

Site Visit Report: Comprehensive Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes

Award #: 90-CA-1755

Cluster: Using Comprehensive Family Assessments to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

Grantee: Contra Costa County Children and Family Services

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SUMMARY

In 2001, the California State Assembly passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, a State initiative modeled after the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR). The act directed counties to undergo a self-assessment and system improvement to enhance performance on key child welfare outcome indicators. In 2003, the State CFSR found that California did not meet the national standards for any of the seven outcome measures. Using a Children's Bureau grant, Contra Costa County Child & Family Services (CFS) implemented the Comprehensive Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) project to address outcomes identified in the California CFSR.

The CAPFO model built on existing policy and practice strengths in line with the eight key components and the 10-step [Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines](#). These strengths included strong family engagement practices, a family assessment practice model, and enhanced strategies to support family-driven case plans. The model also incorporated new practices such as the use of the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale, Motivational Interviewing, Parent Partners, Learning Communities, Coaching Circles, and a strong focus on father engagement.

In 2006, Contra Costa County CFS received over 10,000 referrals for abuse and neglect. Approximately 17 percent of the cases were substantiated. CAPFO aims to impact the process by which families are assessed, the practice of family intervention, and the outcomes experienced by families served. They plan to accomplish this with a more comprehensive and empowering model of assessment and corresponding case planning and execution. The target population included children and families entering the child welfare system at the point of referral. The children and families were randomly selected and assigned to services and control groups at the point of referral. The CAPFO services continued for as long as the case remained open. Long-range goals for the CAPFO project include reducing recidivism in referrals, reducing substantiations, reducing the number of children in out-of-home care, and reducing the time children spend in out-of-home care.

Innovative features used by CAPFO include:

- **The Parent Partner Program.** The Parent Partner program draws upon the strengths of families and engages family and community members in program planning. The program seeks to enlist as staff mothers and fathers who have experienced child removal, services, and reunification. These individuals are trained and supported to provide direct services to parent clients seeking reunification with their children. CAPFO staff indicate that Parent Partners have been an invaluable component to their work in collaborating with clients.



- **Team Decision-Making.** The basic premise of a Family Team Meeting is to promote family involvement and empower families to come together to generate a plan that first promotes safety and then works to engage other members of the family and community.
- **Assessment of Father Involvement and Incarcerated Parents.** Trainings continue to support staff in family engagement and the inclusion of fathers. Working with incarcerated parents was also a project focus for engaging those fathers who have not been included in planning direction, safety, and permanency for their children.
- **Motivational Interviewing.** Participating staff received training on the Stages of Change Motivational Interviewing techniques, the CAPFO process, and the implementation of coaching, case teaching sessions, and feedback meetings. Universally, caseworker staff stated that the high-quality training received for Motivational Interviewing resulted in practice change.

Evaluation of the program is ongoing. The CAPFO model has been recognized by staff and families as family-focused and supportive. There was also a focus on improving performance in placing sibling groups together and, in fact, Contra Costa County has seen improvement in CFSR Performance Indicator 4A, Siblings.

As these practice changes have been implemented and the philosophy of viewing the family as a unit rather than individual components, changes in the tracking of families in physical case folders is moving to one folder for a full family rather than child-specific case folders.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: Comprehensive Family Assessments in Contra Costa County" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

The Comprehensive Family Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) project is administered by the Children & Family Services (CFS) Bureau within the Employment and Human Services Agency of Contra Costa County, CA. As a 5-year demonstration grant project, awarded in 2007 by the HHS, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, the CAPFO model built on existing policy and practice strengths that were in line with the eight key components and the 10-step Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines. These strengths included strong family engagement practices, a family assessment practice model, and enhanced strategies to support family-driven case plans with families and staff collaborating to identify resources and providers to address the family's specific service plan goals. The model also incorporated new practices such as the use of the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale, Motivational Interviewing, Parent Partners, Learning Communities, Coaching Circles, and a strong focus on father engagement and inclusion.

Need for This Service

In 2001, the California State Assembly passed the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, a State initiative modeled after the Federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). The act directed counties to undergo a process of self-assessment and system improvement in order to improve performance on key child welfare outcome indicators. In 2003, the California CFSR found that California did not meet the national standards for any of the seven outcome measures. One reason Contra Costa CFS implemented CAPFO was to address the following outcomes identified in the California CFSR:

- Consistent parent involvement in the case planning process
- Individualized services for children and families
- Frequent and comprehensive parent and child assessments

- Systemic program supports for training, case review, and quality assurance

At the time of the grant application, Contra Costa County was the ninth most populated county in California with just over 1 million residents. CFS workers faced a sharp increase in foster care placements and were seeking solutions to engage families proactively in a manner that focused more broadly on outcomes and implement new tools and processes for the children and families they served. The CAPFO model built on existing policy and practice strengths aligned with the eight key components (a copy of the Eight Key Components is in the Attachment section) of the 10-step [Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines](#) (these guidelines were published by CB in 2005 in response to widespread needs identified in the first round of CFSRs). Key objectives included:

- Strong family engagement practices (Parent Partners and Team Decision-Making meetings)
- A family assessment practice model, which mandates State assessment surveys at various points in the child welfare process, and strong collaboration with Mental Health and other partnering agencies (Health Services, Alcohol and Other Drug, Probation, and Child Health and Development, Education)
- Engagement policy and practices that incorporated the 10 steps defined in the Comprehensive Family Assessment Guidelines
- Enhanced practices to support individualized case planning and family-specific, individualized service plans with families and staff collaborating to identify resources and providers to address the family's specific service plan goals

Target Population

In 2006, Contra Costa County CFS received over 10,000 referrals for abuse and neglect with approximately 17 percent of the cases substantiated. CAPFO aimed to impact the process by which families are assessed, the practice of family intervention, and the outcomes experienced by families served with a more comprehensive and empowering model of assessment and corresponding case planning and execution. The target population included children and families entering the child welfare system at the point of referral. The children and families were randomly selected and assigned to services and control groups. The CAPFO services continued for as long as the case remained open. The long-range goals for the CAPFO project include reducing recidivism in referral substantiations, reducing the number of children placed in out-of-home care, and reducing the time children spend in care.

SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

Background

The site visit took place in August 2012, at the offices of the Contra Costa County Department of Social Services where the Comprehensive Family Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) project is administered by the Children & Family Services (CFS) Bureau. The staff and leadership stated that CAPFO built upon best practices and presented innovations such as the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS), Motivational Interviewing, Parent Partners, Learning Communities, Coaching Circles, and a strong focus on father engagement and inclusion.

The list below defines the basic concepts of the Contra Costa County's Comprehensive Family Assessment model:

- Strengths-based, culturally competent family assessments, including the use of NCFAS to support assessment of the family and to guide case planning
- Family engagement activities that emphasize quality contacts, reflective listening, strengths-based language, and enhanced parent and sibling connection and visiting

- The use of Motivational Interviewing as a practice model
- Enhanced family participation in individualized case planning utilizing Team Decision-Making, Parent Partner mentors, enhanced father involvement, and more inclusion in selecting and arranging culturally competent, family-based services
- Using feedback for continuous program improvement that includes data driven assessments

CAPFO Process

Upon receipt of the referral, the Emergency Response (ER) supervisors apply a random assignment to the referral. If it is determined to be a CAPFO services case, the ER social workers initiate the 10-step Comprehensive Family Assessment activities through enhanced engagement efforts and additional services provided for CAPFO selected families. These services include using Motivational Interviewing techniques, inviting families to participate in Team Decision-Making Meetings, and early involvement with a Parent Partner. If the referral is accepted for services, the ER social worker and the assigned CAPFO Continuing Services social worker meet and conduct a case transfer called a "warm hand off." This meeting is used to convey information about the family and the assessment conducted thus far. Then the Continuing Services worker gathers information through case review and interviews with the family in order to develop and implement the individualized case plan. The comprehensive assessment will continue, with the Continuing Services social worker prepared to modify the case plan and case management efforts to address the current, specific needs of each family in an effort to encourage reunification, maintenance of the children in the home, and address permanency needs. Additional CAPFO interventions include ongoing Team Decision-Making Meetings, Motivational Interviewing, Parent Partners, and use of the NCFAS tool. The services continue through the life of the case, until closure.

The CAPFO Facilitation Team meets monthly to assess progress, discuss challenges, set direction for the Learning Community, plan training and activities for staff in support of CAPFO practices, and to address resource issues and needs of the project. This meeting includes the key project staff, CFS Director and Project Principal Investigator, Project Director, Evaluation Manager, and Staff Development and Representative Managers and Supervisors from the districts. Membership also includes the Parent Partner Coordinator and Motivational Interviewing Trainer/Mentor.

Site Visit Participants

- Neely McElroy, Project Director
- Gloria Halverson, Division Manager
- Sandra Nunez and Amy Nunez, Evaluators
- Parent Partners (names omitted to respect confidentiality)
- Leslie Davis, Social Work Supervisor II
- Social Casework Specialists:
 - Christopher Johnson
 - Mary Jane Harris
 - Brittany Mills
- Greg Merrill, Motivational Interviewing Consultant
- Valerie Earley, CFS Director and Principal Investigator

LESSONS LEARNED

The Comprehensive Family Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) project has developed champions and experts in every office and program to promote successful practices. However, planners recognized the need to better coordinate during implementation and to

promote a stronger awareness of the program across staff roles and responsibilities. Some lessons learned include:

Value of Full Scope Model – One of the strengths of the CAPFO approach to assessing families was a full scope model of "best practice" that engaged and supported families in case planning and provided ongoing assessment throughout the life of the case. When the department prepared the grant application for Comprehensive Family Assessments in 2007 best practices initiated at the time in the county were bundled and incorporated into the CAPFO model. The additional assessment and engagement strategies were incorporated into the best practice activities already in limited use.

The Learning Community – This forum is a strengths-based learning environment that promotes and encourages practice-related discussions, develop critical thinking skills, and improves outcomes for families and children while enriching the participants' skills and knowledge base. This forum served to support CAPFO as well as improve morale and encourage critical thinking.

Coaching Circles – Coaching Circles have provided a forum to hone Motivational Interviewing skills and techniques. Coaching Circles are facilitated by the contract Motivational Interviewing mentor/trainer. Social workers bring in case situations that present difficulties in engagement. The coach and the team discuss the family dynamics, share insights to what has and hasn't worked in similar situations, role play, and plan how to support the family in moving toward the case plan goals and objectives. Coaching Circles are acknowledged by the participating team as an essential tool in advancing their skills in Motivational Interviewing.

Unique and Innovative Features

A key factor cited for the success of the implementation of Comprehensive Family Assessment was the considerable collaborations built among community partners and services and the infrastructure from the Systems of Care Children's Bureau grant initiative awarded prior to CAPFO. Other innovative features of the project include:

The Parent Partner Program

The Parent Partner program (see Executive Summary in Attachment section) is one of a number of recent innovations in child welfare that draws upon the strengths of families and engages family and community members in program planning. The Parent Partner program was created and implemented with the assistance of the county's previous System of Care Federal grant, (2003–2008). The impetus for this program was family involvement in case planning and improved cultural competency in working with parents. The Parent Partner program enlists as staff mothers and fathers who have experienced child removal, services, and reunification. They are trained and supported to provide direct services to parent clients seeking reunification with their children. The program design in Contra Costa County, encourages Parent Partners to serve as mentors, guides, and advocates for current parent clients. Parent Partners can be flexible in the roles they play and in responding to a range of needs parent clients might present. The principal goal of their work, however, is to help parents gain awareness of their rights and responsibilities and to assist parents toward reunification with their children. Because of their unique experience as former clients of the child welfare system, Parent Partners offer a perspective to parents that differs from that of social workers and other allied professionals and may be uniquely positioned to reach parents, gain their trust, and help them access services and negotiate the complicated child welfare bureaucracy. CAPFO staff indicate that Parent Partners have been an invaluable component to their work in collaborating with clients.

Team Decision-Making

Team Decision-Making invites dialogue, prompting parents to consider including in their planning the input of children (when developmentally appropriate), extended family, Parent Partners, neighbors, church leaders, and previously identified supports. The purpose of a Family Team Meeting is to promote family involvement and empower families to come together to generate a plan that first promotes safety and then works to engage other members of the family and community. This leads to resolving conflict and promotes strengths and hope. Family Team Meetings emphasize shared beliefs and values and build on the strengths of family and community. Action plans are developed to outline the strengths of a family and identify the steps needed to address issues.

The "family team" is defined as broadly and inclusively as possible, and the selection of the team includes input by family members. Coordinators and/or facilitators encourage broad membership on the team. Team members include parents, children, extended family members, and support persons as defined by the family. Some approaches explicitly include community members, foster parents, and service providers who are currently working with the family, as well as those who could be helpful in meeting the family's needs.

Assessment of Father Involvement and Incarcerated Parents

One of the significant practice changes initiated through the CAPFO grant was the focus on greater inclusion of fathers in family case planning and expanded involvement of extended paternal families in planning for permanency. Engagement of fathers and extended family is now becoming less the exception and more the norm. Training continues to support staff on these practice changes. Examples of training include:

- Engaging Fathers: Foundations of Fatherhood
- How are the Children? Improving Outcomes for Children of the Incarcerated
- Building Bridges: Putting Families Back Together

Working with incarcerated parents was also a project focus for engaging those fathers who have not been included in planning direction, safety, and permanency for their children. Identified new strategies to support this group of fathers include working with detention facility education staff to coordinate parenting classes with providers of classes in the community, better guidelines for staff on the access and responsibility to incarcerated parents, and offering Children's Services Orientation classes to inmates whose children are receiving services.

Motivational Interviewing

Participating staff received training on the Stages of Change, Motivational Interviewing techniques, and the CAPFO process, and the implementation of coaching, case teaching sessions, and feedback meetings. Universally, caseworker staff stated that the high-quality training received for Motivational Interviewing resulted in practice change. Staff were enthusiastic and eager to learn new techniques that were strengths-based and offered an approach that explored their clients' capacity vs. incapacity for behaviors toward change. Further, staff indicated that the coaching and mentoring component of Motivational Interviewing has resulted in strengthening their caseworker skills to ask questions and guide clients to reflect upon their readiness for change, while emphasizing the client's personal choice and control. This high-quality training that was initiated for the CAPFO project is now embedded in daily practice.

Learning Communities and Coaching Circles

The Learning Community environment has been one of the success stories of the CAPFO grant and is the primary vehicle for development and refinement of the practice model. Participation is broad and includes staff from various districts, programs, and assignments. Learning Community topics focus not only on sustaining practices and refocusing staff in areas that have been less successful in implementation but also providing a place for honing expertise and skills in

Motivational Interviewing. In addition, agenda topics include addressing specific areas of family engagement that present challenges. Support is also given for staff in the use of the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (NCFAS) where family scenarios were distributed and staff individually rated the family on the assessment matrix.

The CAPFO Learning Community meets regularly to give feedback, to share successes and suggestions, and to discuss challenges. This continuous effort keeps grant activities in focus and promotes improvement of the model. In addition, discussions in the Learning Community Environment focus on responding to specific barriers and or concerns of families. For example, the Learning Community discussions have included clinical responses to obsessive clients, techniques for responding to resistance, and engaging fathers in substance abuse treatment. These meetings support transfer of learning from training to the field and an opportunity for staff to share successes and initiate discussions regarding process, policy, and case-specific successes and challenges.

In addition to the Learning Community, Coaching Circles provide a forum to hone Motivational Interviewing skills and techniques. Coaching Circles are facilitated by the Motivational Interviewing mentor/trainer. Social workers bring in case situations that present difficulties in engagement. The coach and the team discuss the family dynamics, share insights to what has and hasn't worked in similar situations, role play, and plan support for the family in moving toward the case plan goals and objectives. Coaching Circles are acknowledged by the participating team as an essential tool in advancing their skills in Motivational Interviewing.

Challenges and Successful Strategies

The most significant challenge for Contra Costa CAPFO has been the budget environment. In 2009, the CAPFO team was disrupted and although services to CAPFO families already enrolled continued, there was a hiatus of approximately 9 months before the team and the Learning Community was reconvened and the project began to enroll families again. Significant staff reductions required revisiting the timing of some aspects of its implementation as the reassignment of staff roles due to budget cuts were implemented across the county. In addition, the project lost its key evaluator, which impacted its ability to collect and analyze data in a timely manner. The project team continued to collect anecdotal information regarding the success and challenges of various components of the CAPFO model. The new evaluation team measured the following:

- Data evaluation from the Child Welfare Services/Case Management System
- Case reviews of the online cases and physical case records to glean information from case contact notes, court reports, and case plan narratives
- Focus groups and surveys to both staff and families to determine satisfaction and fidelity to the model
- Evaluation of the NCFAS process

OUTCOMES

Summary of Accomplishments

The Comprehensive Family Assessments for Positive Family Outcomes (CAPFO) model has been recognized by families and staff as family-focused and supportive. As staff and the agency see the impact of these practices, they become part of the normal systems delivery on many cases, and in some instances, become part of policy and structured practice for the agency. For example, the CAPFO grant incorporated some "best practices" for parent-child and sibling visiting. The campaign involved stepping down from supervised to unsupervised visits as the family progressed with their reunification plan. There was also a focus on improving performance in placing sibling groups together and, in fact, Contra Costa County has seen improvement in

Child and Family Services Review Performance Indicator 4A, Siblings. The department has also made efforts to ensure sibling groups be assigned to one social worker even if the siblings are not placed together. As these practice changes have been implemented and the philosophy of viewing the family as a unit rather than individual components, changes in the tracking of families in physical case folders is moving to one folder for a full family rather than child-specific case folders.

Evaluation

At the time of the site visit in the final year of the grant project, planned grant evaluation strategies included a random selection of CAPFO service and control families that will create a comparative platform for evaluation activities. Intensive case reads of the CAPFO cases were to be conducted to determine fidelity to the model and determine other measurers' success. To supplement evaluation of this data, surveys were to measure staff and family satisfaction and knowledge of and adherence to the Comprehensive Family Assessment guidelines.

The long-range goals include performance improvement in the following areas:

- Less recidivism in substantiated referrals
- Reduction in the number of children placed in out of home care
- Reduced time in care
- Family satisfaction with service delivery

Dissemination

The grantee has disseminated information on Parent Partners and father engagement at statewide parent leadership conferences. Additionally, ongoing resource blasts regarding resources for families are shared via internal Internet as well as a periodic *Father's Facts* publication that is distributed to staff to share best practices and parenting tips for fathers. Upon completion of the evaluation, the CAPFO findings will be disseminated to the agency staff and community partners.

Sustainability

Impact of Focus on Father Engagement – A highlight of the Comprehensive Family Assessments grant, the focus on fathers, continues to impact practice and staff perspectives on fathers' roles in the cases of child welfare families. Though this has grown far beyond CAPFO cases alone, the CAPFO grant was an initial impetus for this direction in Contra Costa County. In addition, the grant funding supported the hiring of the first father Parent Partner. There has been a shift in staff's attention to inclusion and consideration of the father in all aspects of the service and permanency plan. In addition, it is anticipated that training at all levels of the community, including judges, by Contra Costa Parent Parents will further promote awareness of the role of fathers in child welfare--whether in the home, incarcerated, or nonresident--at a much broader level.

Child Welfare Best Practices – When the department prepared the grant application for Comprehensive Family Assessments in 2007 current best practices were bundled and incorporated into the CAPFO model. During the first year of grant planning the project supervisor formed the Learning Community, which included Parent Partners and staff, and asked the group to begin by looking at child welfare from referral through case closure from the perspective of the families served. The outcome of this planning was the CAPFO model upon which the additional assessment and engagement strategies could be added. The CAPFO Project Learning Guide included instructions for all of these ongoing engagement and assessment activities. During that process, the 10-Step Family Assessment Guidelines were used to confirm that all of the components listed were addressed. As the project nears its conclusion, Contra Costa Children & Family Services are again examining best practices including engagement and assessment

strategies. The director's presentations on Moving Forward – 2012 Practice Model describes how practices incorporated as new initiatives 5 years ago will be included in this model. It is fitting that this process is occurring as the CAPFO grant period is ending.

Family Consultation Team Meetings – In conjunction with the development of a practice model for 2012, the Project Management Team continues to explore the concept of Family Consultation Team Meetings. These meetings will be a forum that regularly (every 3 months or so over the life of the case) convenes the family, the worker, supervisor, and other partners to assess the family's progress and address challenges and needs. Decision-making will be shared by the team. Regularly scheduled meetings allow for the assessment of the family from a broad perspective, building on where the family has been as documented from previous team meetings and with a focus on permanency. Each meeting will generate next steps for the family, and progress will be reported at the following meeting. This aligns with the principles of the Comprehensive Family Assessment components and is the next step from the current CAPFO practice model.

Learning Community Coaching Circles – The success of the Coaching Circles have been significant in supporting transfer of learning of Motivational Interviewing techniques into practice. The CAPFO Facilitation Team will be exploring ways to utilize these small groups of staff for case-focused discussions both for team feedback on difficult dialogues with families and to facilitate transfer of learning. These forums give staff time to reflect on their successes and challenges with families. It also supports staff in learning from the experience of their peers.

ATTACHMENTS

- [CAPFO User Desk Guide](#)
- [Comprehensive Family Assessment: Eight Key Components](#)
- [Partnering With Parents Promising Approaches to Improve Reunification Outcomes for Children in Foster Care – Executive Summary](#)