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[Print this page](#) 

Spotlight on the CFSRs: What Are We Learning From Round Two?

Three States Build Father Engagement

In response to the CFSRs and as part of a greater effort to increase family engagement, a number of States have developed a range of innovative practices to engage fathers and paternal relatives in the lives of their children involved with the child welfare system. Kansas, Texas, and Kentucky are three States experiencing the benefits of their efforts to engage fathers.

- [Kansas](#)
- [Texas](#)
- [Kentucky](#)

Kansas

Kansas has made changes in both policy and practice that have begun to show positive results in father engagement. As part of the State's 2008 Program Improvement Plan (PIP), Kansas Children and Family Services (CFS) implemented measures designed to change the culture around caseworkers' views of fathers and to encourage child welfare workers to reach out to fathers. These measures included:

- Changing the word "parent" to the phrase "mother and father" throughout the CFS policy manual. This small but significant change required workers to include fathers in their case planning and to actively seek and engage fathers and paternal relatives. The National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QICNRF) provided support in making these changes.
- Training on father engagement. The Kansas CFS worked with its private agencies under contract to ensure that all providers received training on father engagement. CFS now provides a core training for workers titled, "Effectively Engaging Families and Youth in Case Planning and Case Management." The Father's Place curriculum is also a resource for providers.
- Revising policy to reflect new Federal requirements. In keeping with the Fostering Connections Act, Kansas strengthened its requirements for contacting relatives—including paternal relatives—of children entering foster care. Workers also are required to consider all relatives every time a child changes placements.

In addition to these measures, CFS is a member of the Kansas Fatherhood Coalition, a group of private organizations and public agencies seeking to improve fathers' involvement with their children. The Coalition sponsors an annual Fatherhood Summit that spotlights the important role that fathers play in their children's lives. This year the Coalition plans to sponsor a fatherhood track at the Parent Leadership Conference in the fall. The Coalition also provides training and tools for father engagement, and it gives CFS a connection with other groups that have similar goals of father involvement.

Early outcomes show that the Kansas CFS efforts to engage fathers are working. Statistics on fathers' weekly visits, assessed needs, and services provided all show an upward trend. In addition,

relative placement has increased, as workers now consider paternal relatives as a resource for children in out-of-home care. Kansas CFS plans to build on these early successes with father engagement to continue to improve outcomes for all children and families.

Texas

Texas has strengthened its commitment to involving fathers in their children's lives, and this emphasis permeates all aspects of child welfare practice in the State. In early 2009, Texas created the State-level position of Fatherhood Program Specialist to spearhead this commitment. The Fatherhood Program Specialist coordinates the overall State effort, and this coordination involves visiting jurisdictions throughout the State, reviewing policy, reaching out to fatherhood groups to establish partnerships, organizing conferences and roundtables, facilitating trainings, and making presentations about the importance of father involvement.

One of the initial hurdles has been changing the mindset of child welfare professionals, court personnel, and even families who might not think to reach out to fathers and paternal relatives when a child enters the child welfare system. In changing this mindset, Fatherhood Program Specialist Kenneth D. Thompson, Sr., thinks that it's especially important to let fathers tell their own stories. "We invite fathers who've successfully navigated the child welfare system and gotten custody of their kids to speak at Judiciary Roundtables. Judges can hear directly from fathers about the struggles they've encountered in trying to get custody of their children. The judges are impressed with the fathers' stories, and the fathers feel affirmed because they've had the opportunity to share their experiences in a public forum."

Texas has initiated a number of specific reforms and activities to strengthen father engagement with the child welfare system and support fathers' involvement with their children, including:

- Revising written policies to ensure that fathers are included
- Providing training around the State on father engagement and family finding
- Creating an internal website for child welfare workers to share success stories about father engagement
- Using Family Group Decision Making as a forum to include fathers and paternal relatives in case planning
- Collaborating with fatherhood groups around the State (e.g., New Day Services, North Texas Fatherhood Initiative, Hispanic Fatherhood Initiative, and others) and with fatherhood initiatives in Indiana, Washington, and Colorado through the National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System
- Working with faith-based organizations, especially in rural areas, to provide support and meeting places for fathers
- Valuing cultural diversity among fathers and reaching out to different racial and ethnic groups throughout the State
- Establishing a Parent Collaboration Group at the State level and Parent Advisory Councils at the local level, both composed of fathers who can be resources for each other
- Holding Judiciary Roundtables around the State

Frontline workers have been very receptive to the new emphasis on fathers, appreciating the positive impact that fathers and paternal relatives can have on their children. Workers are encouraged to listen to fathers who talk about their own upbringing, since this often provides clues to the types of support fathers need in developing good relationships with their children.

Thompson echoes this philosophy, noting that, "We want to have a generational impact. We want to break cycles in which fathers were not involved or included. If we can help fathers become part of their children's lives, we're setting the stage for positive father involvement for the next generation."

Kentucky

After the State's most recent Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), Kentucky's Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) made a renewed commitment to engage parents—especially fathers—when families become involved with the child welfare system. Meeting with child welfare

workers, partners, stakeholders, and judiciary personnel, DCBS staff focused on defining "reasonable efforts" to involve fathers, as well as refining policy and implementing processes that would promote fathers' engagement by child welfare workers. DCBS took a systemic approach so that changes were made across processes as well as across agencies, regions, and service areas.

A number of specific changes were devised to encourage fathers' optimal participation in their children's lives, including:

- Updating written policies to include "father-specific" language that ensures that caseworkers seek, identify, and include fathers and paternal relatives whenever possible
- Developing tools such as a checklist that caseworkers use to help them locate fathers and paternal relatives when a child enters foster care, a genogram, a relative exploration form, and a handbook on searching for and engaging absent parents and relatives
- Working with the child support agency to develop a family finding guide to help workers locate fathers
- Revising policy so that cases are reviewed in terms of the progression of both mother and father
- Holding quarterly video conferences with regional staff to educate them about new and updated policies
- Training supervisors to help them mentor and coach caseworkers about father involvement and family engagement
- Revising training to ensure that it is culturally competent and stresses the need for frontline workers to engage everyone who is important in a child's life
- Establishing a workgroup on family engagement that has been interviewing families, including fathers, in rural and urban locations about their child welfare experiences
- Meeting with judges and court personnel on a semi-regular basis to discuss paternity establishment, parent engagement, service provision to parents, and parental notification

"Kentucky's work on family and father engagement has also dovetailed nicely with our State's response to the Fostering Connections Act, as we work to help children and youth connect with family members," comments Gretchen Marshall, DCBS Branch Manager. "Our emphasis is on frontloading the efforts to engage fathers so that workers are looking for fathers and paternal relatives before a child enters foster care. And we've experienced a real shift in workers' attitudes so that our frontline workers welcome the involvement of fathers and paternal relatives as additional resources and connections for children."

Looking ahead, Kentucky DCBS plans to continue its work on father engagement, tracking and evaluating outcomes so that the best tools, policies, and practices can be implemented to help workers find and engage fathers whenever possible.

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[Return to article.](#)