of the U.S. child population.
- American Indian and Alaska Native children represent 2 percent of the children in foster care but only 1 percent of the U.S. child population.

The exploration of disproportionality and disparate outcomes and the implications for timely reunification were addressed in several ways during the Collaborative. Early on, a faculty subcommittee was formed for the purpose of bringing to the fore the issues of disproportionality and disparity. The subcommittee engaged the Collaborative in activities and rich topical discussions that provided historical context, promoted self-awareness, and examined data that made the case for disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. Equipped with this insight, teams were encouraged to consider opportunities to address disproportionality and disparate outcomes during the development of all practice change strategies.

Early on in the work, a culture of openness was established in the Collaborative, setting the stage for participants to engage in what is dubbed “courageous conversations” around race, ethnicity, culture, and bias. Protocols for having courageous conversations are outlined in *Knowing Who You Are*, a program designed by Casey Family Programs for professionals to assist youth in the development of their racial and ethnic identities.

Courageous Conversation Protocol

- **Stay engaged.**

It's courageous to not only get in touch with our own perspectives and express them, but it takes even more courage to listen to another and allow his or her perspective and experience to deeply influence our own. There will be many times when we may want to walk away from the conversation, especially when it gets difficult, but staying engaged is the only way for us to get to a place of healing.

- **Speak our truth.**

It's courageous to communicate our honest and sincere perspectives and ideas. Saying what we think others want to hear or avoiding saying what we feel prevents us from experiencing one another fully. Speaking our truth honors our experiences and helps us to get to a place where our genuine thoughts can be shared and difficult questions can be asked.

- **Experience discomfort.**

It's courageous to talk about racism, prejudice, and discrimination and to experience fully the uncomfortable feelings that may come up for us...anger, guilt, confusion, impatience, fear. Our willingness to risk being uncomfortable is the only way to deepen our interracial relationships and create a space where our different perspectives can sit and interact.

- **Expect/accept non-closure.**

It's courageous to accept that we won't all agree, issues may not be resolved, and we may not get the closure we are looking for. The fact is that courageous conversations take time and effort; they are not quickly over and done. Instead we can work towards acceptance and affirmation that different experiences exist. When this occurs, our own perspectives and life can be changed.

Embracing the values of courageous conversations sets the stage for powerful discussions and learning opportunities. Teams explored the issues from a personal and larger systemic perspective. Every participant was challenged to consider ways that he or she could reduce disproportionality and disparities from his or her role in the system.

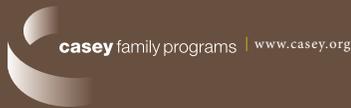
During Learning Session 2, judges from all participating teams were invited to a judicial pre-institute. This judicial convening was hosted through a joint effort with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges' Courts Catalyzing Change (CCC), an initiative focused on reducing disproportionality and disparity in foster care. The pre-institute invited collaborative judges to be leaders in implementing a judicial bench card, which at the time was under development.¹² During the pre-institute, judges explored implicit bias and systemic racism from their perspective as senior officers of the court; in addition, they were preliminarily introduced to the bench card. Among other things, the convening inspired the development of court strategies to impact systemic disproportionality and disparities, including the following:

Promising Strategies and Practices

- Learn about and use promising practices related to reducing disproportionality and disparate outcomes.
- Engage in conversations about race, ethnicity, and culture.
- Use culturally respectful and responsive practices.
- Recognize disproportionality and disparate outcomes.

During the first 5 months of the BSC,

81% (21 out of 26) of hearings for children in Fairfax County's target site were continued. During the last 5 months of the BSC, **21%** (10 out of 47) of hearings for children in the target site were continued! During the first 3 months of the BSC, 54% of Black/African American children visited with their parents as expected. 100% of white children visited with their parents as expected. During the last 3 months of the BSC, **87%** of Black/African American children visited with their parents as expected!





In review of the survey data, it appears we have made some progress in the area of cultural awareness and being respectful, responsive, and supportive of families in the context of their culture.

— WASHOE COUNTY
Nevada Team



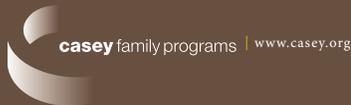
Engage in Conversations about Race, Ethnicity, and Culture

Use Culturally Respectful and Responsive Practices

- Clay County, Minnesota's *Family Traditions, Culture and Customs* PDSA involved social workers asking birth parents and/or family members about any traditions, customs, cultural practices, meals, or dietary requirements that they wanted to have upheld during their child's placement. This set the stage for a culturally sensitive practice by recognizing and respecting the importance of culture as a crucial element in family engagement.
- Similarly, the Philadelphia team's PDSA titled *Culture Is Fundamental* is a practice strategy that seeks to recognize and reduce disproportionality and disparate outcomes through the observance of families' cultural traditions and customs. They anticipated that families will feel empowered and more engaged in the reunification process when their unique customs and traditions are incorporated into their children's care outside of their home. During the intake process, the agency worker and foster care provider discuss cultural values, customs, and traditions with family members and identify at least one that can be used as a strength in the service planning process. The Philadelphia team aspired to promote trust and generate early buy-in that will ultimately promote timely reunification.
- In efforts to develop culturally sensitive services for Hispanic/Latino families and other ethnic groups in their service area, the Washoe County, Nevada team collaborated with Northern Nevada Hispanic Services and other community partners to survey families about their service needs while they were engaged in the child welfare system. The survey inquired as to whether available services were readily accessible, effective, and culturally appropriate. The team initially surveyed reunified families. For the most part, the families reported that services were received in a timely manner and were appropriate to meet their needs. There was mention of waiting lists, but wait times did not appear to be lengthy. The team planned to survey families who have not achieved reunification in future cycles. Moreover, they worked on minimizing any discomfort or reticence that families may experience in providing feedback before their case is concluded.
- The Adams County, Colorado team engaged in similar efforts to identify culturally responsive services for families of color in their service area. The team tested their *Culturally Responsive Services for African American Families* PDSA. The goal of the PDSA was to identify services and service providers to work in a culturally responsive partnership with African American families. The team learned that it was far more difficult than initially anticipated to identify culturally responsive services specifically for African Americans in their community. The services they did identify were not specifically targeted to African American clients, with the exception of a father's program that directs its efforts to working with African American dads. The culturally responsive services that were identified were shared with the target site staff and added to the menu of options used to connect families to services. While this effort did not yield many African American-targeted resources, it did underscore the lack of targeted services available for African American families and the need for continued advances in this area.
- To address disparate outcomes of African American children in their county, the Oklahoma team developed more individualized and culturally relevant services. The practice entailed workers having conversations with children and parents about their cultural, ethnic tribal, or racial background, and specific cultural and family customs. In addition, they solicited families' input about what services they needed in order to achieve successful reunification.

Looking at Washoe County's target site data

for 2010, **94%** (17 out of 18) of children exited to reunification, **100%** (3 out of 3) of children of color exited to reunification, and **100%** (18 out of 18) of reunifications took place within less than 18 months!



By engaging in these conversations, workers were better able to assess families' cultural and individual service needs, thereby increasing the likelihood that services would be more responsive to families and increase their chances of timely reunification.

Recognize Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

Several teams strategized to use resources, data, and tools to support the recognition of disproportionality and disparate outcomes in their localities.

Promising Practices

- The Pasadena, California team endeavored to address disproportionality and disparities by engaging a group of 20 to 25 agency and community service providers in the Knowing Who You Are training. By doing so, they aimed to improve the quality of case planning and create accountability among staff by challenging them to recognize faulty thinking, for example, the failure to recognize racial/ethnic barriers. After the training, the Pasadena team canvassed staff regarding their reactions. The responses varied; there were those who valued the information and those who had a difficult time believing the information presented. The team planned to use feedback to adjust future offerings of the training with the goal of sensitizing additional staff, managers, and community partners to the implications of race and ethnicity for their work. Pasadena also used data as a tool to build awareness and emphasize the need for action. The team designed a disproportionality data sheet that provides basic statistics and graphics, clearly making the case for disproportionality and disparate outcomes in their system. (See Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources.)

Resource: Knowing Who You Are

www.casey.org/Resources/Initiatives/KnowingWhoYouAre/

Knowing Who You Are is a three-part curriculum for social workers and other adults and professionals in the child welfare system. Created with the direct collaboration of alumni of foster care, youth still in care, birth parents, and resource families, the curriculum helps child welfare professionals explore race and ethnicity, preparing them to support the healthy development of their constituents' racial and ethnic identity.

- In May 2010, the Philadelphia team convened a two-day conference on disproportionality titled *Commitment to Change*. Temple University, the Illinois Court, and Howard University were contributors to the conference, which presented the best thinking and practices associated with reducing disproportionality and disparities for children of color in foster care.
- The Clay County, Minnesota team developed a tool called the Disproportionality Report, which they used to educate and increase awareness about disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children in the county's foster care system. The Disproportionality Report conveys race and ethnicity data for children at the initial point of placement in county foster care as compared to in the general Clay County population. The report provides clear evidence of disproportionality for children of Native American, African American, and Hispanic backgrounds in the county's foster care system. In response to initial feedback after presenting the report, the team modified the format to a succinct

slide show presentation. They have presented the information to multiple audiences including social workers, judges, the Clay County Board, and the media. Having shared the disproportionality information extensively, the team recognized that they now have to decide what to do about it. The data provided in the report serve as a baseline, i.e., the team's starting point. In future efforts, the team planned to use the report to encourage the agency, court community, and other stakeholders to take action to address disproportionality and disparity in the county. (See Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources.)

For the 15 months of reported data,
91% (10 out of 11) of children of color exited
from Iowa's target site to reunification! **All**
reunifications from the target site took place in
less than 18 months!



Breakthrough Series
on Timely Permanency
through Reunification

Data and Measurement



Data and Measurement



Through our monthly data collection, we've begun to see the subtle patterns that can create disparate outcomes for clients of color – patterns that we are now working to correct.

– ADAMS COUNTY
Colorado Team



The Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC provided teams with a framework for data collection and reporting, as well as a feedback loop to support data-informed and inspired practice changes. Teams began preparing for their data collection and reporting during the pre-work period and were given monthly support and feedback throughout the course of the BSC. While data and measurement work required a significant investment of team, faculty, and staff time, in return it provided invaluable guidance and insight into the experiences of children and families in each participating jurisdiction.

During the pre-work period, each team identified a target site of approximately 50 to 150 children. This group of children (and their families) was the population who experienced the tests of practice change and who were represented in the monthly measures. Most target sites were based within a unit of social workers who had committed to participating in the BSC with the understanding that they would be involved in BSC meetings, testing PDSAs, and providing monthly data to the team's day-to-day manager. At least one supervisor and/or line social worker from the target site was a member of the core team. This greatly facilitated direct and timely reporting about the efficacy of PDSAs.

Once the target sites were identified, each team selected its monthly measures and created a personalized plan for their collection. Every team was required to post specific data on the Extranet each month as outlined below.

Agency Monthly Measures

Foster Population Changes

- Number of children who exited foster care from the target site
- Number of children who exited foster care by reason of reunification from the target site
- Number of children who exited foster care by reason of reunification within the specified timeframe (each team defined at least three time frames, e.g., 0 – 6 months, 6 – 12 months, and more than 12 months)

Safe Exits to Reunification

- Number of children who exited foster care by reason of reunification six months ago
- Number of children reunified six months ago whose reunification was followed by a new substantiated abuse or neglect report within the following 6 months

Frequency of Visits

- Number of children with a permanency goal of reunification and a service plan of visiting with parent(s) who should expect to visit with their parents in accordance with the timeframe defined by the team (each team defined a minimum timeframe for children's visits with their parents, e.g., at least one visit per week)



The BSC impacted our jurisdiction in a number of positive ways. The data for our target site indicates that we are reunifying children more quickly than prior to the BSC. It has reinforced the tremendous value of family engagement.

– FAIRFAX COUNTY
Virginia Team



- Number of children who participated in visits with parents in accordance with the timeframe defined by the team
- Number of parents who expected caseworker-parent visits to occur in the month
- Number of parents who received the expected number of caseworker parent visits for the month

Family Engagement and Participation

- Number of agency-based meetings (as defined by the team) held within the month (each team defined which types of meetings they would track for this measure)
- Number of agency-based meetings held in that month in which families and/or youth participated
- Number of families and/or youth surveyed in the month (teams were provided with a sample survey to collect feedback from at least ten parents and/or youth each month)
- Number of surveyed families and/or youth reporting that their voices were heard in meetings held in the month
- Number of surveyed families and/or youth reporting that contact with agency/court staff was respectful and culturally responsive this month

Court Monthly Measures

Timeliness of Court Process

- Number of children for whom adjudicatory hearings were held in the month
- Number of children for whom adjudicatory hearings were held in the month within the court's mandated timeframe

Family Engagement and Participation

- Number of court-based meetings/hearings (as defined by the team) held within the month (each team defined which types of meetings they would track for this measure)
- Number of court-based meetings/hearings held in the month in which families and/or youth participated
- Number of families and/or youth surveyed in the month (teams were provided with a sample survey to collect feedback from at least ten parents and/or youth each month)
- Number of surveyed families and/or youth reporting that their voices were heard in meetings held in the month
- Number of surveyed families and/or youth reporting that contact with agency/court staff was respectful and culturally responsive this month

All of the measures were broken down by race/ethnicity. Teams were required to enter all data for white children and children of at least one other race/ethnicity, i.e., Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and/or American Indian.

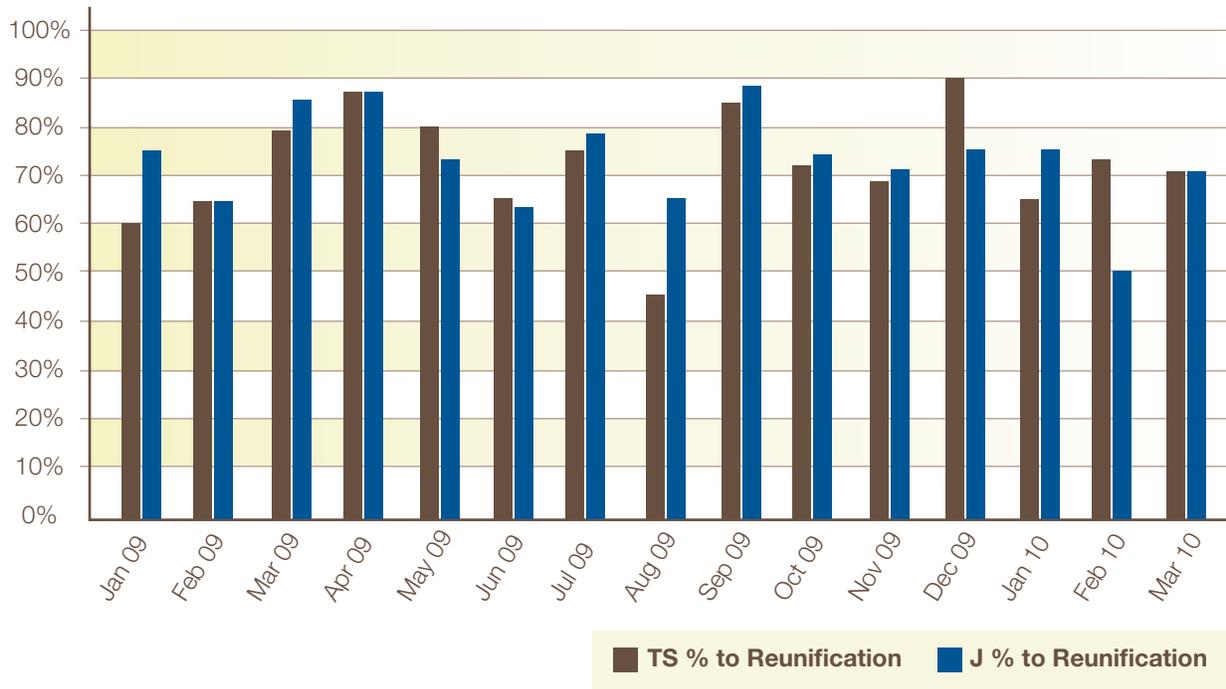
Only a few teams were able to collect these data from one source. Most day-to-day managers collected data from social workers, supervisors, officers of the court, agency data bases, and collateral sources. On average, teams reported spending 5-10 hours each month collecting,

organizing, and posting their data. Measures for this BSC were collected from January 2009 through April 2010.

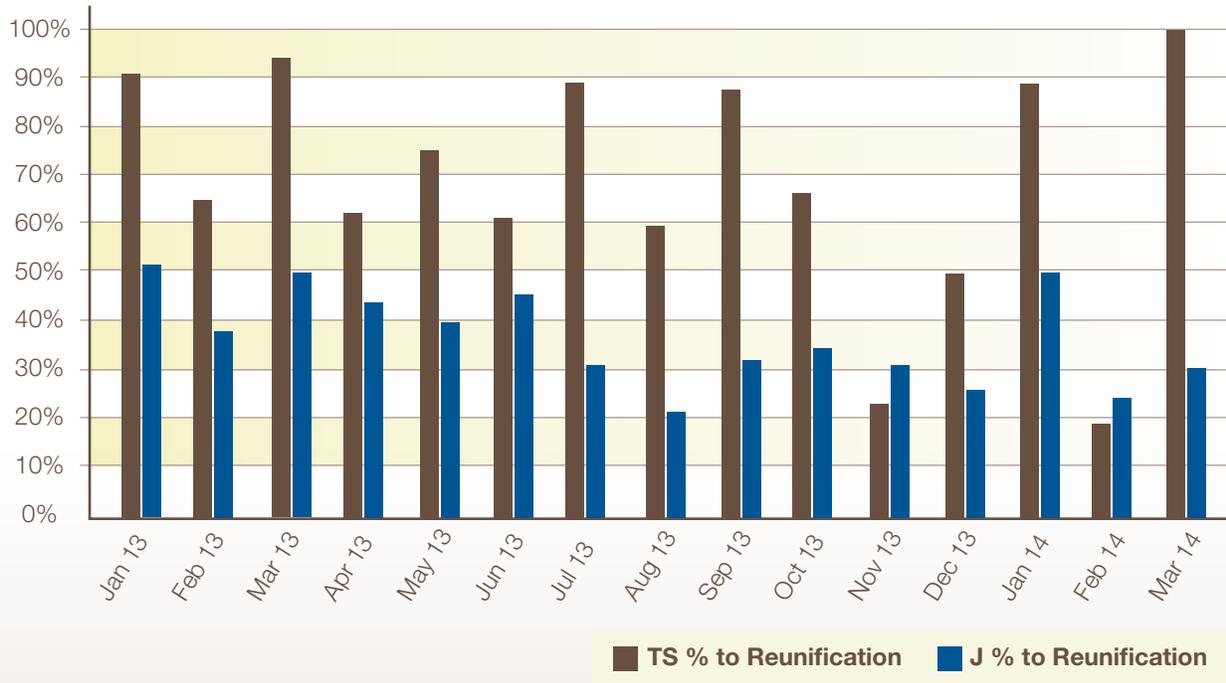
Every month BSC staff downloaded team data from the Extranet and created individualized monthly team reports. The reports included graphs, tables, and narrative feedback for each measure to help the teams better understand the state of safe and timely reunifications in their target sites. Reviewing monthly measures reports helped teams develop a deeper comprehension of barriers to safe, timely reunification and factors contributing to disparate outcomes for children and families of color. Teams made data-informed adjustments to their PDSAs, which resulted in improved outcomes for children and families at their target sites.

For many teams during the period January 2009 to March 2010, exits to reunification in their target sites increased significantly as compared to exits in the overall population. The graphs on the following pages compare the rate of exits to reunification in the target sites (brown bar) to exits to reunification in the entire jurisdiction or tribe (blue bar). The final figure depicts the rate of exits to reunification across all of the target sites as compared to the exits to reunification across all of the jurisdictions. These graphs along with the data highlights included throughout this report give voice to the successes achieved by the 11 participating teams.

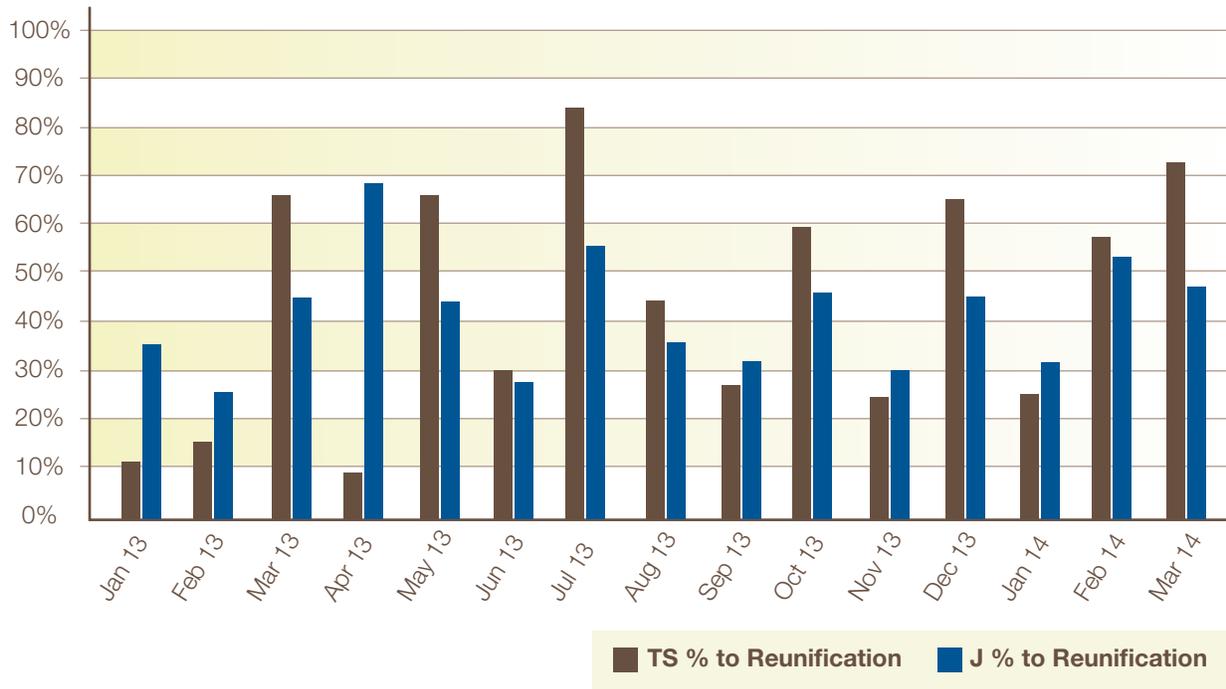
City of Pasadena Percentage Exits to Reunification



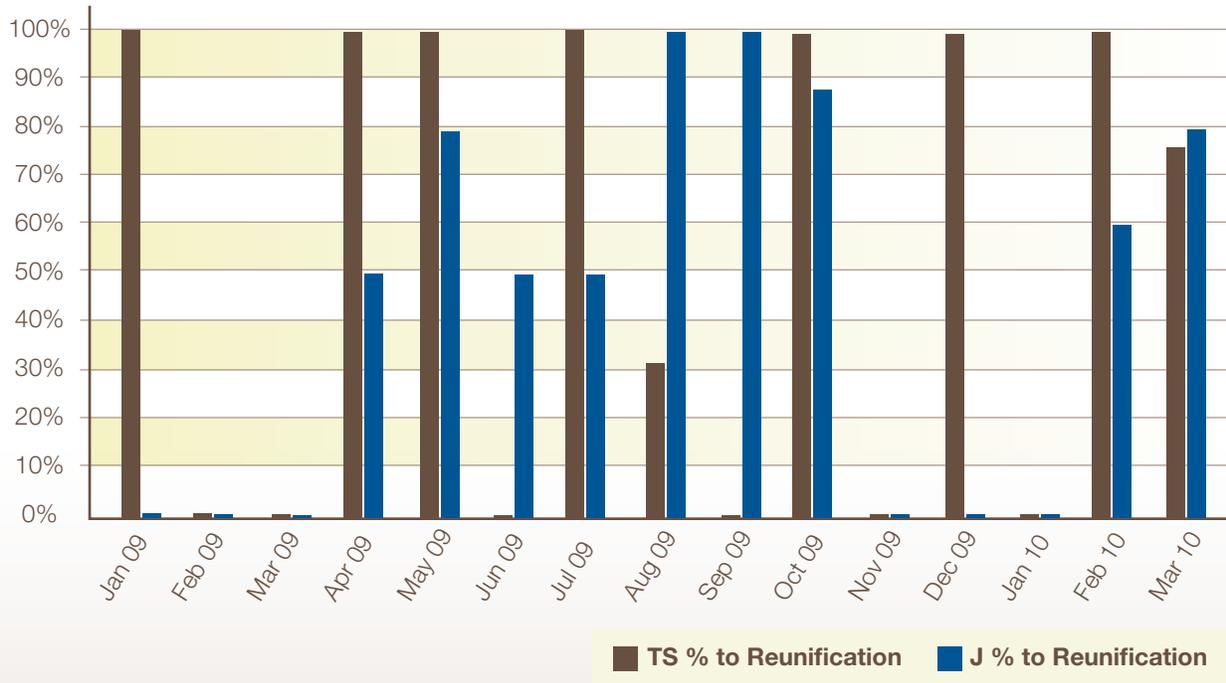
San Francisco County Percentage Exits to Reunification



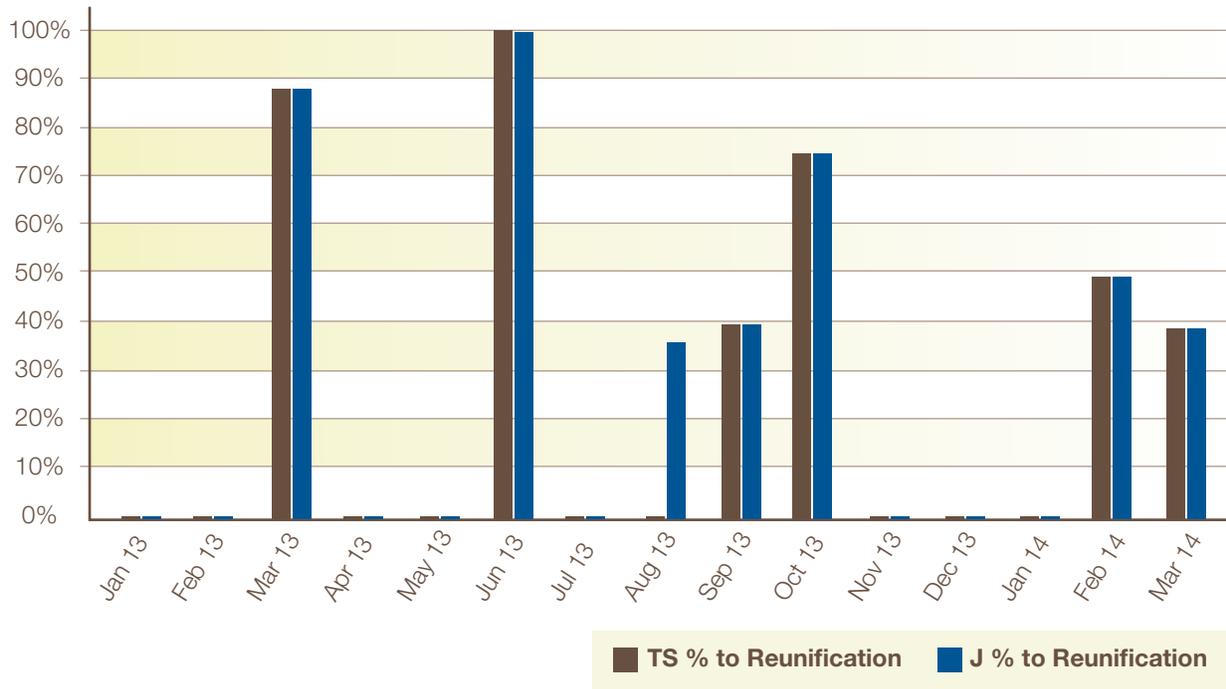
Adams County Percentage Exits to Reunification



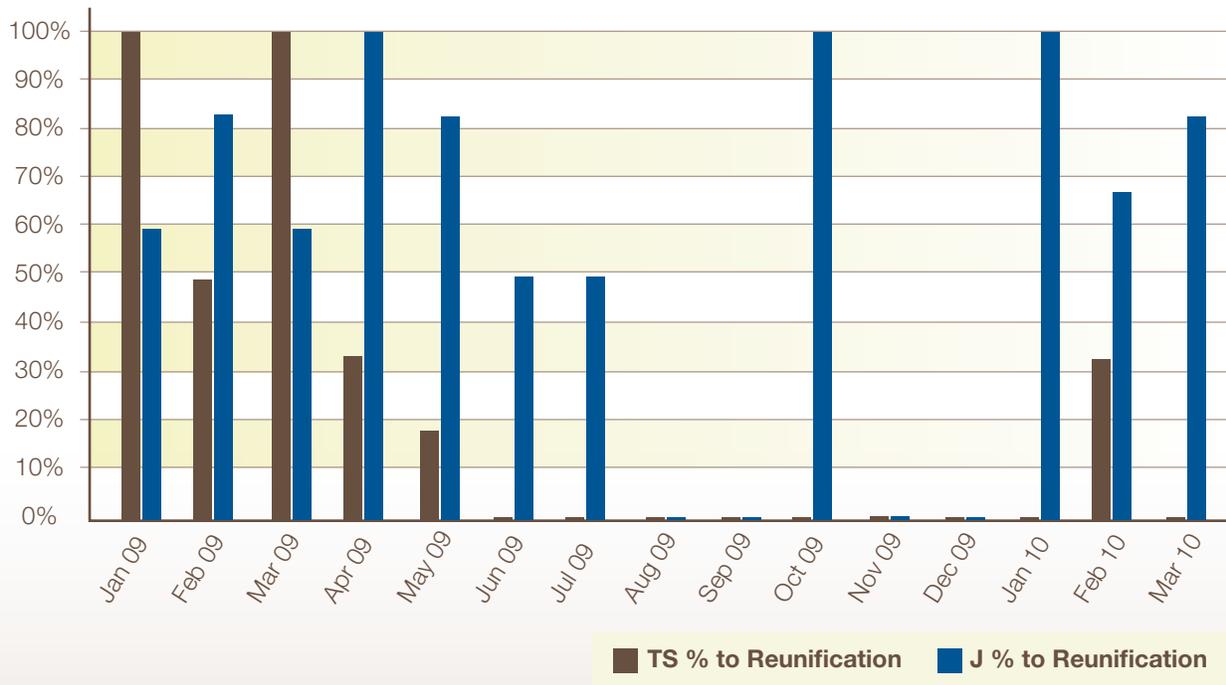
Iowa Percentage Exits to Reunification



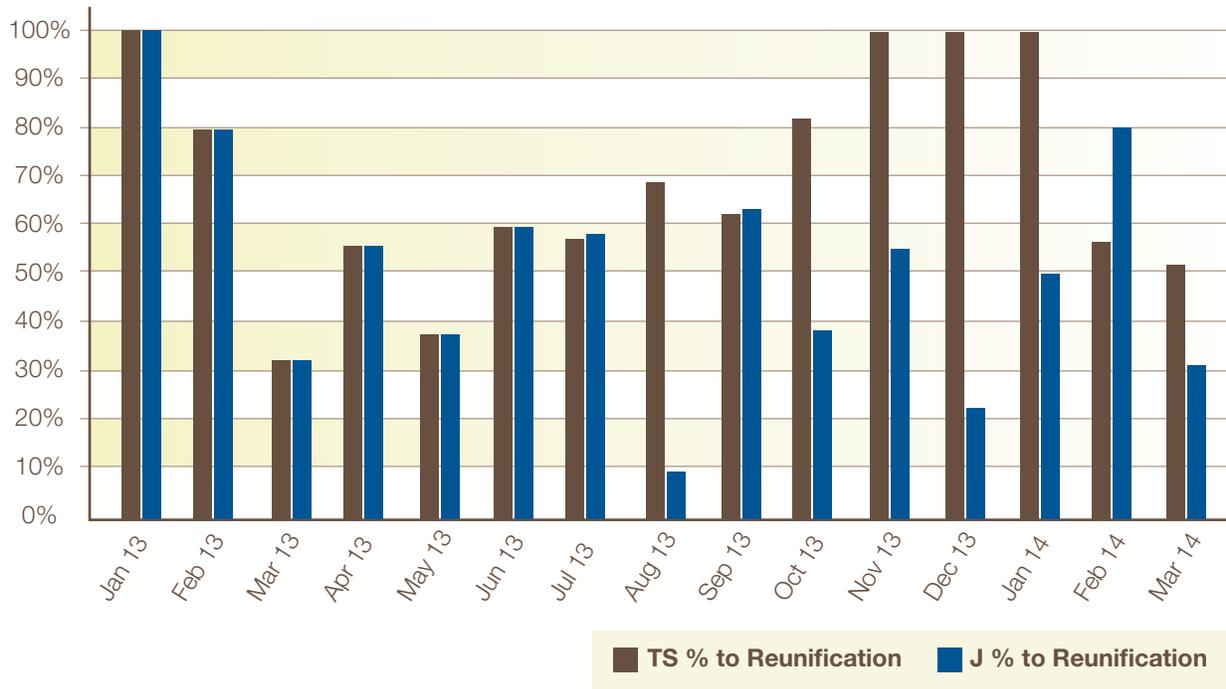
Sault Ste. Marie Tribe Percentage Exits to Reunification



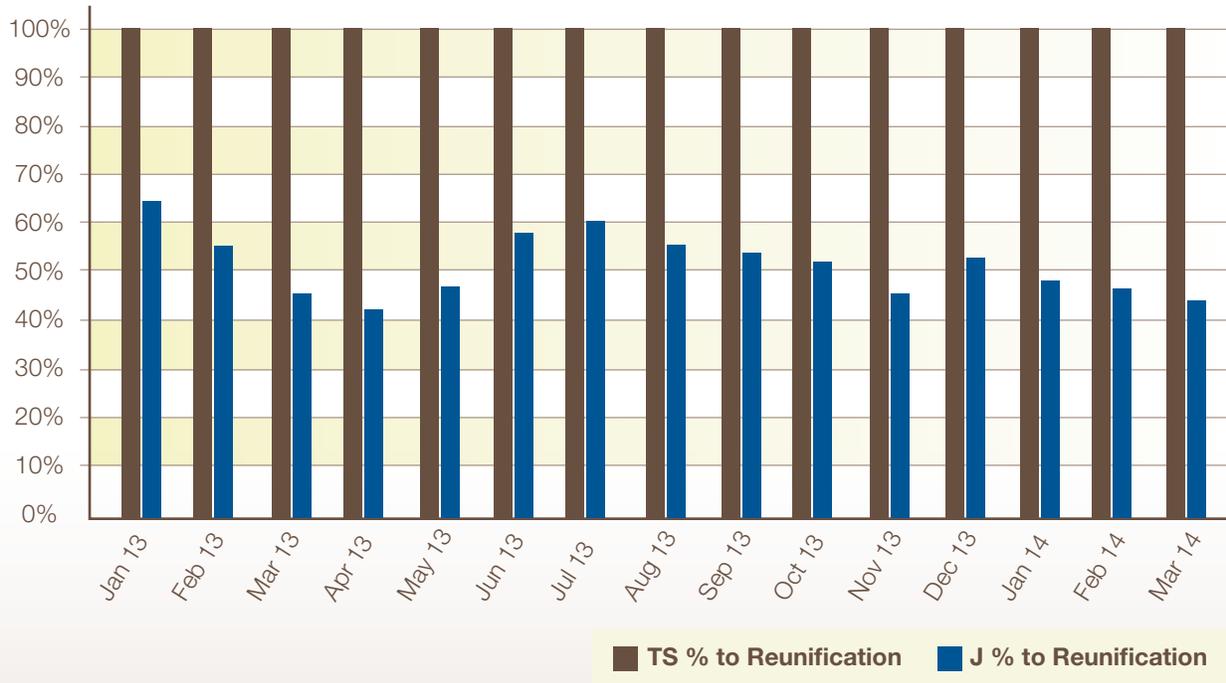
Clay County Percentage Exits to Reunification



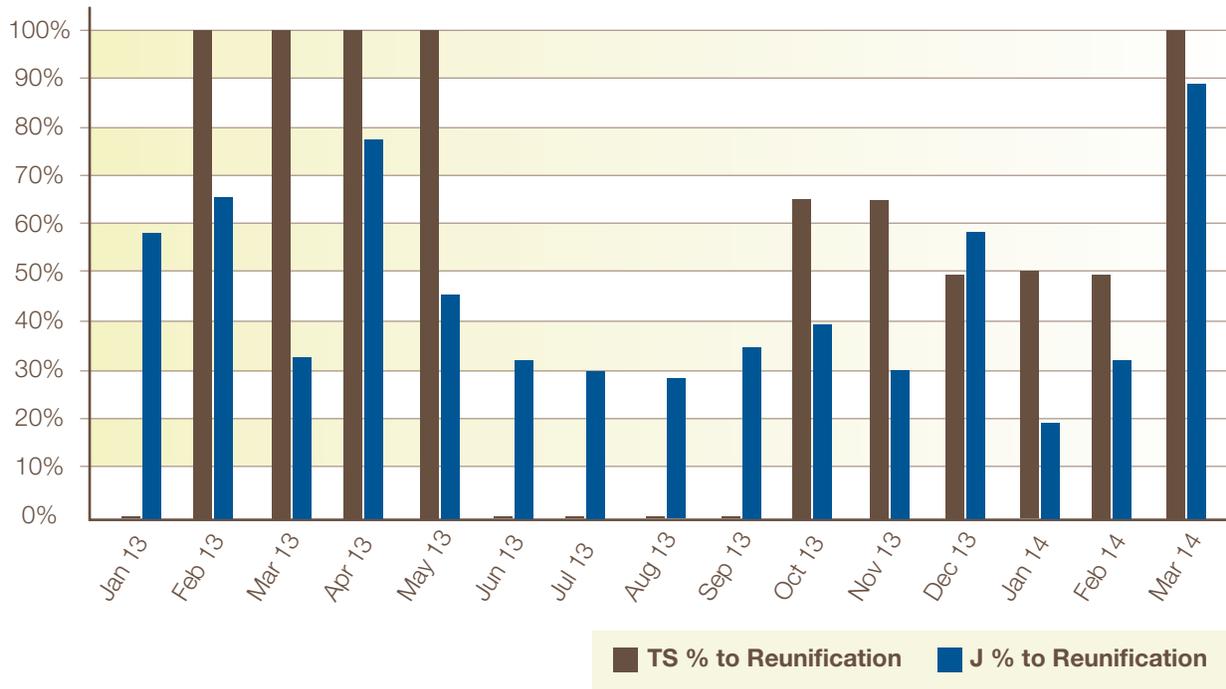
Oklahoma Percentage Exits to Reunification



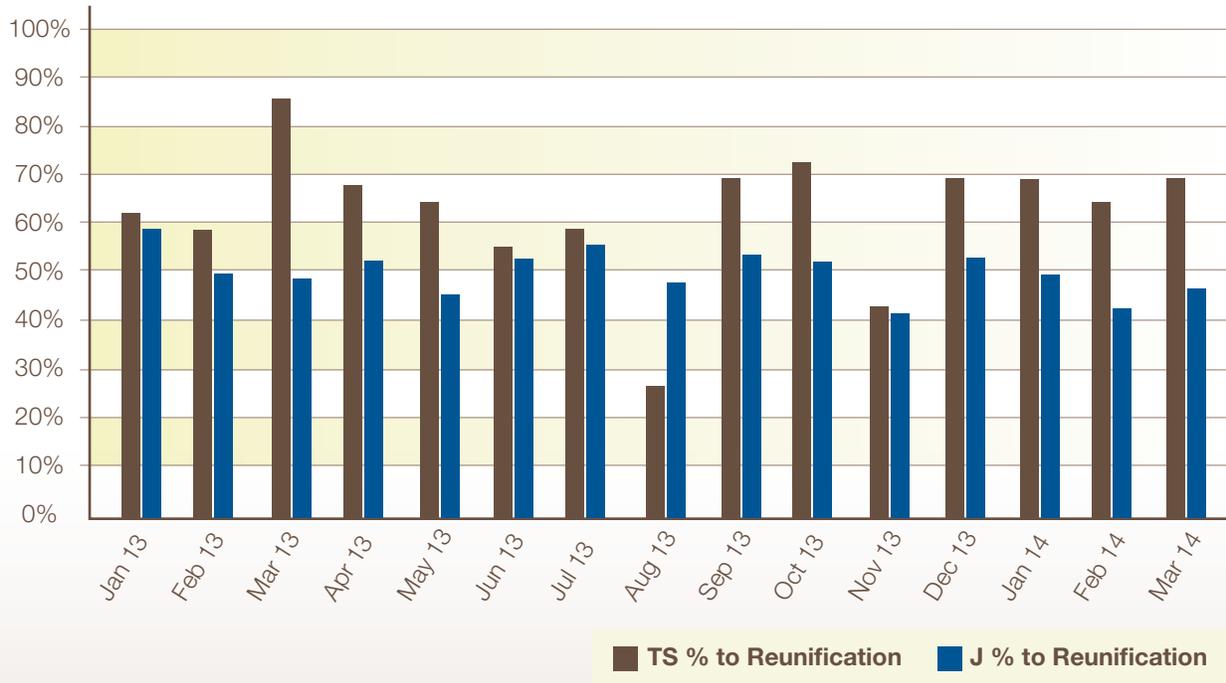
City of Philadelphia Percentage Exits to Reunification



Fairfax County Percentage Exits to Reunification



Jurisdictional and Target Site Percentage Exits to Reunification



Breakthrough Series
on Timely Permanency
through Reunification

Lessons Learned



Lessons Learned



There may be more effort up-front but when children go home earlier, there is less expense at the end. We don't have access to new resources and we have access to less resources, but we are finding more creative ways to use our resources.

— JUDGE TEENA
GRODNER
Fairfax County, Virginia Team



The Collaborative experience is a developmental process. During the journey, teams experienced growing pains that demanded their resilience, flexibility, and determination. The sharing of their triumphs and challenges served to enrich the overall learning experience. In addition, valuable insights were gained that will inform the development and execution of future BSCs. This section highlights some of the lessons learned during the course of the work.

Staffing and Resourcing during Tough Economic Times

The Timely Permanency BSC commenced during what is arguably the most severe economic downturn in recent history. For many systems, budget cuts necessitated staff layoffs and the tightening of resources. Consequently, teams had to determine how to increase exits to reunification with less time and funding, and fewer material and human resources. Two teams had to withdraw from the BSC due to system-wide resource cuts that required them to refocus their resources on other essential services. The Stanislaus County team withdrew early in the pre-work phase of the Collaborative. The Sacramento team was able to continue in the Collaborative through the first 18 months, after which a series of successive cutbacks necessitated their withdrawal. In spite of mounting strain on their agency and court system, the Sacramento team made significant headway toward strategizing for improved reunification in their county. Their work is duly applauded.

In the face of substantial systemic budget cuts, all of the participating teams were challenged to come up with creative ways to resource the testing and spread of their practice changes.

- The San Francisco team explored different funding streams to support their systems-improvement efforts. For example, the agency allocated stimulus funds to support their parent and youth advocacy practices. However, since these funds were finite, the challenge was to identify additional funding streams to continue the work after the stimulus money is exhausted. The agency considered employing Welfare to Work participants as birth parent advocates. Here again, one of the anticipated difficulties with this resource stream was the fact that it too is time-limited. As Welfare to Work participants, who had trained as birth parent advocates would eventually complete the program and transition to other opportunities. The agency would have to train new advocates. The constant turnover could significantly compromise their ability to build an experienced cadre of advocates to provide ongoing support to birth parents. Hence, creative resourcing was not without its challenges.

Other teams forged relationships with stakeholders in their community in efforts to garner support and resources for practice improvements.

- The Fairfax County, Virginia and Pasadena, California teams worked in partnership with community entities to identify family-friendly visitation sites outside of the agency.
- The Washoe County, Nevada team enlisted the Girl Scouts of America, a local museum, and a university to support their first reunification celebration.

These are just a few examples of the ingenuity that teams demonstrated in order to continue their systems-improvement efforts in spite of diminishing resources. In many instances, teams negotiated fiscal challenges by reallocating existing resources in more efficient ways or by focusing their change efforts around practices that did not require new resources. Most teams recognized that by bridging across systems, i.e., the agency, court, community, and constituents, they were better equipped to establish timely reunification practices that would be sustained beyond the BSC.



Everyone agrees that the BSC collaboration process has indeed strengthened our relationships with the court and renewed our commitment to making cross-systems engagement a priority.

— PHILADELPHIA TEAM

Through the process of listening to each other, we have gained greater understanding of our cross-system partners. We also think differently now about including parent and youth more directly in our planning and change initiatives.

— ADAMS COUNTY TEAM



Collaboration

Collaboration was a key contributor to team success. At the inception of the BSC, the faculty and team selection process included the identification of team members who were able to carry out the charge of the collaboration across systems to work toward a common goal. With this in mind, participants developed and employed a variety of strategies in attempts to facilitate true partnership and collaboration.

At least five teams in the BSC planned for successful team participation during the pre-work phase of the Collaborative by organizing team meetings to accommodate the varied needs of team members. This resulted in teams meeting in diverse places, for example, at the court and in the community. In addition, thought was given to the best time to meet. For some teams, meetings were held during the lunch hour and food was served. Others scheduled meetings after regular business hours to accommodate those who were consistently unavailable during the work or school day. Teams also used video and phone conferencing to ensure that all team members could attend.

Cross-Systems Collaboration

Beyond scheduling times when team members could attend meetings, early on in the pre-work period of the BSC, the Fairfax County, Virginia team was concerned that they might have difficulty working across systems. As a result, the team took it upon themselves to bring in a facilitator for two intensive team-building meetings. This allowed them to embark on the Collaborative experience with a strong sense of team identity.

Cross-systems collaboration has emerged as a significant building block in the work of systems improvement. Recent BSCs have been intentional about bringing public child welfare agencies together with cross-systems partners around prevailing issues. This BSC offered a unique opportunity for court and child welfare agencies to partner towards the achievement of a mutual goal: timely reunification. Beyond the court and agency, the Collaborative invited constituents and community stakeholders to the table to advance practice change, and in so doing, forge stronger working relationships. This work was not without its challenges. Along the way, teams had to work through deeply entrenched systemic cultural mores that have historically impeded successful collaboration.

Early on, it became clear that often unacknowledged yet very real hindrances to cross-systems engagement had to be addressed in order to establish true collaboration. One way that the issues were called out was through ongoing courageous conversations about the myths and misconceptions that exist among different child welfare stakeholders. For example, during a second learning session panel discussion, constituents and team members from the agency, court, and community partners candidly unveiled common stereotypes about their respective roles in the system. Each panelist dismantled misperceptions about his or her role in the system, by discussing the unique challenges of that role from a personal perspective. Collaborative participants subsequently engaged in a nonjudgmental open discussion that allowed many to appreciate the unique challenges of their cross-systems counterparts in a new way. This powerful activity paved the way for empathy and a new level of relationship across systems.

Negotiating power dynamics within and across systems was a constant consideration throughout the Collaborative process. Court and agency senior leaders on each team were responsible for setting the tone for genuine partnership within the team and across organizations. In order to achieve true partnership, participants had to respect each other as equals. To effectively manage the power differential that exists across roles, teams had to first



The best we can hope for in this process, without significant systemic change in how judges are selected, retained, and rotated, is to try to locate those judges willing to undertake transformation of the system, support them, and hope that they will be able to stay in their positions.

— JUDGE STEPHEN RIDEOUT
BSC Faculty Co-Chair



acknowledge it and then find ways to flatten the hierarchy in the context of their systems-improvement activities. Participants were encouraged to step outside of their usual roles to create a culture of equality. For example, birth parent and young adult team members were challenged to step up and voice their ideas and perspectives. In contrast, senior leaders were challenged to step back and listen.

The most successful team experiences were those where senior leadership used their influence to encourage equality across team members and across systems. This was an ongoing process that was further complicated by the fact that outside of the BSC environment, the hierarchy still existed. For some that meant consciously switching hats to ensure that power differentials within the system did not contribute to some team members assuming a more dominant role while others held back from freely sharing.

Changes in Senior Leadership

Change at the senior leader level was a real challenge to the work of teams, specifically to practices being tested in the courts. It was important that senior leaders assume a consistently active and visible role throughout the Collaborative process. In many jurisdictions, judicial officers regularly rotate in and out of juvenile and family courts. Due to rotating court appointments, several participating judges had to withdraw from the BSC. Such changes had the potential to disrupt the momentum of systems-improvement efforts. Since judicial rotations were outside of anyone's control, the best that could be done was to take measures to ensure continuity of the work. When possible, departing judges were encouraged to support the transition by briefing the new court senior leader about the work done to date and by remaining on the team as an extended team member to support the continuation of the work.

Another significant challenge was scheduling senior leaders' BSC activities at times when they were available to participate. While the schedules of judges and agency leaders are understandably variable and very busy, their presence on calls and in team activities is crucial to the work. Scheduling activities to accommodate senior leadership remained an ongoing challenge that required creative and flexible call scheduling strategies, e.g., changing call times, alternating days of the week and times of activities, and decreasing calls from monthly to bimonthly. To address the scheduling issue, senior leaders often appointed designees to participate on calls in their absence in order to work around their unavailability.

Lessons Learned – Constituency Engagement

The Collaborative celebrated many examples of authentic constituency engagement. These successes were a direct result of the intentional efforts of the staff, faculty, and planning team. Early on in the Collaborative, a constituency engagement faculty subcommittee was formed to develop and evaluate collaborative activities and tools to ensure that young adult and birth parent team members were engaged as active and equal contributors in the work of systems improvement. The subcommittee included faculty members who were alumni of the foster care system and birth parents who had experienced reunification through the foster care system. As a result of their collective expertise, dedication, and patience, they infused the value of constituency engagement in every aspect of the Collaborative experience. Moreover, they supported the development of constituent team members through leadership skill-building opportunities and one-on-one coaching.



We feel the biggest impact to our team has been the relationship building and insight we have gained from our youth and birth parent partners. As a team, we have learned we all have an important role to play in improving our system and practices.

— CLAY COUNTY
Minnesota Team

Teams must be accountable for demonstrating constituency involvement in every aspect of the work.

— HEIDI KAYLER
BSC Faculty



Strategies for Constituent Participation

- Ensure that constituents have a safe, supportive, respectful environment that nurtures and maintains the confidentiality of their circumstances and stories.
- Recognize constituent expertise; without their perspective, the work is incomplete.
- Ensure there are opportunities for their involvement that go beyond tokenism.
- Be open to effectively listening to their ideas and input.
- Be sensitive to acronyms and child welfare jargon when constituents are present; use language everyone can relate to.
- Compensate constituents for their time and participation.
- Be respectful of the diversity of constituency perspectives and contributions.
- Include constituents early in the planning process; whatever the point of entry, make it meaningful.
- Ensure that constituents are clear about their role.
- Ensure that there are feedback loops; that constituents have a way to express their concerns, ideas and thoughts about how they are involved; and that they actively influence positive changes in that regard.

Casey Family Programs 2011

One of the many insights gained and lessons learned during this process is that change pertaining to constituency engagement does not come overnight. This was most apparent in the level of young adult and birth parent involvement during learning sessions. With each successive learning session, constituent team members assumed increasingly substantive roles in the planning and execution of activities. They shared their thoughts about content, and they developed and co-led many parts of the agenda. This was accomplished by dedicating the time needed to develop relationships and the competencies necessary to work in true partnership.

The constituency engagement subcommittee convened regularly to develop opportunities specifically for constituents and for the Collaborative as a whole using elements from the Better Together program. Recognizing the varying levels of experience around partnering within the Collaborative, the subcommittee leveraged the expertise that already existed among participants as a model. This required many hours of one-on-one coaching and attention to individual needs.

The work of the subcommittee evolved during the Collaborative as a result of testing new ways of engaging constituents and making adjustments in response to feedback. Some of the discoveries made along the way included finding that teleconference calls were not the most effective platform for engaging constituents. In-person engagement proved to be the best way to foster the relationship needed for true partnership. Moreover, it was much more effective to initiate new activities in person as opposed to on calls during action periods. Calls were best used as a secondary support to in-person learning.

Another effective engagement strategy is the use of learning session pre-institutes to provide in-person affinity group time prior to the convening of the entire collaborative. Based on other collaboratives' successes with learning session pre-institutes for young adult and birth parent team members, it is clear that providing ample in-person affinity group time is beneficial to achieving a higher level of constituent engagement. Although not tested in this collaborative,

designating a day before the learning session for a constituent pre-institute appears to be an effective strategy that could be best employed early on in the Collaborative.

Attrition was a factor with young adult and birth parent team members as with other roles on the core team. During the Collaborative process, several teams lost birth parent and young adult team members to external factors that were often unavoidable. As a result, new constituent team members were transitioned into the Collaborative at different stages. The lesson learned here was that it is imperative that teams are intentional about orienting new team members into the work, especially constituents. Strategies such as assigning another team member to regularly check in with new team members and spending one-on-one time to ensure that new team members are abreast of the work to date and their role going forward are highly recommended as key constituency engagement practices.

In summary, early planning and preparation that involves constituents is a critical prerequisite for effective constituency engagement. The integration of constituency engagement values must begin as early as possible and be infused in every aspect of the work. This requires patience, time, and ongoing evaluation.

Strategizing around Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

Conversations about disproportionality and disparate outcomes began at the outset of the BSC and continued as a salient subtheme throughout the Collaborative process. Staff, faculty, and a Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes Subcommittee worked diligently to develop activities that brought these issues home to participants on both an individual level and a systemic level. In so doing, the goal was to heighten participants' sensitivity to implications of race and ethnicity on permanency outcomes and to underscore the urgency around affecting change in this area.

Collaborative tools such as the PDSA form guided the development of practice improvements around disproportionality and disparate outcomes by asking participants to think about all proposed practices through the lens of the potential impact on disproportionality and disparity, thus keeping these issues at the fore of every practice change effort.

Teams consistently reported challenges around developing practice changes that specifically reduced disproportionality and disparate outcomes for children and families of color. For many, it was a struggle to deconstruct these concepts into small tests of change. While teams came to recognize that many of the practices they were testing had the potential to positively influence disproportionality and disparities, the ongoing challenge was not being able to make a direct connection between the practice improvements being tested and a reduction in disproportionality and/or disparate outcomes. Practice changes around these issues do not often yield immediately observable and/or measurable improvements. Consequently, for many it was more challenging to come up with PDSAs in the area of disproportionality and disparate outcomes than in the more concrete and measurable component areas.

Furthermore, it was difficult to accept that practice changes, however small, over time could affect larger systemic change such as reducing the overrepresentation of children and families of color in child welfare systems. Here the lesson is that systems-improvement work around disproportionality and disparity more than other component areas requires patience and trust in the value of small and incremental improvements towards a larger goal.

Another observation was that every participant was starting from a different place and experience in his or her understanding of issues of race and ethnicity. Collaborative participants had to be able to define and embrace the issues based on their personal experiences and the unique nuances of their systems. Consequently, this process played out differently, and within varied timeframes, for different teams. Collaborative leadership used different tactics to jump-start PDSA planning in this area including infusing opportunities for shared learning and discussion by using resources such as an excerpt from *Race: The Power of an Illusion*¹³ as a foundational education tool at the first learning session. In addition, this was accomplished by infusing opportunities for continued exploration of the issues from different systemic vantage points throughout collaborative activities. It was also helpful to provide teams with examples of small doable steps that have been tested in other collaboratives.

It is essential that future collaboratives continue to call out disproportionality and disparate outcomes as key components in the work of reduction of the number of children in foster care and in systems improvement. The investment of time and targeted support around these issues is paramount to the realization of timely permanency through reunification for children and families of color.

Sustaining Practice Changes

The most successful teams are those that are able to take the lessons learned in the 18 months of the BSC experience and use them going forward as part of a new way of doing business. They spread and sustain not just the individual practice changes tested in the action periods, but the use of the Model for Improvement as a way to enhance their continuous quality improvement efforts. They engage children and families in both individual casework and in systems-improvement efforts. They are open to cross-systems and community collaboration efforts. They are attuned to issues of disproportionality and disparate outcomes and seek ways to improve their practice with families of color. Moreover, they understand the value of being able to demonstrate their improvements through simple measures that can be shared with the agency, the court, and the community to make their case for practice changes.

During the final action period, teams focused on planning for the spread and sustainability of their most successful practices. In the face of shrinking resources and growing responsibilities, they were encouraged to be proactive about how the improvements they had tested over the course of the Collaborative would be sustained beyond the BSC when there was less targeted attention and technical assistance. In support of this effort, the BSC staff and faculty developed the Sustainability Planning Tool, a check list that calls out five key considerations. The complete Sustainability Planning Tool is included in Appendix E, Team Tools and Resources.

5 Sustainability Considerations

1. Resources
2. Implementation
3. The Human Aspect
4. Engagement
5. Evaluation and Outcome



Our BSC group plans to continue the Collaborative efforts made during the BSC long after Casey is gone.

— SASWAANS
BAHWETING
Michigan Sault
Ste. Marie Tribe



Teams engaged in action planning that took into account how they would continue to resource the spread and maintenance of improvements, specifically fiscal, staffing, and materials requirements. They also explored what it would take to implement a successful practice, including their system's readiness; policy and procedural considerations; and having the requisite information, technology and training. The human aspect took stock of issues such as staff buy-in, changes in leadership, attrition, and sustaining enthusiasm and momentum around systems improvement directed toward timely permanency through reunification. Teams continued to identify ways in which they could sustain engagement across systems as well as uphold the involvement of young adult and birth parent team members as essential collaborators in the work. Finally, building evaluation and outcomes considerations into sustainability planning necessitated dialogue around questions, which included the following:

- How do you know these changes make things better for children and families?
- What data will you continue to capture to evaluate the ongoing effect of this change?
- What will you do if long-term data fail to show ongoing improvement in reunification outcomes?
- What will you do if long-term data show that the change may be contributing to poorer outcomes in another area?

As a result of collectively strategizing around the five key considerations, teams were better prepared to spread and sustain promising practices after the Collaborative ended.

Faculty and Staff Support

The success of this BSC was in large part due to the intensive support provided by the BSC faculty and planning and staff team (see Appendix C). This team composed of national leaders in child welfare and the judiciary, employed their professional and personal expertise to design, facilitate, and execute robust learning opportunities during the two years. BSC faculty and planning team members went beyond their traditional roles to ensure that Collaborative participants were equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to lead systems-reform work both within the Collaborative and at home in their respective communities. This support included facilitating constituent calls outside of regular business hours to accommodate schedules and time zones, offering one-on-one coaching to support the preparation of participants assuming leadership roles during learning session activities, and providing monthly feedback to assigned teams about their new and developing PDSAs.

The Collaborative leadership team was highly engaged and innovative. In many ways, this BSC was a laboratory that served as a testing ground for new approaches to supporting teams and providing technical assistance. For example, during the first action period, faculty and planning team members were assigned to work with specific teams during the learning session and throughout the following action period. This arrangement was designed with the intention of fostering a deeper level of support and technical assistance by matching teams with faculty who had expertise in areas in which they encountered challenges. The plan was to rotate faculty assignments after every action period; however, after the first reassignments were made, teams and faculty alike shared that the changes in assignments were disruptive to the flow that they had established working with their teams. Consequently, faculty assignments remained the same for the final two action periods. This allowed faculty and planning team members to build relationships with teams and offer more intensive support.

This is just one example of how Collaborative leadership attempted to be responsive to feedback in real time. Many of the successes celebrated during this BSC were a direct result of the Collaborative leadership's investment and their willingness to step away from the traditional BSC structure to meet the emergent needs of teams along the way.

Breakthrough Series
on Timely Permanency
through Reunification

Conclusion



Conclusion

In the spirit of Plan Do Study Act, the Collaborative experience has evolved over time based on lessons learned from previous BSCs. The Timely Permanency BSC served as a laboratory to test, study, and adjust new ways of applying the methodology. The ongoing feedback solicited from participants resulted in real-time adjustments in attempts to meet the unique needs of the participants. When unanticipated challenges caused by external variables could not be remedied in the moment, the Collaborative exercised flexibility and made the adjustments necessary to continue the work.

At the close of the BSC, teams recognized that the end of the formal collaborative experience marked the beginning of the next chapter of their work. Equipped with the knowledge that timely reunification is everyone's responsibility, and an achievable framework for developing, testing, and expanding change, teams are poised to continue the work of systems improvement beyond the BSC.

Endnotes

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appendices

Appendix A: Change Package

Appendix B: Participating Teams

Appendix C: List of Faculty and
Planning Team Members

Appendix D: Practice Cards

Appendix E: Team Tools and Resources

Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Timely Permanency through Reunification

Change Package

Jurisdictions participating in this Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) on Timely Permanency through Reunification will be addressing nine component areas of practice improvement. Agencies and courts are expected to test ideas within each of these areas. The work in these key areas will not be sequential; it will be concurrent. Furthermore, work in one area will often be linked to, if not overlap with, work focused in another area. This shared connectedness is what causes small tests of change in a BSC to result in system-wide improvements.

The nine components are:

1. Committing to reunification as the most desirable permanency outcome.
2. Recognizing and reducing disproportionality and disparate outcomes.
3. Making sound decisions on permanency.
4. Engaging the family network as partners.
5. Using out-of-home placements to support reunification.
6. Using services and supports as a foundation for reunification.
7. Recruiting, preparing, and supporting a qualified workforce.
8. Continuing to support the family after reunification.
9. Collaborating with cross-systems and community partners.

There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to the complex challenge of permanency through reunification. There are many strategies that might be used to address practice and improve outcomes in each area. Thus, the components listed here are intentionally descriptive rather than prescriptive. They bring attention to each of the broad areas in which strategies for improving practice need to be tested. It is up to participating jurisdictions to determine what specific strategies should be tested within their unique environments. These strategies, and the Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycles (PDSAs) used to test them, will be the work of the agency, the court, and other key stakeholders.

The Challenge

Children and youth are removed from the care of their parents or caretakers when the public or tribal social service agency responsible for their safety determines that they are currently unsafe or are at risk of imminent harm. These children may remain in care after a court hearing to determine whether the agency provided reasonable efforts or active efforts as required by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to prevent removal and established probable cause that

maltreatment has occurred. The majority of these children and youth are reunified with their parents or caretakers after a stay in out-of-home care. Of these, most return home within a few weeks or months; but others languish for years in a system that is challenged to return them to their parents and that is, at the same time, unable to provide them with another option for permanency in a family setting.

Two primary pieces of federal legislation that agencies and courts must comply with related to timely permanency are the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997.

ICWA was passed in 1978. At that time, the federal policy efforts to “adopt out Indian children” had resulted in 25% – 35% of American Indian children being placed for adoption with non-Native families. ICWA specifically requires that tribes be notified when American Indian children are brought into state or county care and that active efforts be made to maintain the family of origin. When returning home is not possible, efforts are to be made to place the child with a relative, an extended family member, a tribal community member, or an American Indian family located elsewhere. Despite this expectation, American Indian children continue to be less likely than Caucasian, Asian, or Latino children to return home to their families.

The federal mandate of ASFA limits the time a child can spend in out-of-home care, requiring public child welfare and tribal social service agencies and courts to achieve permanency goals in a “timely” fashion. Mandated timeframes are often at odds with what is known about the challenges faced by parents who are struggling to overcome issues such as poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness, making reunification within those timeframes difficult.

Once children are removed from their families, public and tribal child welfare agencies and courts must seek to:

- Help those children achieve permanency through reunification with their families whenever possible.
- Notify tribes when children become involved in state/county care and engage in active efforts to maintain the family of origin.
- Ensure that reunification occurs within the shortest timeframe appropriate to that family and child, as well as within the federal guidelines.
- Ensure that children who are reunified with their families will be safe from repeat maltreatment.

Background and Overview

Being in a family positively impacts a child’s development. Children should be raised in a family and most families can care for their children, though some need some additional support. People are not isolated beings; they are part of familial and social networks. When those networks and connections are disrupted – as when children are taken away from their families – the impact is negative and it is cumulative on the child, the family, and the community.

Each year, more than 287,000 children who were in foster care for some period of time leave care. Of these, more than half are reunified with their parents, after an average of six months in care. However, reunification does not occur uniformly across the nation, with differences appearing from state to state, across races, and at different ages. For example:

- Reunification rates by state range from a high of 76% to a low of 30%.
- Children under the age of 1 year are reunified with their parents only 35% of the time.
- Nationally, 68% of Asian children are reunified, as are 54% of whites, 58% of Hispanics, and 54% of American Indians; but for Black children, the rate is only 48%. This statistic is amplified by the fact that African Americans and American Indians are twice as likely to be investigated and substantiated for child maltreatment, and their children are two to three times more likely to be placed in foster care than those in the general child population. Children of color enter foster care at a higher rate, stay in care longer, and leave foster care at a slower rate than white children.

What happens to those children for whom reunification is not achieved in those first six months of placement? The longer a child is in out-of-home care, the less likely reunification will be achieved. Longer stays in foster care increase the chance of multiple placements, which are associated with problems of attachment, poor school performance, and behavioral difficulties. Those who stay in care the longest are at risk of becoming one of more than 20,000 young people who leave the foster care system each year with no achieved permanency outcome and at risk of homelessness, unemployment, pregnancy, and poor educational achievement. Ironically, many of these youth return to their families of origin on their own after they “age out” of the system.

Collaborative Mission

The mission for the Collaborative that is composed of all the jurisdictions participating in this BSC is to increase the capacity of public or tribal child welfare agencies and courts to effect safe, timely reunification of children with their families. Concretely, this can be attained by:

- Creating and defining a common language and a common understanding of safe, timely, successful reunification
- Implementing strategies, policies, protocols, and practices that respect and actively engage families and communities while providing workers and court personnel with support for ongoing learning and practice improvement
- Integrating practices that lead toward reunification of families in an ongoing and continuous way throughout the life of the case.

The goal for each participating jurisdiction in this collaborative is to identify, develop, test, implement, and spread promising strategies for improving practice in their child welfare, tribal, and related legal systems to support safe, timely permanency through reunification for children in out-of-home care.

Collaborative Principles

This change package is built upon eight principles. These principles express the values that will guide all work in developing, adopting, and implementing promising practices. The principles are interrelated and work together. The order does not reflect a judgment of each principle's respective value or importance. We believe that:

1. The most desirable place for children to grow up is in their own safe, nurturing, and caring families. Most parents want to and can provide a safe and nurturing home for their children.

2. The child welfare or tribal social service agency and court recognize and honor the fact that parents, children, youth, kin, communities, and tribes have strengths, resiliency, and their own natural supports. These natural supports are used to support family connections and build on existing strengths. The child welfare agency and court also recognize that children have deep and important connections to their families and communities, both cultural and geographic.
3. Active engagement of birth parents – both mothers and fathers – youth, their maternal and paternal kin, and foster parents with child welfare agencies, tribal social service agencies, courts, and community service providers is fundamental to:
 - Making sound decisions
 - Making sure the focus stays on permanency
 - Developing and using the appropriate interventions and services to increase the likelihood of safe, timely reunification
 - Ensuring constituent involvement and choice
 - Effectively evaluating outcomes
 - Holding all partners accountable for genuinely serving child, family, and community needs
4. The child welfare or tribal social service agency and court understand and respect the varying beliefs, values, and family practices of different cultural, racial, religious, and ethnic groups. Culturally responsive services and supports are child-focused, family-centered, family-driven, community-connected, and strengths-based.
5. Placement and reunification strategies work to maintain, honor, and support relationships and connections between parents, siblings, children, kin, and significant others.
6. All child welfare or tribal social service agency staff, court personnel, and foster families are committed to partnering with birth parents, children, and their kin.
7. Communication by the child welfare agency or tribal social service agency and court with birth parents, youth, and their kin is honest, respectful, and direct.
8. Child welfare or tribal social service agency and court leadership assumes responsibility and provides support for compliance with ICWA as well as adopting and implementing promising practices across all levels and units of their organizations.

Components

While the principles provide an overarching foundation for this work, the components describe the ways in which jurisdictions put these principles into practice. Work done in each component should reflect the core values defined by the Collaborative principles.

Each of the nine components addresses a key area of practice that impacts the achievement of timely permanence through reunification. The broad description of the component is intended to provide a general definition of the practice area without being overly prescriptive about the specific work that teams will do to operationalize it.

Within each of these broad areas is a brief list of strategies from which teams can determine what specific practice changes should be tested within their unique environments. These strategies, and the PDSAs used to test them (based on these nine components), will be the work of the agency, the court, and other key stakeholders throughout this BSC – and beyond.

The organization of components recognizes that changes must occur at the system, management, and practitioner levels in order to successfully implement strategies focused on timely permanency through reunification. A system must have the capacity to implement new promising practices, work through organizational culture barriers, and have an infrastructure in place that allows for data collection and analysis. Additionally, strategies to achieve timely permanency through reunification will be most successful when the practices of the child welfare and court systems reflect an understanding of the long-term impact that foster care placement has on a child and the urgent need to provide permanency.

In this BSC, agencies (child welfare / tribal social service) and courts are expected to test ideas within each of the nine component areas. The work in these component areas will not be sequential; rather, it will be concurrent. Furthermore, work in one component area will often be linked to, if not overlap with, work focused in another component area. This shared connectedness is what causes small tests of change in a BSC to result in system-wide improvements.

1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome

The agency, the court, and their leadership fully support the primacy of safe, timely reunification as the most desirable permanency outcome for most children and families, while maintaining a concurrent focus on safety and well-being.

- A. Employing concurrent planning for permanency
- B. Helping families overcome challenges to reunification
- C. Involving families in design and implementation of child welfare and court systems that support reunification
- D. Notifying and working with tribes to achieve reunification

2. Recognizing and Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

At key decision points, from initial contact through case closing, agency and court staff understand and take into consideration the ways institutional racism contributes to the disproportionality of children of color in the system and the disparate outcomes for children and families.

- A. Recognizing, understanding, and eliminating the impact of institutional racism and bias on decision-making
- B. Using culturally respectful and responsive practices
- C. Developing, requesting, and/or providing services that are supportive of families in a culturally responsive way
- D. Using data to assess agency and court progress in reducing disproportionality and disparate outcomes

3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency

Sound child welfare decisions focus on the ability of the family to provide safety and permanency for its children. These decisions are individualized, child-focused, strength-based, family-centered, culturally informed, community-connected, and for American Indian/Alaska Native children, tribally connected. Such decisions are rooted in evidence-informed, promising, and emerging practices as well as individual, institutional, and cultural practice wisdom.

- A. Ensuring transparency and openness
- B. Employing comprehensive assessments
- C. Complying with federal and agency timelines

4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners

From initial contact through case closing, maternal and paternal families, children, kin, and resource families are brought together and actively engaged as true partners in assessment, decision-making, case planning, and results. The agency and court demonstrate a respect for constituents' perspectives and value their input and solutions.

- A. Engaging children, birth families, kin, and resource families in planning and decision making
- B. Employing non-traditional search techniques to identify and engage the broadest family network
- C. Preparing the family network to participate in discussions and decisions
- D. Honoring cultural, family, and individual strengths and differences

5. Using Out-of-Home Placements to Support Reunification

Agency staff, court systems, birth families, children, and resource families understand out-of-home placement to be a service of last resort after all other attempts to safely maintain the child at home have been exhausted. All placement decisions are respectful of the child and family's culture, race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

- A. Placing with kin as the first choice
- B. Placing siblings together
- C. Supporting and maintaining children's connections
- D. Preparing and supporting birth families, kin, and foster families in working together towards reunification
- E. Preparing children, birth families, kin, and foster families for transitions, including placement, change of placement, and reunification

6. Using services and supports as a foundation for reunification

The agency and court, in collaboration with the family network and community partners, actively plan, implement, coordinate, and manage appropriate and effective services and interventions that are accessible and that meet identified service needs to support a goal of safe, timely reunification.

- A. Facilitating and supporting family and sibling visiting
- B. Using worker visits to support and assess families
- C. Customizing services to meet the needs of the youth and family
- D. Ensuring that appropriate services are available and accessible in the community

7. Recruiting, Preparing, and Supporting a Qualified Workforce

The agency and the court recruit, prepare, and support qualified, competent, and well-trained employees with the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and organizational supports needed. The workforce reflects the racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the communities and tribes from which the families and children come.

- A. Training and supporting the workforce in culturally responsive skills and competencies
- B. Training and supporting the workforce in effective practices
- C. Providing consistent, quality, supportive supervision and management
- D. Including family feedback in agency quality assurance, individualized performance review, and professional development

8. Continuing to Support the Family after Reunification

Post-reunification services and support planning begins at the time of placement. The agency, its partners, and the community continue to support the youth and family after reunification occurs and until the family is self-sufficient and can provide for its children's safety, permanence, and well-being.

- A. Developing transition and time-limited post-reunification plans in partnership with family networks
- B. Ensuring the availability and accessibility of services and support without disruption
- C. Engaging the community in meeting the continuing needs of children and families

9. Collaborating with cross-systems and community partners

The agency and court collaborate with a broad range of cross-system and community partners, including schools, medical and mental health communities, law enforcement, corrections, substance abuse and domestic violence agencies, and other key public and private agencies. These partners are actively engaged and assume shared accountability in activities that lead to safe, timely reunification, and also in preventing removals and keeping children safely in their homes once reunification occurs.

- A. Communicating in language that is understandable and meaningful
- B. Educating partners and the community
- C. Developing a collaborative support network of resources
- D. Establishing results or outcomes for children and families that community partners have identified responsibility to achieve

Glossary¹

This glossary is intended to clarify what the BSC staff and faculty mean when they use certain words and terms. We recognize that different places and people may have different meanings for some of these words. This glossary is, by no means, intended to be the final word on what these terms mean or how they feel in action. We encourage individual teams to work together to develop their own definitions that best meet their needs.

Assessment: Gathering, examining, and using the facts of a situation to make decisions. In child welfare, assessments may be made to:

- Decide if the agency needs to take action to protect a child (safety assessment)
- Decide the chance that a child may be hurt or neglected in the future (risk assessment)
- Understand the strengths and needs of a family, parent, child, or community

We use assessments to identify the services that are needed and to make a plan that will reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Breakthrough Series Collaborative: The joining together of teams who are all working on improving their work in a particular area. It involves trying many small changes in practice to see if they produce better results for larger change. Teams measure their work so that they can continue with changes that work, and stop doing those that don't.

Child-focused: Listening to a child's voice in decision making and valuing the child's view related to decisions impacting his or her life.

Culturally responsive: The ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faiths or religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the differences of individuals, families, tribes, and communities, and uses each other's cultural strengths to improve results.

Community: People and families who live near each other or who have something else in common.

Cross-system partners: Other agencies and community groups who work with the same children and families as child welfare does. This includes schools, doctors and hospitals, and courts.

Disparity: Refers to unequal treatment or services (types, quality, and quantity of services available) resulting in less positive outcomes for one group than another group.

Disproportionality: Refers to a situation in which a particular racial/ethnic group of children is represented in foster care at a higher percentage than their numbers in the general population. For example, in 2000, black children made up 15.1 percent of the children in this country but 36.6 percent of the children in the child welfare system.

Family-centered practice: Recognizes the strengths of family relationships and builds on these strengths to achieve optimal outcomes for children and families.

¹ Adapted from *Glossary to the Change Package* developed by the American Humane-Casey Family Programs Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Safety and Risk Assessments in Child Welfare, February 2008.

Family-driven: Families have a primary decision-making role in the care of their own children as well as the policies and procedures governing care for all children in their community, state, tribe, and nation that includes choosing support, services, and providers; setting goals; designing and implementing programs; monitoring outcomes; partnering in funding decisions; and determining the effectiveness of all efforts to promote the well-being of children and youth.

Kin: Maternal and paternal relatives (through blood, adoption, or marriage), tribe or clan members, godparents, stepparents, or any adult whom the child, youth, or family recognizes as having a significant bond with them.

Kinship care: A type of out-of-home care in which the full-time care of the child is provided by relatives, godparents, stepparents, or other adults who have a kinship bond with the child. This could include a close friend, a neighbor, or a member of a child's tribe. This is also called "relative care." Children may be placed formally in homes of relatives by the courts (kinship foster care) or they may be placed informally on a voluntary basis by the parent or guardian.

Participating jurisdictions: Child welfare or tribal social service agencies and partnering court that are taking part in this BSC.

Permanency: An enduring family relationship that is safe and meant to last a lifetime; offers the legal rights and social status of full family membership; provides for physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual well-being; and assures lifelong connections to extended family, siblings, other significant adults, family history and traditions, race and ethnic heritage, culture, religion, and language.

Resource family: Includes kin, foster parents, legal guardians, or adoptive parents.

Reunification: The process of reuniting children in foster care with their families and reinstating custody of the children to their parents/guardians. Reunification continues to be the preferred permanency option, when it can be done in a safe and timely manner. (www.childwelfare.gov/admin/glossary/glossaryf.cfm#family_reunification)

Safety: Absence of an imminent or immediate threat of moderate-to-serious harm to the child. (www.childwelfare.gov/admin/glossary/glossarys.cfm)

Strengths-based: A perspective that emphasizes an individual or family's capabilities, support system, and motivation to meet challenges. (www.childwelfare.gov/admin/glossary/glossarys.cfm)

Well-being: How well a child's schooling, health, and mental health needs are being met.

Participating Teams

As a result of demonstrating a commitment to improving permanency outcomes for youth in care, the following teams were selected to participate in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC:

California

- Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Compton Office
- Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Pasadena Office
- Sacramento County Child Protective Services Department of Health and Human Services*
- San Francisco City and County Family and Children's Services Division
- Stanislaus County Community Services Agency: Child and Family Services Agency*

Colorado

- Adams County Social Services Department

Iowa

- Iowa Department of Human Services, Muscatine County

Michigan

- Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians Child Welfare Agency-Anishnaabek Community and Family Services

Minnesota

- Clay County Social Services

Nevada

- Washoe County Department of Social Services and the Second Judicial District Court, Reno, Nevada (data chart unavailable)

Oklahoma

- Oklahoma Department of Human Services

Pennsylvania

- Philadelphia Department of Human Services

Virginia

- Fairfax County Department of Family Services

*The Stanislaus County and Sacramento County teams withdrew from the Collaborative as a result of significant resource cuts.

Timely Permanency through Reunification

Staff, Faculty, and Planning Team Members

Collaborative Chairs

Dr. Jackie Contreras

Judge Stephen Rideout (ret.)

Collaborative Faculty

Sue Badeau

Nancy Colon

Madelyn Freundlich

Millicent Williams

Brandy Carnes

Chauncey Strong

Judge William Thorne

Tabitha Kelly

Collaborative Planning Team

Susan Dougherty

Lucille Echohawk

Heidi Kayler

Susan Kelly

Anita Shannon

Collaborative Staff

Dr. Tracey Campfield

Kerrin Sweet

Andrea Murray

Practice Cards

These cards describe sets of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

Practice Card:

Achieving Timely Permanency through Reunification

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Practice: | Communicate in Language That Is Understandable and Meaningful |
| Components involved | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome 2. Recognizing and Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes 3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Child welfare and court professionals often use language that is specific to their systems; defined by law, regulations, and policy; and filled with jargon and acronyms. While this may be useful when addressing others who are familiar with the terminology, it can be confusing and cause miscommunication when the intended audience is someone outside one's own system. For children, families, and community partners, understanding oral and written communications can be even more difficult. By examining and changing the language they use on a daily basis, teams enhanced the ability of both constituents and partners to understand why and how child welfare and the courts were involved in the lives of families, and facilitated more timely reunifications by defining conditions for return in clear, meaningful terms.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop definitions of terms such as <i>safety</i>, <i>risk</i>, and <i>protective factors</i> with input from youth, families, and other stakeholders. • Share the same definitions with constituents, agency and court staff, family team meeting facilitators, and other key stakeholders. • Incorporate conditions for return in terms of observable, behavioral change into service plan and treatment goals. • Add heading "Safety Reasons Preventing Reunification" to standard court reports, giving specific steps parents must take to have their children returned. • Engage the family and professionals together in developing a list of safety concerns in plain language and a plan to address all concerns. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>When the family writes their own plan, they take more ownership. The family can write the plan at a meeting as a result of the input gathered at the family meeting. A parent can also write their own plan and present it to the social worker and judge as a way to insure safety in that the parent writing the plan should cover safety issues learned from the various therapies and classes they participated in while their children were in foster care. (Fairfax County, VA)</i></p> <p>Pasadena, CA began developing this practice in a BSC on Safety and Risk Assessments and continued to refine their definitions and share them with multiple stakeholders throughout this BSC. <i>With the use of common language throughout the life of a case, it is felt that line staff will stay focused on the facts of the case and the issue that brought the family to the attention of [the agency] regardless of race and/or ethnicity.</i></p> |

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| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to ask families if they understand terms and what is expected of them; make revisions to definitions based on feedback. • Post definitions in offices and meeting rooms as reminders. • Train staff and cross-train with other professionals to ensure that all stakeholders have the same understanding . |
| Originally tried in | Pasadena, CA; Adams County, CO; Clay County, MN; Washoe County, NV; Fairfax County, VA |

Practice Card:

Achieving Timely Permanency through Reunification

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Engage Families in Planning and Decision Making |
| Components involved | <p>3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>5. Using Out-of-Home Placements to Support Reunification</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Families who participate as equal partners in planning for the safety and permanency of their children are more likely to work in concert with the agency and court to make use of services and to attain case plan goals in a timely manner. By giving family members an active role in deciding who will attend meetings, what will be discussed, how children will be safely cared for, and reflecting on next steps, social workers are able to build better relationships with family members as well as observe interactions that can provide insights into the strengths and challenges within the family.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ family team meetings (FTMs) at different points in the case, including within 24 hours of placement, within 5 days of placement, every 30 days; in place of a permanency planning review; prior to reunification. • Ask each parent to invite at least one person of his or her choosing as a personal support at the family team meeting. • Have youth participate in family team meetings. • Teach parents/youth to hold and lead their own family team meetings, so that they can continue the practice on their own between formal meetings and after reunification. • Have a brief meeting with the family immediately after a court hearing to make sure everyone has the same understanding of “what just happened.” |

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| <p>Examples of success in the BSC</p> | <p><i>A Family Team Meeting occurred and each birth parent was able to identify and bring one person to the FTM as a support person. The family had prior social services involvement and was pleasantly surprised that the FTM process existed and that their input was not just wanted but needed in order to move ahead with treatment planning. The family gave feedback that they liked the process, felt heard, and were again surprised that the meeting was family-focused and not about the department chastising them for what they ‘did to their children.’ The family clearly heard the message that we are committed to safely reunifying their children with them and they had a clear understanding of the components of their treatment plan and the changes that needed to occur prior to reunification. We also learned that each family has unique needs and the FTM process needs to have the flexibility to adapt to the needs of each family. (Adams County, CO)</i></p> <p><i>It is interesting to note that some families are asking to continue the FTM instead of the family group conference. They seem to have developed a respectful relationship with the social worker and actually want the input from the agency as they work towards reunification. This is an unexpected result as we would have thought most families would prefer to discuss the issues on their own without the social workers present. Another unexpected result is that some families were ‘owning’ the process and beginning to hold their own family meetings outside of meeting with the agency. They would come to the next FTM with a family plan as they had already met on their own. (Fairfax County, VA)</i></p> |
| <p>Things to think about</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find out ahead of time whether family members or support persons will need childcare during the meeting, and if so, whether they are comfortable using agency-supported childcare. Some parents may not want to leave their children in the care of the agency, particularly if they have had prior experience with removal. • Make sure family members, social work staff, providers, and the facilitator are well prepared for what to expect (purpose and structure) during the meeting. • Social workers may be resistant to ceding some of their “power” to the family. Address staff concerns in making the move to increasing the level of family engagement in decision making. • If resources permit, give families a choice of meeting types, e.g., with or without a facilitator, with or without the caseworker present. • If one of the purposes of the meeting is to create a safety plan that involves having a relative or support person care for a child, have CPS, criminal record check, and other pertinent forms available for individuals to complete on the spot. |
| <p>Originally tried in</p> | <p>Adams County, CO; Iowa; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Oklahoma; Fairfax County, VA</p> |

Practice Card:

Achieving Timely Permanency through Reunification

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Facilitate and Support Family and Sibling Visitation |
| Components involved | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 6. Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | <p>A strong connection has been established between the frequency and nature of visits between parents and children in out-of-home care and the timeliness and success of reunifications. Visits between siblings who are separated have also been shown to be important to the achievement of permanency, as well as the maintenance of bonds between brothers and sisters. Teams tested a variety of practices to enhance visits between family members to make the experience less stressful and more fun for parents and children alike, and with intentional goals leading to safe reunifications.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the frequency of visits. • Engage nontraditional partners in providing supervision and/or mentoring during visits – including foster parents, peer mentors, faith community members, and community partners. • Identify space for family visits in comfortable, non-office settings in the community. • Have social workers present cases involving supervised visitation at regular unit meetings; have the team identify safety reasons precluding (or allowing) unsupervised visits; move to unsupervised visits as soon as safety concerns are met. • Take photos of parents and children together every three months, and give copies to both. • Have the judge routinely order visits between siblings when they are placed in different homes. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>We have had 15 monitored visits with families in the reunification stage. The visits have taken place in the evenings and on weekends and are in a child-friendly setting (toys, outdoor space, changing center, and snacks). The feedback from families and social workers about having a young adult or birth parent representative supervise the visits has been very positive...every social worker wants the visits to happen this way. We are working with other community partners to try to set up additional visitation options similar to this.” (Pasadena, CA)</i></p> <p><i>Our agency SWs are verbalizing that by talking about supervised visits, we are using it less and less and getting kids to unsupervised visitation more quickly. (Clay County, MN)</i></p> |

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| <p>Things to think about</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask parents and children what activities they would like to incorporate into their visits. • Train non-traditional monitors in how to link the risk and safety concerns to their observations and to mentoring during visits. • Develop a list of specific questions to use during unit meetings when reviewing cases with supervised visits. • When necessary, secure court permission to expand/modify/change the supervision level of visits. • Make sure each family is comfortable with the location/monitoring of visits; respect their need for confidentiality in the community. |
| <p>Originally tried in</p> | <p>Compton, CA; Pasadena, CA; Adams County, CO; Clay County, MN; Washoe County, NV; Philadelphia, PA; Fairfax County, VA</p> |

Practice Card:

Achieving Timely Permanency through Reunification

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Prepare and Support the Family for the Transition to Reunification |
| Components involved | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 6. Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification 8. Continuing to Support the Family after Reunification 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | Reunification following out-of-home placement is not truly successful unless the family is able to continue caring for its children safely over time. BSC teams recognized the need to help families plan for that time, to put in place services families might need to support them, and to help families mark the transition with pride and joy. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a family team meeting in preparation for reunification, in which the family builds a plan for continuing safety for their child. • Invite a family resources worker to a family team meeting prior to reunification in order to link the family to services such as TANF, CHIP health care, food stamps, etc. • Create an “exit packet” of information, including a safety plan and culturally appropriate neighborhood resources, for families to use after they exit agency supervision. • Work with the state childcare agency to develop a protocol for connecting families to subsidized childcare, to provide seamless services at transition. • Celebrate “Family Reunification Day” in the community. • Create a celebration ceremony for birth families and foster families to share the transition to reunification. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>This practice has been a very helpful and successful one...in terms of planning for discharge. It has led to families not having to wait until they had enough money saved to pay for childcare, and the agency not having to figure out how to pay initial childcare costs. (Washoe County, NV)</i></p> <p><i>We learned that working together intensely with families prior to and after reunification increased families’ success. (San Francisco, CA)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each of the ideas listed in the “How to” section works best when they are continuations of practices families have already been part of: ongoing family team meetings during placement; linkages to services through other offices, agencies, and community partners; consistent information sharing; cooperation between foster and birth families. |
| Originally tried in | Sacramento, CA; San Francisco, CA; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card:

Achieving Timely Permanency through Reunification

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Reduce Time to Reunification |
| Components involved | <p>1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Reducing the length of time children spend apart from their families is beneficial to the children, to their parents, and to the agency and courts who no longer need to supervise them, as long as safety is ensured. Teams in this BSC tested two practices to achieve this goal: (1) involving families in seeking safety solutions from the onset of agency involvement, (2) increasing the frequency of court review, which served to focus all parties on manageable short-term safety goals.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a family is identified as ready for reunification in regular supervision, initiate a court hearing immediately, rather than waiting for the 6-month review date. • Seek judicial review of out-of-home care cases more frequently than required by law (e.g., every 30 or 45 days). • Conduct a family services team (FST) meeting prior to the initial court hearing. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>Families were identified and their cases were reunified/dismitted early. We anticipated that attorneys would oppose early reunification but that turned out differently than we anticipated. (San Francisco, CA)</i></p> <p><i>The data show this practice is helpful to families. It brings the support system of the family to the table and provides the opportunity for safety planning as well as relative placement identification. It also allows some cases to resolve without becoming involved in the child welfare system, therefore ensuring the children can remain safely with their parents. (Washoe County, NV)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing the frequency of judicial hearings requires close collaboration and coordination with judicial and court staff to manage dockets. Without an increase in staff/resources, this may work best in jurisdictions with small numbers of children in out-of-home care. • FST (family solutions team) meetings are more likely to be held promptly if facilitators collaborate in developing a scheduling system that works well for both their needs and for child welfare staff. • Increasing the frequency of reviews may lead to an earlier conclusion that reunification may not be the best permanency goal, but it also permits the development of an alternate goal earlier in the case. |
| Originally tried in | San Francisco, CA; Iowa; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Build Relationships with Families |
| Components involved | 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners |
| Overview and rationale | When caseworkers approach parents involved with the child welfare system as individuals rather than as cases, they open the door to building positive relationships that can lead to authentic collaboration in meeting safety and permanency goals. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage caseworkers to use words of support and encouragement at every interaction with parents. Conclude each interaction with parents with the following questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Based on the discussion we've just had, do you feel more hopeful or hopeless that we are working together to help get your child home? What did we specifically discuss that made you feel more hopeful or hopeless (use of these terms should reflect what client tells us in question 1)? What are 3 things you'll be doing in the next week to work on the changes that we've discussed that will help you get your child(ren) home? Is there anything else that I could have done today that would help you feel better supported to make changes? |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>All families and workers reported very positive responses. Several families reported that they had never been asked for their opinions and/or their perception of the situation in their work with social services. Workers noted a shift in the relationship that occurred following this intervention. Families reported that they felt clearer about the conversation once they were asked about their hopefulness, and they also were able to identify immediate steps they would take related to their treatment following this discussion. (Adams County, CO)</i></p> <p><i>By giving the parents a chance to feel heard, listening to their story, and giving them gentle words of encouragement, the parents will buy in to case requirements. (Pasadena, CA)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of scripted questions may stand in the way of developing authentic relationships if questions are read as if from a checklist. Encourage workers to practice interactions and develop wording that is comfortable to them. Asking questions is only the first part of building relationships; it is what happens as a result of hearing the answers that can convince families that they are truly important in the eyes of the worker. Bring parents who have experienced success through positive relationships with caseworkers to trainings/staff meetings to talk about the importance of this effort. |
| Originally tried in | Pasadena, CA; Adams County, CO |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Engage Youth in Court Hearings |
| Components involved | <p>3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Judges must make important decisions regarding placement and permanency for children based on the evidence presented to them in hearings. The experience and wishes of young people are often not heard, or they are expressed through the lens of the caseworker, guardian ad litem, attorney, or other parties. Judges in the BSC tested practices that brought the voice of young people directly into their chambers or the courtroom, providing youth with a direct say in their living situations and in their futures. Even when the youth's wishes could not be met, the young person was able to feel that his or her voice was heard, and he or she received direct feedback and information on the reasons for decisions that were made.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite children to attend all court hearings. • Give children the option to speak to the judge in chambers. • Develop (with input from young people) a list of questions for judges to use when speaking with children. Provide the youth with a copy of the questions before the hearing, to increase his or her comfort level about speaking in open court. • Use technology, such as Skype, to facilitate direct interaction between judge and youth when the young person is unable to attend the court hearing in person. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>The in-chambers visit was a very positive experience and the kids said, "You're not scary at all" to the judge. (Clay County, CO)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare children for speaking with the judge or the hearing by providing information about the process, reviewing what will be discussed, giving them an opportunity to ask questions. Consider using a youth mentor (see the Engage Youth Mentors to Support Youth practice card). • Make sure that guardians ad litem or attorneys representing youth are aware of the plan. • Technology/logistics issues must be addressed. This may include limits on number of connections available; costs involved in multi-participant video conferences; security blocks on Internet connections; availability of wireless connections; built-in vs. peripheral cameras; presence of a person able to trouble-shoot on the spot. |
| Originally tried in | <p>San Francisco, CA; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Clay County, MN; Oklahoma; Fairfax County, VA</p> |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| Practice: | Engage Parent Mentors to Support Parents |
| Components involved | <p>3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Child welfare and court systems can be intimidating to parents who are unfamiliar with their workings and who are already stressed about their family situations. By providing parents with an experienced peer guide (a parent who has already been through the system), teams in this BSC found that parents can have more effective relationships with the agency and the court. Mentors were able to provide detailed information to prepare parents for court and agency processes and reduce anxiety about the future.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the parent mentor call parents after completion of drug court intervention to celebrate their success and offer encouragement and support. • Have the parent mentor contact parents before the initial team meeting to explain the process. • Give parents the opportunity to meet with a parent mentor before a court hearing to ask questions they might have about the child welfare and court systems. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>We now have a parent mentor in the office with us 32 hours per week! He is working on client contacts as well as program development and collaborating with other programs in efforts to begin a Parent Partner Program in Clay County and possibly Minnesota. VERY EXCITING!</i> (Clay County, MN)</p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider different methods of establishing contact – a letter or phone call from the mentor; an explanation by a worker, judge, or attorney; a release from parents allowing a mentor to contact them. • Parent mentors may provide an opportunity to improve an agency's cultural competence, ensuring all parents are engaged. • Explain the process and purpose of parent mentoring to other agencies and partners who may encounter them (e.g., foster parents, service providers, CASAs, etc.). • Provide parent mentors with training in court and agency processes and in communication skills; follow up with support from more experienced mentors, a community partner, or agency staff. • Parent mentors have reported experiencing personal growth and appreciation for the opportunity to “give back” to their community and help other parents. |
| Originally tried in | Sacramento, CA; San Francisco, CA; Adams County, CO; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Clay County, MN |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Engage Youth Mentors to Support Youth |
| Components involved | <p>3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>6. Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Child welfare and court systems can be intimidating to young people who are unfamiliar with their workings and are already stressed about their family situations. By providing youth with an experienced peer guide (a youth who has already been through the system), teams in this BSC found that youth can have more effective relationships with the agency and the court, and a stronger voice in planning their pathway to adulthood. Mentors were able to provide detailed information to prepare youth for court and agency processes and to reduce anxiety about the future.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A young adult who has experienced the foster care system meets with youth soon after their entry into care to provide them with information. • A youth mentor meets with a youth in care to explain the process of creating a plan for permanency and life skills development. • A youth mentor works with a youth in care and his or her caregiver to create a Lifebook. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>[The peer mentor] met with 4 brand-new custody children (teens) who...had been in the shelter less than 72 hours. He provided all of the teens with our Kids Guide to CW, which was developed by our line worker, youth representative, and line supervisor. All but one of the children in the meeting were receptive...and appreciated the information and hearing from a peer who shared some of the same experiences that they are going through. This was about a 30-minute visit. One of the youth had only been in the shelter for a few hours and was not as receptive as he was still dealing with his removal from his family. [The youth mentor] provided this youth with the guide and told him to call him if he had any questions at a later date. (Oklahoma)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider different methods of establishing contact – a letter or phone call from the mentor; an explanation by a worker, judge, or attorney; a release from parents allowing a mentor to contact the youth. • Youth mentors may provide an opportunity to improve an agency's cultural competence, ensuring all young people are engaged. • Explain the process and purpose of youth mentoring to other agencies and partners who may encounter them (e.g., foster parents, service providers, CASAs, etc.). • Provide youth mentors with training in court and agency processes and in communication skills; follow up with support from more experienced mentors, a community partner, or agency staff. |
| Originally tried in | San Francisco, CA; Adams County, CO; Oklahoma; Fairfax County, VA |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Help Families and Youth Organize Information and Resources |
| Components involved | 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | Families involved with child welfare agencies and courts have a lot of forms, paperwork, and appointments to keep track of, in addition to their already full lives. Providing simple organization tools can give families a means to fit these new and unfamiliar expectations into their daily lives, helping them coordinate their own schedules with that of the protective services system. Timely completion of tasks and forms is an essential step toward achieving timely reunification with their children. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide families with an expandable folder to hold all of their agency and court documents; include a calendar, pen, and list of community resources. • Provide children with age-appropriate folders that include case and court documents, important dates, phone numbers, contacts, and a glossary of child welfare terms. • Prepare a calendar for families to keep track of hearings, meetings, and service appointments. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>This has been a well-received item. The FST (family solutions team) meetings have consistently used them as has our parent mentor through the court. They report verbal feedback from the families that they find the resource folder to be helpful. (Washoe County, NV)</i></p> <p><i>In order to cover the costs of putting these packets together, we contacted the 7th Judicial District Summit group to see if they would be interested in assisting us. They thought it was a great idea and not only funded the packets for our target county, but also put packets to be handed out in the courts of the other counties that the Judicial District covers. As a result, these packets will begin to be distributed judicial-district wide. (Iowa)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between the agency and the court in the development and dissemination of information and resources to families and children can reduce the number of individual pieces of paper and help families take control of their schedules. • Provide information materials/videos in languages spoken by the populations you serve. • Check the reading level and jargon/acronyms in your materials. Can your families/youth understand the terminology? |
| Originally tried in | Compton, CA; San Francisco, CA; Iowa; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Gather Information from Families, Youth, and Community Partners to Improve Child Welfare and Court Systems |
| Components involved | 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | The children and families who experience interactions with the child welfare and court systems can offer first-hand information on both the effectiveness of the systems and on what it feels like to interact with court and agency staff and service providers. Eliciting feedback from constituents gives systems valuable information for continuous quality improvement efforts. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask children/families/service providers to complete a short survey asking for feedback on their understanding of processes and/or their satisfaction with the way they were treated. • After a case has been closed, have the family meet with a neutral party such as the family team meeting facilitator to provide feedback on their experience with the agency. • At the beginning of a court hearing, the judge asks families/children whether they have had pre-hearing meetings with their attorneys. • Have a young person strategically share information about the experience of being in out-of-home care during new foster parent training. • Have parents who have experienced reunification talk with parenting class service providers about ways to engage parents whose children are in placement. • Incorporate a training session led by parents and youth into new social worker training to provide them with some insight from the perspective of families as to the reunification process and the importance of a productive working relationship with families in an effort to achieve established goals and objectives. • Invite youth to share their feelings about their experience with the child welfare system through an arts workshop. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <i>Evaluations from attendees at foster parent pre-service training consistently voice their greater understanding of a child's walk through foster care as a result of the youth speaker's presentation. Some have decided to care for adolescents after meeting the youth.</i> (Washoe County, NV) |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare constituents to share their personal stories in a strategic way. • In any venue in which youth or parents are sharing their stories or feelings, be prepared to provide emotional support if needed. • Provide a stipend or compensation to parents and youth who provide information to others in training or information sessions. |
| Originally tried in | Compton, CA; Pasadena, CA; Sacramento, CA; San Francisco, CA; Clay County, MN; Philadelphia, PA; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Identify and Engage the Broadest Family Network |
| Components involved | <p>3. Making Sound Decisions on Permanency</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | Absent fathers, extended family members, and other important individuals can support children and families on an ongoing basis as well as act as essential resources for safety, permanency, and well-being. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete a genogram within 30 days of initial contact with a family. • Develop a checklist of steps taken to locate absent parents; include in every court report. • Use a questionnaire to elicit information from children in foster care concerning people with whom they have important connections. • Provide the court with the safety plan developed during the family solutions team (FST) meeting, thereby engaging the extended family in the hearing process. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <i>Concerns [were] expressed regarding the use of an engagement tool in a court process and concerns regarding confidentiality of statements made during a 'mediation-type' process. The team has discussed the confidentiality concerns, and part of the FST process is to explain to the family and team at the meeting that the information is to be shared with the court. This does not appear to be a barrier... This is felt by the courts to be a good practice and it has spread to all teams in our department. (Washoe County, NV)</i> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts to locate absent fathers and to identify and engage extended family members can begin as soon as the initial report and continue through all contacts with children, families, and collaterals. • Consider using non-traditional resources such as peer mentors and foster parents to help children and parents complete genograms or provide information about family members. • Be sure to follow up with individuals identified by children as important in their lives. • Document the case record with contact information for extended family; update periodically. |
| Originally tried in | Iowa; Clay County, MN; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Prepare and Support Birth Families and Foster Families to Work Together towards Reunification |
| Components involved | <p>1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome</p> <p>5. Using Out-of-Home Placements to Support Reunification</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>When birth parents and foster parents are able to establish ongoing communication and establish a mentor/mentee relationship, visits can be more productive and frequent with fewer complications. Information can be shared about the child, and birth parents can feel empowered. Good relationships between the families can support placement stability. When both families share the goal of decreasing time to reunification, timely permanency is more apt to occur.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite birth and foster families to a meeting to introduce each other, clarify their respective roles, and establish a plan to support consistent and effective communication on behalf of the children as it relates to reunification. • Hold a team meeting with both birth parents and foster parents present within 24 hours of placement, to set the stage for collaboration right from the start. • Have foster parents mentor parents during visits, sharing parenting skills and tips. • Have families meet each other during “icebreaker” sessions designed to encourage communication. • Include foster parents in cross-system training that includes agency staff, attorneys, CASAs, and other community partners. Focus the training on the expectation that all parties will prioritize engaging with the larger family system and meeting their needs, rather than expecting the family to fit into existing, one-size-fits-all supports and services. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>The positive connection between the birth parent/foster parent was very empowering. The connection gave the birth parents an opportunity to be more active, nurturing, and positive in their children's lives. (Compton, CA)</i></p> <p><i>Ice-breaker meetings...give the placement resource the opportunity to look beyond preconceived notions and fears and see the family as a whole and each member as a person with a story...[and] the meetings lay the groundwork for ongoing and future connections. When placement resource and birth families have a strong connection, that connection generally remains in place after safe case closure, which is a benefit to the child. (Iowa)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birth and foster families may need coaching to feel comfortable working together and understanding the importance of partnership and collaboration. • Prepare workers to skillfully facilitate meetings and other interactions between birth families and foster families. |
| Originally tried in | Compton, CA; Iowa; Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, MI; Washoe County, NV |

Practice Card: Constituency Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Provide Information about the Court and Agency Systems to Children and Families |
| Components involved | 4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | Child welfare and court systems can be confusing and intimidating to children and families who are struggling with safety issues and their separation by protective services. By sharing information about the mechanics of these systems and making contact information readily available, agencies and courts help empower families and youth to participate fully in their processes. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give children notice of court hearings and their right to attend. Prepare an information sheet for families and children. • Prepare a video introduction to the court and/or child welfare system for youth/parents. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <i>The key to children taking an active role at court is to understand what is happening and how they can get what they think in front of the judge. Sacramento uses a form...[which] helps children of all ages better understand that the court is there for them; that they have a say in what happens to them; and the court really wants to know what they think. Since introducing this form and improving communication among the partners, we have seen an increase in children's attendance at court from 25 percent to over 75 percent. All of the children we have talked to about the form say that reading it and talking to their attorney about the form helped them decide to take a more active part in their case. (Sacramento, CA)</i> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information materials/videos in languages spoken by the populations you serve. • Check the reading level and jargon/acronyms in your materials. Can your families/youth understand the terminology? • Consider the tone of video information. Is it family/youth-friendly? Does it convey a message of helpfulness and collaboration, or one of judgment and imbalance of power between families and systems? |
| Originally tried in | Compton, CA; Sacramento, CA; Adams County, CO; Oklahoma; Philadelphia, PA |

Practice Card: Cross-System Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Develop a Collaborative Support Network of Resources |
| Components involved | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome 6. Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | <p>In the field of behavioral health, the concept of “wraparound” has achieved success as a way to focus services from multiple sources on a child’s or family’s needs. Taking that idea into child welfare, teams found success in educating a wide variety of formal and informal partners about the goals of the child welfare agency and then asking them to participate in a family’s progress toward reunification.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a collaboration between a community agency providing residential substance abuse treatment that allows children to stay with their mothers, and the child welfare agency, sheriff’s department, court, public defender, and substance abuse agency to enable women being released from incarceration to go immediately into supportive treatment, working toward reunification with their children. • Hold a team decision-making meeting with parents, children, and service providers prior to reunification, to identify and set up community resources to support the family’s success. • Enlist community agencies to provide a list of available services, along with cost, accessibility, availability, etc. Update the list regularly so that workers can easily determine what resources are available. • Train community partners on federal and state child welfare requirements, the role of the public agency, the importance of reunification, and the ways community providers can collaborate with the agency to serve children and families. • Engage local faith communities to assist in meeting the needs of individual families (one family per congregation). • Ascertain interests (e.g., hobbies, recreation, educational or vocational goals) of parents and/or youth, and spread a wide net in the community to nurture those interests through both traditional and non-traditional partners. • Meet with school administrators to develop a plan for foster parent recruitment. • Educate probation officers about the process of engaging families and young people about family team meetings and post-hearing meetings to ensure that families understand “what just happened.” |

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| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>The meeting was a success! The probation officers were engaged and interested. They really benefited from being able to ask the youth questions directly about her stay in foster care – what it was like for her. At the conclusion of the meeting, one of the probation officers said, “I am going to court this afternoon, and I think I’ll try the [What Just Happened Meeting] with the family.” Since our PDSA began, a natural spread to another program in the county occurred. This was very exciting! (Fairfax County, VA)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the initial team decision-making meeting, the caseworker will tailor one referral for each identified need to ensure that there is no waiting list for the service, the client can afford the referral, and the services are accessible and appropriate. • Engage a local university to participate in multi-agency collaborations by conducting an evaluation. |
| Originally tried in | <p>Compton, CA; Pasadena, CA; San Francisco, CA; Philadelphia, PA; Fairfax County, VA</p> |

Practice Card: Cross-System Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Educate Partners and the Community |
| Components involved | 1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome 9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners |
| Overview and rationale | All families do best in supportive communities that meet their needs and those of their children. Community members, including both individuals and formal and informal service providers, can best meet those needs if they understand the ways in which families come to be involved with child welfare agencies and how agencies and courts seek to strengthen families while simultaneously protecting children. Teams in this BSC undertook several community education efforts to garner support for their activities. Such proactive efforts can serve to maintain support for the agency in times of stress and when high-profile cases can otherwise derail reunification efforts. |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare a presentation for media outlets in order to seek individuals and agencies wishing to participate in strengthening families in the community. • Develop and conduct trainings in which multiple partners, including foster parents, attorneys, law enforcement, CASAs, and agency staff receive education about the benefits, timelines, and processes of reunification. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>The message of teaming and collaboration in the form of training across disciplines has been quite successful. There has been broad support for the message of teaming across disciplines for the reunification work associated with our families. (Washoe County, NV)</i></p> <p><i>Prior to the BSC, child welfare in Oklahoma related to the family as developing service plans and directing services and service providers as required by the court order. The Oklahoma team has developed from the foundation through strengthening communication and educating all parties involved to achieve timely permanence for children and youth in out-of-home care. We were able to do this by creating PDSAs that spoke to and educated our parents and youth and encouraged community partnerships. (Oklahoma)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some community members and community partners may have varied opinions about reuniting children with parents who have mistreated them. Efforts to engage them must include some recognition of their possible objections as well as education about the positive effects of reunification for not just children and families but for neighborhoods and communities as well. |
| Originally tried in | Pasadena, CA; Washoe County, NV; Oklahoma |

Practice Card: Cross-System Engagement

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Enhance Agency-Court Communication |
| Components involved | <p>1. Committing to Reunification as the Most Desirable Permanency Outcome</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>While courts and agencies are both seeking to help families achieve positive outcomes, they each have their own focus and processes, and may be viewing the child, the family, and the goal of reunification through different lenses. Techniques that simplify and routinize written or oral communications between agency and court staff can lead to better shared understanding of what the family needs to do in order for children and parents to be reunited. Enhanced communication can also lead to a decrease in continuances and ultimately quicker reunifications.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a court report format that presents relevant information to the court in a standardized format. • Through training, help caseworkers improve their skills in court presentation. • Social worker calls attorneys of parent and child to inform them of outcomes of permanency staffing meetings. • When filing for protective custody of children whose parents are minors, the parents are assigned to holistic legal representation through the community legal services agency. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>[As a result of caseworkers calling to advise outcomes of permanency staffings] attorneys are coming to court with more knowledge about what is going on in the case and court hearings are going more smoothly. (Sacramento, CA)</i></p> <p><i>One of our greatest accomplishments was the innovative addition of an improved working relationship with family court, judges, and attorneys... Everyone agrees that the BSC collaboration process has indeed strengthened our relationships with the court and renewed our commitment to making cross-systems engagement a priority. (Philadelphia, PA)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ascertain the greatest challenges faced by caseworkers in their presentations to the court (as seen by both workers and judges/ attorneys), and develop trainings specific to those skills. • Coordination between agency and court calendars can simplify scheduling and further decrease continuances. • Co-location of agency and/or court personnel may lead to enhanced relationships as well as provide a swift resolution of some issues. |
| Originally tried in | Sacramento, CA; Washoe County, NV; Philadelphia, PA |

Practice Card: Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Engage in Conversations about Race, Ethnicity, and Culture |
| Components involved | <p>2. Recognizing and Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>7. Recruiting, Preparing, and Supporting a Qualified Workforce</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Having families self-identify their own races, ethnicities, and cultures is the most reliable method we have of doing so. Engaging in conversation builds rapport between staff and families, ensures a greater degree of cultural sensitivity, and demonstrates respect for not just individual families but for their cultures as well. Improved relationships can then lead to more open sharing of information, resulting in swifter progress toward reunification.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask a birth parent or family member about any traditions, customs, cultural practices, meals/dietary requirements, and hair/skin care and/or other personal hygiene practices that they would want the child to maintain while in foster care. • With the family, identify at least one cultural value/custom/tradition that can be employed as a strength in service planning. • Ask the family: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What culture/race does the family identify with? ○ What are the family’s child-rearing practices? ○ What are the family’s roles and rules? ○ Who provides support to the family? • Engage staff in conversation/training about their own cultural identity and the ways that that impacts their interactions with others. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>By asking the family about their cultural identification and their needs, the agency “was able to better assess appropriate service needs of the family. The family was more responsive to the services that were recommended for reunification. (Oklahoma)</i></p> <p><i>Philadelphia...sponsored a regional conference [on disproportionality]...The buzz...has [staff] thinking about this every time they see a family. Staff were surprised that it was the first time they heard about race and the impact of race on decision making/decision points in the case. (Philadelphia, PA)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most individuals are uncomfortable talking about race, ethnicity, and culture – including workers. By dealing with their own discomfort, workers can better approach families to have these conversations. • Workers must understand why this is important for families and how it demonstrates respect for them. • Workers must understand how this may be used in identifying and addressing disproportionality and disparate outcomes. • Data descriptors typically used by agencies may not adequately reflect the way a family self-identifies. |
| Originally tried in | Pasadena, CA; Clay County, MN; Oklahoma; Philadelphia, PA |

Practice Card: Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes

This card describes a set of practice improvements that were tested by teams in the Timely Permanency through Reunification BSC, and that can be easily replicated and adapted in most agencies.

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| Practice: | Use Culturally Respectful and Responsive Practices |
| Components involved | <p>2. Recognizing and Reducing Disproportionality and Disparate Outcomes</p> <p>4. Engaging the Family Network as Partners</p> <p>6. Using Services and Supports as a Foundation for Reunification</p> <p>9. Collaborating with Cross-Systems and Community Partners</p> |
| Overview and rationale | <p>Individuals and families tend to seek out others like themselves as neighbors; it is not unusual to find concentrations of families of the same ethnicity living in a community. By seeking out the service providers that spring up to serve their neighbors, agencies can expand their repertoire of community partners while serving their constituents in more culturally responsive ways. Families who feel that their beliefs and practices are respected are more apt to engage positively with the agency.</p> |
| How to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify community partners who can provide culturally responsive services to constituents of different races/ethnicities by asking them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o What specific services does your agency offer? o Who can make referrals and what is the source of payment? o Do you have specific experience working with clients who embrace ____ beliefs? [Question specific to family] o If so, what have you found as the best way to engage families who embrace this belief system? • Ask community service providers how the agency can better meet the needs of constituents of different races/ethnicities. • Have a neutral third party survey parents whose primary language is not English about whether services being provided are appropriate/effective. • Create a Spanish-language video that orients parents to the court/agency. |
| Examples of success in the BSC | <p><i>We have looked at our data and struggled with how to make a significant impact... We had a worker come forward and say, 'I just don't know about culturally appropriate resources.' The worker became the champion of looking at what is out there and then talking to those resources about how we can work together. (Adams County, CO)</i></p> <p><i>In review of the survey data, it appears we have made some progress in the area of cultural awareness and being respectful, responsive, and supportive of families in the context of their culture. (Washoe County, NV)</i></p> |
| Things to think about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jurisdictions with smaller populations of families who are not from the majority culture sometimes fail to see the needs of these families. • Identifying the need for culturally responsive services is only the first step in a journey. It may take sustained effort over time to ensure that services are actually available and accessible to the families who need them. |
| Originally tried in | <p>Adams County, CO; Clay County, MN; Washoe County, NV; Oklahoma</p> |

Appendix E: Team Tools and Resources

Tools and Resources

- Compton's **Calendaring Your Success** court calendar*
- Adam County's **Common Language** definitions
- **Telling It Like It Is: Foster Youth and Their Struggle for Permanency**. DVD link from Seneca Center/California Permanency for Youth Project www.senecacenter.org/perm_digitalstories
- Clay County's **Disproportionality Report** PowerPoint
- City of Pasadena's **Disproportionality Data One Pager**
- Sault Ste. Marie Tribe's **Parent Awareness Workshop** parents' booklet
- **Strategic Sharing** (www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/StrategicSharing.htm)
- Fairfax County's **What Just Happened Meeting** sample agenda/outline
- Washoe County's **We're All In This Together** icebreaker meeting between birth parents and foster parents sample agenda/outline
- Sustainability Planning Tool

Web-based tools are located at www.casey.org/breakthrough-series



Acknowledgements

We commend the commitment to timely permanency demonstrated by the eleven participating teams. Months after the close of the BSC, we continue to receive positive feedback from team members about positive outcomes related to their timely permanency work efforts.

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