

CT Family First Kinship & Foster Care Meeting Notes

Date of Convening: October 26, 2020

Welcome

- Tina Jefferson began the meeting by welcoming everyone. There were about 39 people on the call. Tina Jefferson and Randi Rubin Rodriguez reintroduced themselves to the group as the co-leads of the Kinship and Foster Care workgroup.
- The co-leads gave a brief summary of how to use Microsoft Teams:
 - The tool bar includes the button for the chat box, mute/unmute, and camera.
 - Tina muted everyone to start to avoid any audio issues, such as echoes.
 - The co-leads asked the participants to turn their cameras on if they felt comfortable so that everyone could see each other.
 - Natalia Liriano and Pam Kelley monitored the chat for comments.
- New members unmuted themselves to introduce themselves to the workgroup. Those who were part of the Kinship and Foster Care workgroup in early 2020 introduced themselves in the chat.

Kinship and Foster Care Review

- The interruption caused by COVID-19 lasted longer than expected; the last meeting the group had was in February. It has been several months since then, and both DCF and the agencies that the members represent have undergone many changes since then. The co-leads asked members to think about the interruption and consider what new learning/takeaways they have found, as well as new needs they have identified.
- One person who works with the Adoption Assistance Program explained that they have been able to ramp up and maintain their services remotely. Before the pandemic, they would not have thought this was possible, but they felt they had done a good job. In some ways, connecting is easier as virtual meetings free up room in their schedules since there is no need to coordinate transportation. Being reachable is a challenge and they have focused on that. They have also needed to be flexible with their programs; families' needs have changed.
- Another member echoed these thoughts. They work at a nonprofit that assists the Department and the court. They have proven throughout the pandemic that they are great partners, and they have been able to adapt and move a lot faster than state governments.
- A third person highlighted our foster parents. They have been asked to transition and maintain contact with birth parents, and they have been extraordinary. They

have also done excellent work keeping children in schools. This idea was echoed by another member who agreed that foster parents have been amazing in schooling and connecting children with virtual visitations. Normally, caseworkers are transporting the child, but now foster parents are the ones facilitating the meetings.

- A member gave props to everyone on the call, as they have heard great things from families about providers giving support and flexibility to families.
- Randi said that as an Executive Director, the staff at nonprofits and DCF have raised the bar in terms of their commitment, integrity, and compassion. With so much virtual, there is not always a clear boundary between staff's work life and personal life, but everyone has continued to do the work. She applauded everyone for being here.
- JoShonda began to review the work to date. Before COVID there was much accomplished. Now that work has resumed, several workgroups are meeting. The website is still intact, and members are encouraged to review the website for the latest information. Due to the Kinship and Foster Care workgroup's progress before the COVID pause, they remain close to finishing their work.
- The Candidacy workgroup accomplished its deliverables, and it has been sunsetted. There is a new workgroup called Infrastructure Practice and Policy that will be building upon Candidacy's work to recommend an infrastructure approach to referral, matching families to services, data tracking, and service delivery. They will be meeting every other week, and it is likely they will be meeting through April. At this point, the workgroup is rather small, so if anyone has people they would like to refer to participate, please email the Family First inbox.
- The Programs and Service Array workgroup is meeting every other week. They have been mapping services and are fairly close to providing preliminary recommendations. The workgroup currently has upwards of 100 members.
- The Fiscal workgroup will begin their work once they have the recommendations from Programs and Services Array group. They will engage the financing analysis work at that time.
- The goal is to submit the Department's Prevention Plan in April 2021 (at the latest). At that point, the Department will pivot to implementation work. Ken Mysogland told the workgroup that both he and the Department appreciate everyone's insight. Around July 2021, implementation will begin and the workload will be significant.

Chapin Hall

- The co-leads introduced Miranda Lynch, Olivia Wilks, and Joanna Widding, Policy Fellows from Chapin Hall with the University of Chicago. Chapin Hall has been providing support to Connecticut throughout the planning process. They have been working with other states as well and hope that their insights from this can be leveraged to support systemic changes. They are happy to do this work and support families and kin.

Our Shared Values: Recap & Next Steps

- The workgroup reviewed the major themes that have emerged through their previous discussions:
 - Improving access and referral to services
 - Improving existing services
 - Addressing service gaps
 - Improving system partnerships
 - Enhancing caregiver supports
 - Education for families/kin caregivers
- The workgroup's discussions left off around training - what do we want that to look like for caregivers? For staff (both in and out of DCF)?
- One participant added that the timing is perfect, as they just recently spoke with a grandmother who was a little unsure what to apply for. The family dynamic complicated things, and she needed help. It would have been useful to her to have a robust kinship navigator with boots on the ground, in-person help and guidance (especially to help with court visits and talking with her family). Kin often do not want to be seen as the legal decision-maker without a professional. Tina agreed and felt that a more family-friendly process is needed.
- Randi found the comment about dynamics to be interesting - the workgroup has not looked at community mediation or restorative practice yet. This could be an opportunity for kin to participate in that training and develop that skill set. Both those practices speak to family dynamics and enhance child wellbeing.
 - To elaborate on restorative practice, families with children in care may have injured relationships between family members, and these injuries' healing can be impaired. Restorative practice looks at what we can achieve for the greater good without blame and helps neutralize tension. It heals these injuries rather than simply resolving problems.

- Tina pointed out that racial justice was also not explicitly discussed in the workgroup meetings. The Department now wants to view Family First and prevention through a racial justice lens - what does that look like?
- One person explained that there must be commitment from staff. There must be people of color in the organization as well as people who speak multiple languages and who understand racial justice. It is important to build relationships. Relationships are more important than the system. Another person added that the kinship navigator needs to be culturally competent and must understand specific cultures. Staff should be people who have done the work.
- A member agreed that so much learning has been happening, and the conversation is happening now. They spoke to their director to consider how they might have the conversation as a white person, but we all need to be able to discuss these issues to ensure that families are comfortable.
- "We need to become comfortable with being uncomfortable," one person said.
- Randi explained that her organization is small but diverse, although it is less diverse in culture. Her staff has challenged the organization to reexamine its culture and address this within its staff. For example, there is a licensing requirement regarding individual auto licensing, which can cost between \$50-\$100 depending on where you live. Does living in certain places make it more expensive to work for their organization? How do we push back collectively on this? How do we look at the families we work with and change the dynamic? Randi also mentioned that DCF has a training that she feels is helpful, and she thanked Tina for raising this issue. The training she is referring to is DCF's "Ouch Program," where staff and peers are encouraged to call out a practice that is not racially just and discuss these considerations with families.
- Randi hopes to raise awareness about micro-aggressions and encourage open dialogue (for example, certain comments about a Black woman's hair).
- After some time discussing racial justice, Tina asked the group to pivot back to education and training families. How do we meet them where they are, bring the training to them, and ensure the content is relevant to their situations?
- One person said that asking families is better than assuming. They know their needs best, and they need things that are specific and gives them more agency. This will create a better relationship because they will have a say. Another member affirmed that relationship-building and trust is crucial.

- A workgroup member brought up the idea of a kinship advisory board to solicit input. This workgroup is mainly comprised of professionals without many kin in the room; we are making educated guesses rather than empowering them. Tina agreed with the value of making kin voices heard but pushed back on the idea that we are making educated guesses - the providers in the room have a lot of experience working with kin. She encouraged folks to share their perspectives since they have a lot of contact with these families. Where are we not getting it right?
- Another person highlighted the importance of children's voices when soliciting constituent opinions.
- One person suggested pulling together a board like this over the next 6 months.
- In terms of providing training, one suggestion was to increase support for therapeutic foster care as well as add more training ahead of placement. They felt that kin often receive support after the placement, and it would be helpful for them to know more beforehand so that they do not feel like a lot is being thrown at them all at once. We need to examine how we can prepare them better.
- It was added that we need to meet folks where they are at and be flexible. Some have cared for children for a long time, and others have not. We need an agile system.
- Another person added that funds and housing represent the most severe service gaps. We do not have many supports for people with limited resources, and we need to expand these. This point was seconded by someone who feels that our services are well-intentioned, but it sometimes feels like we're throwing services at the family to see what is wrong. They would love to discuss housing and transitional supports for young folks.
- Randi added that staff sometimes feel like they are being asked to complete "new" tasks that are outside their job scope. Flexibility needs to be a part of the job culture so staff can tailor their responses to the families they serve. Prevention is not just a resource manual; New Haven has a management team, and the RAC could also pull in voices. Authority needs to be shared before DCF comes in. How do we engage with families and improve these relationships in a systemic way that will enhance prevention efforts?
- One person asked about school relationships - schools often serve as early warnings when a household is struggling. They see tension in families first. How do we enhance these relationships for better prevention?
- Tina said that Family Resource Centers through school systems provide resources.

- Another member read about increasing support embedded in communities. This would help with emergent issues. Casey Family Programs wrote about community service providers in Georgia. They worked out of a library and served as a referral agency where families would speak to them about their needs and they would provide help. The library is not a stigmatized location, and the providers paid rent to the library, which benefitted everyone. Something like this would help meet families' needs outside of the Department.
- Tina had read about something similar and liked that the families identified the need.
- One person said that this reminded them of differential responses; there could be "hubs" where agencies can send representatives (like community centers). A DCF consultant could be present to be available for prevention-oriented guidance. Family resource centers could provide a similar outlet.

Break

Feedback

- Randi asked the group about their experience working with school social workers. Some folks had reported that it is challenging to work for them, and she wanted a sense of how common that experience is.
- One person replied that the quality depends on the town and they cannot generalize. They felt it would be helpful to do trainings on PPTs (Planning Placement Team and Individualized Education Program) before school. If there was a way to work with the State Department of Education statewide and bring in educators for a conference on this issue, that would be useful.
- Another member replied to let them know that CAFAF has two trainers who work in restorative practice to teach school staff. They do a phenomenal training, and they also work with DCF and caregivers. They recommended pushing families towards this to engage and connect. They are able to then better work together with the schools. This member did not like to refer to it as "training," as it can be insulting to families to imply that they need training.
- Area Resource Consultants were also brought up as helpful resources. They can discuss rights with special education services. They support this need and have a good level of expertise in this matter.

- Another person said that it is important to build up natural supports. Families want to rely on their own networks. Friends and families should be invited to meetings, since they are the ones who already provide support.
- Tina felt that school social workers are challenged in larger districts. She is not sure if they are consistent in addressing issues. She would like a better way to know how well schools meet educational needs.
- Randi brought up Monthly Family Team meetings, where families can bring in anyone to the meeting to enhance the community network of support. There is an ongoing policy issue between DCF and the Board of Education where kin families are falling through the cracks. They cannot identify supports for those children. This has been an issue for a while, and education is key to supporting youth since they spend so much time there.

Outstanding Thoughts and Recommendations

- One member asked about the development of a kinship navigator program. It has been a while since the last meeting; are there any updates on that front? Do any other models have an educational component? Are we using any other state as an example? Have other states managed to include one, and if so, how?
 - Miranda Lynch replied that the answer is a little bit of both. Chapin Hall hopes to look at the literature more to see what a foundation could be, what we can improve upon, and what evidence specific to Connecticut may exist. They then hope to use implementation science to fit this to the community and ensure it is sustainable. Currently, no kinship navigators have been approved by the federal government, but some are in the running (such as Ohio, which Chapin Hall supports).
 - One person heard that New York is trying to manage a kinship navigator, but it is hard to receive a high level of support. Miranda agreed that this is true, it is hard to demonstrate a high level of support that a kinship navigator is helping.
- Tina reminded the group that the next meeting is in November, and we will focus on all the recommendations we have to date. We will then refine based on feedback and pull together a more cohesive set of recommendations. Randi asked the group whether there was anything they have overlooked/missed.

- One person felt that the meeting was a little hard to follow. There is a lot in our buckets - is there anything that workgroup members can get in the meantime? They were aware that a lot had been done, but it is not organized in one place.
- Tina apologized for not meeting this need and offered to send the workgroup members a 5-page document from Chapin Hall that outlines the group's recommendations to date. Participants can provide feedback through email and/or at the next meeting. It can be challenging to decide how much of a recap is needed and whether members would prefer to complete their work and wrap up. Luckily, Chapin Hall was able to synthesize the meeting notes into that document, which will likely be helpful for participants. She also suggested that the workgroup consider adding a meeting in December if the group is not satisfied with the November meeting.
- One member shared that they strongly felt that any kinship navigator program should not be run by a state agency; if the goal is to keep families out of DCF when possible, we need the nonprofit world to do that work. Several others agreed with this point in the chat. Randi agreed but pointed out that we would need to determine where.
- Randi agreed that it is difficult to know how much of a review is needed before meetings, and she offered to send the documents (agenda, presentation, etc.) out earlier before the meetings.
- Both co-leads committed to sending the materials out earlier, sending the document that summarizes the recommendations to date, and checking in at the end of the November meeting to determine if everyone feels settled. Tina thanked the group for the feedback and agreed that it would be good to use other words besides "training." Language matters.
- Randi suggested that members email the co-leads or the Family First inbox with any thoughts and they will remain adaptable to the group's needs.
- The next Kinship and Foster Care meeting will be **Thursday, November 19 from 1 pm-3 pm via Microsoft Teams.**