Five Counties, Many Voices: Profiles of Family Engagement in Colorado's Child Welfare System

Interviews conducted by Molly Jenkins

Introduction
Recently, there has been a national trend toward the implementation of family engagement practice in child welfare. Child welfare systems — through practices and policies — are increasingly beginning to recognize the importance of giving families a voice and leadership role in the decisions that impact their lives. Through applying various family engagement approaches and models, family expertise can be utilized, family perspectives and strengths are respected and harnessed, and extended family members can serve as supportive connections for the entire group, including promoting the safety, permanency, and well-being of children.

For more than a decade, the American Humane Association has recognized the incredible potential and worth of family engagement and has shown leadership in the area of family group decision making (FGDM) research and evaluation, training and consultation, and program development. (For more information on FGDM, please visit www.fgdm.org.) Because American Humane is headquartered in Englewood, Colo., we felt compelled to highlight the family engagement work that exists within our state. Since 1997, a consortium of Colorado counties, calling themselves the Forum for Family Engagement, have been gathering to discuss implementation and best practices regarding the multiple family engagement models that exist at their Human Services departments. Five of these counties were chosen to be interviewed for this narrative and approved the publication of their profiles for this Issue Brief. It is American Humane's sincere hope that these five profiles will lend far-reaching attention, credibility, and support for family engagement practice in Colorado's child welfare system.

Adams County
By respecting family strengths and diversity, the Human Services Department of Adams County has shown dedication to working with community providers to support children and families and to help them achieve safety and well-being (Adams County, Colorado, 2010). The county's pledge to serving and valuing families is illustrated through its commitment to family engagement practice. In approximately 2002, Adams County began the Early Crisis Intervention (ECI) Program in an effort to incorporate early front-end family engagement. This program was the department's first step in involving family members and family support networks in the case planning process. Adams County is currently in the process of phasing out ECI meetings in order to focus more on processes that involve family members as key decision makers, such as family group conferencing (FGC) and family team meetings (FTMs).

In 2006, Adams County began the implementation of FGC and FTMs. Family group conferences at Adams County follow the “traditional” path of family engagement and are rooted in FGDM philosophy: These conferences are guided by independent facilitators and include a time for the family to meet privately to make decisions and to develop a plan that will best meet their needs. According to Walton, McKenzie, and Connolly (2005, p. 17), private family time “actualizes the leadership and responsibility of family as primary decision makers.” Before a family group conference, the caseworker meets with the family members to discuss who they would like to invite to the meeting. The coordinator then contacts each family member to explain the process, answer questions, and prepare them for the conference. Preparing each family member and having them participate in the FGC process is crucial at Adams County — more engaged family members mean greater support for the child and the family. In the past, facilitators have conducted family group conferences in family homes, communities, and even hospitals, when children are significantly ill. Adams County family group conferences usually work best when the case is ongoing and/or is at its midpoint.

Adams County FTMs differ from family group conferences in that they do not include private family time. These meetings are more of a combination of team decision making (TDM) meetings and family group conferences, and are generally briefer than family group conferences. For example, if the family is in crisis or needs immediate assistance with matters such as child placement decisions, an FTM is typically offered. As a result of obtaining Promoting Safe and Stable Families grant funding, the department has been able to add a part-time facilitation/coordination staff position. Moreover, in the first year of implementation, Adams County completed 27 family group conferences and FTMs; from 2007-2008, this number rose to 43 (with 54 referrals). This 59 percent increase in completed meetings speaks to both the department's commitment to family engagement and to the increasing number of families living in Adams County that have the opportunity to participate in these processes.

In addition to family group conferences and FTMs, Adams County features a third model of family engagement: the FAST team meeting model. The goal of FAST team meetings is to gather family members together quickly in order to avoid court intervention and/or to close the case between 30 and 90 days. Families that experience a FAST team meeting are supported in the future care, safety, and well-being of their children, with reunification being an ideal outcome.
Family engagement meetings and conferences are not yet mandatory in Adams County. Thus, they rely primarily upon referrals from caseworkers who recognize the benefits of involving families in case planning. In order to gain more agency-wide support for family engagement, department advocates have regular conversations with colleagues about the practice, as well as distribute educational material (i.e., emails, pamphlets, fliers and brochures) about family engagement throughout the agency. Promoting family engagement “as a way to help [workers]” has been helpful in these conversations.

In November 2008, a family group conference was held with a family seeking placement for children who had been removed from their parents' care. Adams County was able to include family members from Mexico via teleconferencing. During the conference, the grandmother from Mexico spoke with the children's guardian ad litem and received information on how to contact officials to obtain legal documentation stating that she was a reliable guardian. The children ended up moving to Mexico to live with their grandmother shortly thereafter, and the entire family seemed very pleased with this outcome. Without a family group conference, this important family connection may not have been explored, and the children may not have had the chance to stay together, live with family, and/or retain their important cultural traditions and identities.

**Arapahoe County**

Arapahoe County is one of the largest counties in the state of Colorado, with a population of more than 550,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The county's Department of Human Services “offers a variety of services designed to reunify or preserve the family as a safe place for children” (Arapahoe County, Colorado, 2010). In February 1999, two practitioners who had received training on the New Zealand family group conference began to implement this approach in the county. In the summer of 2000, the child welfare program director mandated that any case involving children under the age of 12 (who were also living outside of the home) must be referred for a family group conference. In fact, Arapahoe County attributes the large level of past and ongoing support for family engagement practices to the leaders within the organization, including the director of Human Services; the Children, Youth & Family Services Division manager; administrators and supervisors. Currently, Arapahoe County is using four different models of family engagement meetings: listening to the needs of kids (LINKs) meetings, family group conferences, youth-centered permanency meetings, and preparation for adulthood meetings. As of February 2009, Arapahoe County had seven facilitators.

Historically, a primary focus of Arapahoe County family engagement practice has been to "widen the circle" of support in order to achieve permanency for youths, especially those who have either been living in care for long periods of time and/or are close to aging out of the child welfare system (~18 years old) (Pennell & Burford, 1994). In 2002, Arapahoe County conducted a thorough case review process for all children living in out-of-home care without permanency plans in place. As a result of these case reviews, Arapahoe County created the Child Specific Recruitment Program, which included using family group conferences for the purpose of achieving permanency for youths. In 2005, the county developed specific family group conferences, called youth-centered permanency meetings, that focus on the needs of this population and emphasize connection building and achieving a permanency plan or placement. Likewise, these conferences are largely youth-driven; the Arapahoe family group conference unit conducts diligent searching for all possible connections by asking youths which people are important in their lives and what connections they want to foster. Thus, youth-centered permanency meetings have broadened the definition of “family member” by considering and valuing the many diverse connections in a youth's life. Because this process requires “real commitment, time and space,” youth-centered permanency meetings often occur more than once and may continue on an ongoing basis (i.e., up to 6 months).

**LINKs meetings** began full implementation in February 2009. LINKs meetings were developed in order to engage families earlier (within 72 hours of a case being filed in Child Protection and within 2 weeks of an adolescent referral for Youth Services), to address immediate safety issues and to identify families as candidates for the other family engagement meetings the county offers. These meetings occur every 90 days until the case is closed. The LINKs meeting is the most frequently implemented model because it determines the specific needs of the family, while having the permanency, safety, and well-being of the child guide the process. It is Arapahoe County's expectation that “anything that becomes a case” will go through a LINKs meeting process.

**Family group conferences** in Arapahoe County follow the New Zealand model; they are family-driven, include private family time, and provide an avenue to build communication and support networks for families. Like youth-centered permanency meetings, preparation for adulthood meetings are youth-driven conferences that focus on achieving permanency and successful independence for children who are close to aging out of the system. The concentration of these meetings includes supporting youths in their transition to independence, securing other permanent living arrangements for them (if they are not planning to live...
independently), building connections, and exploring college and job-training opportunities.

Arapahoe County anticipates that its work in family engagement will continue to grow and that ongoing system training and commitment are crucial pieces of this development. Ideally, the county would like to formally evaluate its program in the future. With continued dedication to family engagement, Arapahoe County envisions that youths will reach permanency faster, that cases will be closed sooner, and that both workers and families will experience “higher levels of accountability and empowerment.”

**Jefferson County**

Located just west of Denver, Jefferson County is one of the most populous counties along Colorado’s Front Range. Jefferson County’s Department of Human Services envisions a “community of safe and stable families” and values family empowerment and involvement in decision making (Jefferson County, Colorado, 2010). The county first implemented FGDM approximately 10 years ago, but due to staff turnover issues and time constraints within the department, the practice was short-lived. Recently, there has been a resurgence of FGDM practice in Jefferson County. This has been made possible by the Jeffco Community Connection grant project (which is a federal demonstration grant through the Children’s Bureau). This grant project is intended to foster collaborative relationships between the TANF and child welfare systems. Jefferson County’s FGC pilot program serves as a central component of this collaboration.

Jefferson County currently offers two models of family engagement: FGC (through the pilot program) and TDM. While each has its own strengths and place in the child protection process, it is important to recognize the collaborative value of FGC and TDM. The challenge is to create opportunities for families to participate in each model and contribute to their maximum ability. Through the Jeffco Community Connection project, Janet Hopkins has discovered that the FGC process enables families and their support systems to devise methods by which they can efficiently execute risk, safety, and financial stability plans. Given the specifications of the grant project, Jefferson County has to be selective when offering family group conferences to families. For example, a family’s geographic location, TANF eligibility, and nature of involvement with the child welfare system all determine the family’s participation in the project. Families are offered a family group conference via random assignment. Notably, families with children living in out-of-home care are not eligible to take part in the FGC pilot program. Jefferson County currently has one FGC facilitator who works with families, service providers, and other stakeholders in the county’s highest risk community. Conferences take place within the family’s community rather than in agency offices and workrooms. Thus, the family’s role as primary decision maker is strengthened; it becomes more the family’s process than the department’s. Jefferson County is looking for sustainability of the FGC pilot program and hopes that the sustainable pieces will create various applications of this family-driven process within all of Human Services.

In 2005, Jefferson County began holding TDM meetings with families and other stakeholders. Families and/or children who participate in the TDM process are typically experiencing potential changes in placement, or are in need of permanency planning. TDM meetings can also serve as the first contact meeting between the family and Jefferson County staff as a method of initiating case planning. By definition, TDM meetings involve families and their supports in a collaborative decision-making process which requires approval by the child protection staff. As of March 2009, there were three trained TDM facilitators. Because TDM is commonly used by Jefferson County, there is great hope that the program and number of staff will continue to increase and develop in this area.

The county director has been very supportive of the FGC pilot program and family engagement approaches, which has supported staff in this new way of “doing business.” Through education, conversation, experience, and exposure to family engagement practices, staff members are increasingly beginning to see the value in the information shared and connections re-made during the preparation stage of family group conferences; in engaging extended family members and supports in the process; in using family group conferences and TDM meetings to develop inclusive and respectful relationships with families; and in having stakeholders and consultants at the table who are also committed to the safety and well-being of the child and the entire family. Likewise, because the FGC and TDM facilitators carry some of the workload, family engagement processes have created a benefit by reducing the pressure that caseworkers commonly experience. Jefferson County hopes this growing support will translate into more families participating in family engagement processes.

**Larimer County**

Larimer County’s Department of Human Services believes that the well-being of children is both a parental and community responsibility, and that “children have a right to ongoing relationships with parents and [extended] kin, wherever and whenever possible” (Larimer County, Colorado, 2010). In 1998, Larimer County (with direction from Deb DeLuca) began implementing FGC after noticing increases in the number of children in care, the length
of time children stayed in residential treatment centers, the number of children aging out of the system and then returning to their parents, and the rates of families re-entering Larimer County’s child welfare system. Furthermore, cases often felt “stuck,” with few options available to children and families. It was obvious change was needed, and it was believed this change could be accomplished through engaging the family in case planning and decision making. According to Deb, “families know their families best and can make decisions about their lives with the guidance of child welfare workers.” Through research and internal discussions about the FGCM process, Deb was able to gain wide agency support for the practice. This support was further enhanced in 2001, when Jim Drendel became director of Larimer County’s Children, Youth & Family Division. Larimer County exemplified its commitment to family engagement — and its belief that strength-based/family-focused practice improves outcomes for children and families — when the department created a team to facilitate conferencing and family engagement approaches. Without this support and clear prioritization of family engagement from department leadership, staff would not have had the time, energy, and attention necessary to undertake an effective approach to conferencing.

In 2004, family group conferences and early family engagement became priorities for Larimer County. To gain even more buy-in from child welfare, other system colleagues, and the community, the strengths of family engagement practice were emphasized through education and training. In addition to implementing family group conferences, Larimer County created its own model, called the family safety resource team (FSRT). FSRT meetings were developed to address both the safety and resource needs of children and families in a strength-based fashion. Because FSRT meetings “are all about the options available to families to address safety,” Larimer County feels that they go beyond family involvement to family inclusion. FSRT meetings underscore the importance of early family engagement; they are typically used when a case first comes in (within 72 hours of the case being opened) and they address the immediate safety concerns of the family and agency. FSRT meetings also emphasize the importance of follow-through and ongoing family engagement, and they may involve referring the family to one of Larimer County’s other three family engagement models: family unity meetings (FUMs), family group conferences, and mediation. Both FUMs and family group conferences are used to include family members in long-term planning and decision-making, while mediation is typically used in situations where two parties need to come together to resolve a particular issue. Thus, the decision of which meeting type will be most suitable for families often relies upon that family’s individual needs and the amount of time available to make decisions. For example, if case planning needs to be done in two weeks, there may not be time to conduct a family group conference, but a FUM could be arranged. Assuming the family is engaged and that extended kin and family supports can be located, the case can then move to a family group conference. According to 2008 research from Colorado State University, family and child outcomes (such as decreased incidences of system re-entry and rates of re-abuse) have been largely positive for Larimer County family group conferences.

Currently, there are 10 staff/team members working in the area of family engagement — in 2001, there were two. This expansion in staff again exemplifies the investment and commitment that Larimer County has made to this practice, as well as to the families with whom the county works. It is the responsibility of the family’s caseworker to get the extended family and support networks to the FSRT. Facilitators in the team organize, prepare, and facilitate all the other family engagement meetings. Deb is particular about the manner in which family group conferences are conducted; she requires that her team visit with the family members face-to-face beforehand in order to properly engage and thoroughly prepare them for the conference. According to Deb, the preparation stage is vital to successful family group conferences, and dedication to the process is a must.

Larimer County believes a number of enhancements could further boost its family engagement practices, including: greater numbers of extended family members and support networks that are able to attend a conference (especially at the FSRT meeting); further commitment to following through with families to ensure that they are receiving the services they are requesting and that they are adhering to the plan they created during the conference; increased streamlining of plans made during a meeting with specific and local community service providers; focused efforts on developing creative and innovative services for families; dedication to ensuring that fathers and their families are included in the process; and more family engagement training and educational opportunities made available for staff in order for family engagement practice at Larimer County to continue to grow.

Morgan County

Morgan County’s Department of Human Services is located in Fort Morgan, a small and pastoral town on Colorado’s northeastern plains. In 2004, the department began implementing the Family and Community Team (FACT) Decision Making Conferences Program. This program encompasses two types of family engagement models: mediation and TDM meetings. Mediation typically occurs when disputes over parenting time and case planning issues
need to be negotiated. The goal of Morgan County’s TDM meetings is to gather together as many family members, professionals, and community practitioners as possible to determine which services the family may need, and how these services may best be acquired. Since Morgan County is small and rural, it is sometimes difficult to find local and accessible resources that fit the service needs of families, including language translators, services for the county’s Somali and Russian refugees, and providers who accept Medicaid. Likewise, because of Morgan County’s semi-remote location, getting numerous family members to attend TDM meetings can often be challenging. Thus, although Morgan County makes concerted efforts to involve and engage extended families in the TDM process, these meetings occasionally have a higher number of professionals and service providers than kin. While these realistic challenges may limit the degree to which families are involved in the FACT Program, they also make the department’s continued commitment to family engagement practice all the more remarkable.

Morgan County’s director and administration are largely supportive of family engagement practice. Education on the value of engaging families in case planning procedures has been helpful in garnering agency-wide support, as has the positive feedback from the school system and families that have participated in the FACT Program. For example, the department recently conducted a TDM with a family that needed assistance in managing its 6-year-old child’s difficult behavior at school. The family’s mental health provider put the child on medication, and the child was placed in a self-contained classroom. Through the TDM, Elizabeth Orosz, facilitator for family engagement meetings, discovered that the family members did not agree with the mental health provider’s diagnosis, but they did not feel they were in a position to question these professional recommendations. Elizabeth empowered and encouraged the family to take the child to The Children’s Hospital in Denver to get a second opinion. After 2 weeks of medical assessment and evaluation, the child was indeed given a different diagnosis (autism) and the family felt more prepared to manage their child’s behavior through service referrals and appropriate prescriptions. Now, the parents are more assertive and proactive when it comes to the care of their child. In addition, the TDM meeting helped to mend the relationship between the family and the child’s school. The family recently contacted Elizabeth to report that the entire family is still doing well and to express their appreciation for the opportunity to be involved in the TDM process.

Moving forward, Elizabeth would like to expand Morgan County’s FACT Program by incorporating additional family engagement models into practice, including FGC. In fact, Morgan County plans to replace FACT meetings with a new program, called facilitated family engagement conferences, in the near future. Additionally, Elizabeth would like to formally measure the outcomes for families that have participated in a family engagement meeting in order to evaluate practice (i.e., Is the FACT Program “successful”?), increase agency and community support and referrals, and enhance the program to serve the maximum number of families in need. Elizabeth reports that many families have commented on how, because of the FACT Program, they felt they were “given a voice” in the decisions that impact their lives. Recognition of these testimonials, as well as the department’s efforts to partner with families, are the first steps to supporting this practice and helping to ensure that the county’s objectives can one day be reached.

About the Author

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References


