

# PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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*In summarizing research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation, only to enhance them.*

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## NC Progress to Engage Families in Child Welfare Services



North Carolina is transforming its child welfare system. It has embarked on this journey of change for two main reasons: to ensure child welfare services are provided consistently across our state's 100 counties and to improve outcomes for children and families.

The last issue of Children's Services Practice Notes provided an overview of child welfare transformation in North Carolina. It described the legislative and administrative "pillars" supporting the changes ahead and shared perspectives of people working hard to make our state's vision of an improved child welfare system a reality.

In this issue, we turn our focus to the importance of family engagement. North Carolina intentionally chose "Engaging" as one of its practice standards and has invested in strengthening the family's voice throughout the child welfare system.

This issue of Practice Notes includes tips and resources to help you engage families through the continuum of child welfare services even when challenges to authentic family engagement occur.

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## Creating a Standard for Engaging Families

Engagement is a pillar for our work with children and families. It begins with our first meeting and continues throughout a family's journey through child welfare. How well we are able to respond to their needs depends largely on how well we engage them.

How do we assess whether our engagement is effective? Let's discuss how the statewide implementation of the practice standard, "Engaging" is being integrated from the state and local perspective, including how one county is planning to use the practice standards in performance evaluations.

### NC Division of Social Services Perspective

An interview with 32-year child welfare veteran, Tracey Brenneman, Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Technical Assistance Trainer with the NC Division of Social Services, highlights the work to support counties in addressing areas needing improvement. When asked how counties are implementing the Engaging practice standard, Ms. Brenneman shared a few key insights.



Tracey Brenneman

**1. Integrate practice standards into the work already being done.** For example, a supervisor can include the Engaging standard in existing staffing tools. They can talk to their staff about the standards during staffings and remind them to take their time to fully assess the family's strengths and needs before making decisions.

**2. Continue using practice standards as a team-building tool.** Integrating practice standards is not a solo task. Promoting accountability and building confidence in the use of engagement can be achieved by learning more about and using the standards in different settings. To engage staff, program managers may wish to highlight one standard during each unit meeting. They could discuss what that standard would look like if upheld and determine strategies to embrace it.

**3. Model engagement in our work with each other.** Using engagement with staff and colleagues offers us a rich opportunity to practice the skills we will be using with our families. Supervisors who effectively demonstrate engagement with their staff spend time with their workers in the field and demonstrate in their interactions with families and staff what good engagement looks like. When they display effective engagement, managers communicate the expectations and information workers need to feel empowered and supported.

While Ms. Brenneman noted obstacles to engagement such as time limitations, high turnover, and high caseloads, she reminded us that these challenges are not unique to North Carolina. Despite the barriers, there are strategies counties can use to fulfill the practice standard of Engaging better.

"Go out with your workers," Brenneman urged supervisors. "Watch them, model for them, and debrief with them to coach them in better engagement practices - what you say, how you say it, etc. In the training CPS Assessments, we talk about engaging families through the skills of 'crucial conversations,' which means you start with the part you can control, yourself! You focus on the outcome you desire, which is that families trust you and are willing to partner with you to keep children safe. This only happens if you focus on those engagement skills."

### Durham County DSS Perspective

In an interview with Lashonda Bacote, Durham County DSS's Quality Assurance and Training (QAT) Social Worker, an 11-year child welfare veteran and former CPS Supervisor, she shared how her agency is integrating the practice standard Engaging into their work and specifically in employee performance evaluations.

Durham DSS began the process of integrating the practice standards into work plans in July 2023. Workgroups comprised of child welfare program managers, supervisors, and QAT staff support this huge undertaking. When it has been fully revised, the performance evaluation process will include a 360-degree evaluation, meaning staff will evaluate themselves and their supervisor and the customers

will evaluate their experience with staff. It will also employ a client satisfaction survey to help evaluate practice standards implementation. Durham DSS is working to integrate these elements into performance evaluations by November 2024.

While Durham DSS integrates the practice standards in performance evaluations, their QAT department continues to assess their use of the practice standards in their quality control (QC) reviews.

Durham captures the Engaging standard as an outcome rated on the QC evaluation tool.



**Lashonda Bacote**

For example, the tool assesses engagement by tracking whether caseworkers document invitations sent to all relevant family members for child and family team (CFT) meetings. The tool also tracks whether caseworkers are using safety circles/safety networks with the family throughout the life of the case.

Interactions between the supervisor and child welfare worker can also demonstrate the integration of the Engaging practice standard. QAT determines whether the supervisor and worker are prepared in advance of their individual staffings by identifying whether notes are prepared before the meeting and/or the Case Conference tool was used to measure expected behaviors. Engagement between supervisors and workers should mirror the engagement workers have with families.

## **Family Partners Impact North Carolina Child Welfare Policy and Practice**

How have those with lived experience of North Carolina's child welfare system impacted policy and practice? To find out, Children's Services Practice Notes attended a meeting of the NC Child Welfare Family Advisory Council and interviewed Teka Dempson and Gina Brown, two of its members.

### **Family Engagement in NC**

North Carolina has long believed parents and youth should be involved in the design and delivery of child and family services. Past examples

Social work entails gathering a lot of qualitative data. To assess this data, supervisors must go on visits with their workers and see the interactions between workers and families. During these visits, supervisors can observe how workers interact with families, whether workers consider family cultural differences, and how they prepare to engage with families.

**"We have to practice what we want our workers to practice."**

QAT also evaluates the use of required forms. For example, completing the Monthly Permanency Planning Contact Record assists with the implementation of the practice standards. QAT educates staff to use forms as a tool to guide practice and ensure that workers are consistent and remain on track.

Asked what she would like child welfare workers and supervisors to know or be able to do after they read this article, Ms. Bacote replied, "We have to practice what we want our workers to practice. We have to engage and demonstrate intentionality in implementing practice standards in our daily work. This starts by making staff aware of the standards, so they are not a surprise. Give them meaning so that it's not added work. It's already what they do... not a new way but an improved way of working with our families."

For more information about NC's Practice Standards, click [HERE](#)

of our state honoring the family voice include the implementation of the Multiple Response System (MRS), the integration of the "Engaging" practice standard into child welfare services, the development of Strong Able Youth Speaking Out (SaySo), and other community-based programming. Yet even with these successes, our state understood it needed to do more to weave the family voice throughout the entire child welfare system. For this reason, North Carolina included the development and implementation of a family leadership model in its 2016 federal Program Im-

provement Plan. The goal was to create a model that integrated family voice into policy, practice, and programming. One major component of this model involved North Carolina's Division of Social Services (NC DSS), in partnership with the Center for Family and Community Engagement at NC State University, bringing family and youth perspectives to the table and establishing the NC Child Welfare Family Advisory Council (CWFAC). This state-level council gives parents and youth opportunities to be full partners in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of child welfare services. CWFAC is comprised of young adults with former experience with the child welfare system, birth parents who have received child protection services, foster parents, adoptive parents, and kinship parents.



**Teka Dempson**

member Teka Dempson told Practice Notes. "There has been a huge shift over the last couple of years when it comes to family engagement. This state-wide council has led to the development of local family engagement committees [in Durham, Forsyth, and Richmond Counties]. These are examples of the state 'walking the walk.' I believe we are a model for other states."

### **CWFAC's Impacts**

At least one Family Partner serves on each of North Carolina's five Design Teams (Workforce Development, Permanency, Continuous Quality Improvement, Safety, and Well-Being). Family Partners also serve on various state-level workgroups and committees such as the Prevention Planning Workgroup, Transition Age Youth Workgroup, Safe Babies Court Project State Advisory Group, Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams (START) Advisory Group, and more. Family Partners have also facilitated parent cafes, written articles, presented at conferences and webinars, and co-trained resource parents. Additionally,

North Carolina has been one of a small number of states to include Family Partners in joint planning with the Children's Bureau. At least one Family Partner serves on each of North Carolina's five Design Teams (Workforce Development, Permanency, Continuous Quality Improvement, Safety, and Well-Being). Family Partners also serve on various state-level workgroups and committees such as the Prevention Planning Workgroup, Transition Age Youth Workgroup, Safe Babies Court Project State Advisory Group, Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Teams (START) Advisory Group, and more. Family Partners have also facilitated parent cafes, written articles, presented at conferences and webinars, and co-trained resource parents. Additionally, North Carolina has been one of a small number of states to include Family Partners in joint planning with the Children's Bureau.

**"Family partners make sure the work we do, the words we use, and the processes we create make sense to those outside of child welfare. They are an essential partner in improving the system that serves North Carolina's most vulnerable children and their families." - Lisa Tucker Cauley, Senior Director for Child, Family and Adult Services**

Dempson and her colleague Gina Brown both appreciate the support they have received to help prepare them for those various roles. "The Division of Social Services knows they need to be clear with us about the purpose and prepare us for our role," Brown said. This includes assessing the Family Partners' readiness to participate and setting the stage by sharing who will be in the room, questions that will be posed, and helping them consider what topics may be difficult. Brown added, "State leaders have taken the time to get to know us, value our strengths, and build trust. It has become a true partnership."

Through their involvement in these groups, CWFAC members have had a significant impact on our state's child welfare system. One change Dempson is particularly proud of involved changing language on forms and documentation and helping develop language for the practice stan-

dards. For example, CWFAC asked that the terms “case number ID” be changed to “family ID” and “visitation” to “family time.”

Members of the CWFAC also provided feedback on North Carolina’s structured decision-making tools. There is a Family Partner who co-trains resource parents in the pre-service course Trauma Informed Partnering for Safety and Permanence Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (TIPS-MAPP). Additionally, Family Partner involvement within the Leadership Advisory Team resulted in specific recommendations for our state’s Prevention Services Plan, including determining eligibility for Family First Prevention Services Act-funded services.

### **Moving Forward**

“Because NC DSS provided quality training on all aspects of child welfare and topics such as strategic framing on how to share our story and find healing, those of us who have been a part of the CWFAC from the beginning can now help support and coach our newest members,” Brown said. She shared that because they have been prepared for meetings and can fully contribute, their voices have been heard and valued. “We are no longer just a seat at the table. Our voice

### **Engagement Begins at Intake**

The five primary goals of engagement are informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering—all vital components of client-social worker relationships in child welfare (Bassier et al., 2008). Child welfare staff consciously strive to establish better relationships and cooperation with families and community partners. Engagement begins at intake. Intake workers build rapport, focus on child safety, and draw out important details to determine if there is a risk of harm to a child that needs to be assessed.

For this article, Practice Notes spoke with North Carolina Division of Social Services (NC DSS) Policy Consultants Aman-

da Hubbard and Jadie Baldwin-Hamm. Acknowledging that a reporter’s knowledge of the family varies is important to keep in mind, Baldwin-Hamm reminds us. For example, one reporter may have recently developed a relationship with the family while another may have years of connection with the family. Intake workers should inform reporters of the child welfare reporting and follow-up process. They consult with the reporter to screen a report in or out and provide the potential assessor with the details needed to conduct an in-depth assessment. The object of intake is to ask the necessary questions. The intake report is lengthy. Not ev-

ery question needs to be asked for every report. The Division of Social Services wants intake workers to use their professional judgment when using the intake tool to ask questions that pertain to the main safety issue described. “We want the intake worker to focus on behaviorally specific language to ensure that once a report is screened in, the assessment worker can go out and let the family know precisely what the concerns are, why we are engaging with them, and if something needs to be changed, what that change needs to be,” Baldwin-Hamm explained.

is embedded, and we are expected to be there.”

At their November 2023 meeting, members of CWFAC echoed the value of the support, coaching, and technical assistance they have received. One Family Partner shared how members of the council have learned about one another’s strengths and lean into one another to speak up on the topics about which they feel most passionate and with which they have lived experience. Another spoke of being empowered by council members to provide input and navigate spaces she never thought she would be in. Others shared that serving on CWFAC can feel overwhelming at times because there is so much to be done. One young adult with lived experience said too many young adults have not yet had their voices heard, and that she looks forward to a future where there is space for more of them to be involved.

For more information about the NC Child Welfare Family Advisory Council, click [HERE](#)



**Gina Brown**

Intake is considered the front door of child protective services. Cases only enter child welfare

through intake or foster home licensing. Therefore, engagement with an intake worker often sets the tone for how community members see child protective services. Establishing rapport over the phone is complex and critical. No matter how many calls are coming in and how hard the day has been, the intake worker must greet the reporter with a pleasant, professional voice. After informing the reporter that their name and contact information are needed so that any assessor assigned can follow up regarding the concerns, it is best practice to explain the intake process and how long the report will take. Baldwin-Hamm said intake workers must understand statutes and policy well to ask good follow-up questions. Intake workers ensure that screening decisions are made with the best information possible and empower the agency to make strong screening decisions. Hubbard added that the intake worker needs to have a “very high level of professional curiosity” and the ability to dig in. Intake workers should ask themselves questions such as What am I missing? What haven’t you told me? and encourage the reporter to share more details with statements such as Tell me more about that.

Hubbard shared that a narrative interview style promotes consulting, collaboration, and involvement between the intake worker and the reporter. If feasible, it is always important to identify the family’s strengths.

Most of the time, asking about the strengths may be based on the reporter’s connection or relationship with the family, especially with reporters who have a longer-term relationship with the family. The more information gathered, the more it helps assessors engage families and identify an effective safety plan and next steps with the family.

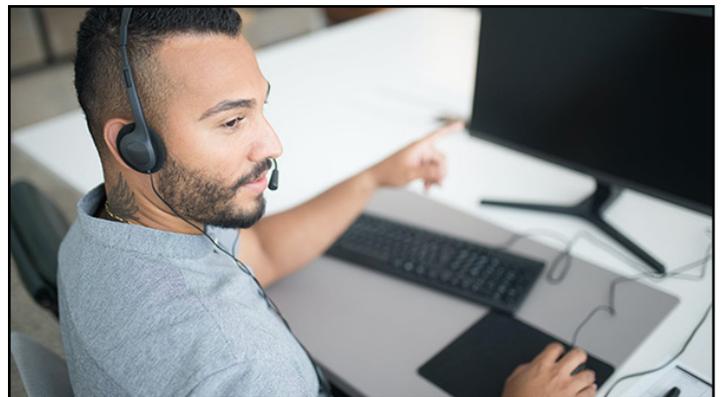
### **A New Intake Process**

A new intake process rolling out in the coming months will help with gathering information from a reporter as well as supporting consistency with intake reports received across the state. Counties are implementing a new electronic case management system, the Child Welfare Information System (CWIS).

Hubbard shared that the rollout will occur in phases to provide support to the counties as they implement it, making sure they have adequate training and technical assistance. There will be a set of training sessions before each county goes live in the new system, along with support from county regional specialists, the NC DSS intake team, and Evident Change consultants who helped our state develop the new intake structured decision-making tool. Implementation phases are assigned based on a readiness assessment and counties’ willingness to imple-

ment the new electronic system.

The Safety Design Team, whose members include county child welfare staff, community partners, families with lived experience, and NC DSS staff, provided input on the new intake policy and tool. NC Assistant Attorneys General also helped develop the intake tool to ensure it was clear and aligned with statutory definitions. The changes intend to create a more straightforward intake policy that translates well within the new technology. CWIS links the policy



to technology, which will lead to more consistent intake decisions. With CWIS, in some instances, the screening process is automatic. For example, if an intake worker selects “physical abuse,” CWIS assigns the report to the investigative assessment track and only allows a 24-hour or immediate response timeframe.

Baldwin-Hamm pointed out areas where the system ensures the worker is asking about relatives or kin or other support for the family. Asking about relationships identifies those safety networks to build on from the

beginning and leads to more family engagement. Another important piece is helping the intake worker focus on what specific caretaker behavior is of concern and what the potential impact on the child might be. If a safety issue requires a child welfare response, the assessment process is set up for success to address the behavioral changes needed to ensure the safety and well-being of children.

An evaluation found the previous intake tool to be lengthy and redundant. According to Hubbard, the new intake process has eliminated some mandatory questions and focuses more on engagement. An intake worker will ask the questions needed to make a sound screening decision. The new tool should be more efficient for reporters—particularly for professionals—because they can give the information they have without having to be asked several questions unrelated to their work and exposure to the family. The new intake tool questions are related to the policy criteria, helping intake workers determine screening and jurisdiction (including federal requirements), and ensuring all laws are followed.

Baldwin-Hamm pointed out that the new tool allows direct access to definitions and criteria. There is no longer a lengthy decision tree to consult when determining whether to accept the report, which will help with the engagement of reporters. There is now a new, structured decision-making intake policy manual that has been designed to help with the CWIS intake process. The manual has an embedded link in the intake tool so workers can refer to it as needed. This tool will help workers inform, consult, and collaborate with reporters, address reporter questions and concerns, and comply with child welfare policies and procedures.

Baldwin-Hamm stated that one of the challenges for intake work has always been workers taking the time to explore protective factors and statutory definitions as they communicate with reporters. The reporters may need additional education about why these intake questions and information are necessary. Intake workers must have skills including professional curiosity, good narrative interviewing skills, and a willingness to educate and support the community about the agency's role and where child welfare can

intervene according to policy and law. Engagement at intake carries over throughout the life of the case. When good information, including about family strengths, is gathered during intake, the assessment worker has information they can draw from when they meet with that family. Thorough intake information helps assessors to engage families with effective safety planning, and in building rapport with the family. For example, if it is reported that the family is in crisis, the assessment worker will know what additional information to provide the family on the first visit.

Engagement is vital in every aspect of child welfare; however, engagement with the reporter in intake sets the tone across every function in child welfare. Baldwin-Hamm described engagement at intake as ideally reflecting principles of child welfare work with families and stakeholders which should include equity, consistency, utility, and accuracy. The new intake tool and electronic system are designed to do just that.

Frequently asked questions about the new intake tool can be found [HERE](#)

## **Why is it so Hard to Engage Fathers?** By Rick Zechman

If after just meeting you, I asked you to tell me some of your most personal experiences, would you share that with me? Probably not. Building rapport and trust takes time. Often, fathers have already felt judged and labeled. They've been told they're deadbeat, absent, uninvolved, or have a record. Child welfare workers can get off to an even more rocky start with fathers because they may have had previous experience with child welfare or the legal system that wasn't exactly positive. It's embarrassing to open yourself up to another's judgments and sometimes feels mean-

ingless if that doesn't result in increased time with your child.

I once worked with a father who loved spending time with his child every day. Later, when the couple separated, this man's relationship with the child's mother became challenging. Spending time with his child became more and more difficult. Over time, conflict with her made him dread the task



of coordinating time to see his child. He didn't have money for an attorney to seek a custody and visitation agreement, and he was behind on child support. The negative feelings of guilt, shame, and being dead broke spiraled. Contact with his child became less and less frequent. He wondered what would be different for his child if he was more present in his child's life.

### **Benefits of an Engaged Father**

Having a father engaged in their child's life impacts their well-being. [The Fatherhood Project](#) reviewed a comprehensive compilation of research on the impacts of father engagement during different childhood development stages and found some significant benefits for children.

#### **Fathers:**

- Can be as equally attached to infants as mothers.
- Occupy a critical role in child development. A father's absence hinders development from early infancy through childhood and into adulthood. The psychological harm of a father's absence experienced during childhood persists throughout the life course.
- Using authoritative parenting (loving and with clear boundaries and expectations) leads to better emotional, academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for children.
- The quality of the relationship with their child matters more than the specific number of hours spent together. Non-resident fathers can have positive effects on children's social and emotional well-being, as well as their academic achievement and behavioral adjustment.

#### **Father Engagement/Involvement:**

- Is related to positive child health outcomes in infants.
- High levels of involvement are correlated with higher levels of sociability, confidence, and self-control in children. Children with involved fathers are less likely to act out in school or engage in risky behaviors in adolescence.
- Children with actively involved fathers are 43% more likely to earn A's in school and 33% less likely to repeat a grade than those without engaged dads.
- Reduces the frequency of behavioral problems in boys while also decreasing delinquency and economic disadvantage in low-income families.
- Reduces psychological problems and rates of depression in young women.
- Children who feel a closeness to their father are

twice as likely as those who do not to enter college or find stable employment after high school, 75% less likely to have a teen birth, 80% less likely to spend time in jail, and half as likely to experience multiple depression symptoms.

Having a father engaged in the life of a child can also increase their connections to the support of paternal relatives. Increased social connections are a protective factor linked to a lower incidence of child abuse and neglect. In child welfare services, we've seen the benefits of having a father involved in their child's life. Taking the time to



engage fathers is an investment.

### **Strategies for Father Engagement**

Fathers' initial reaction to child welfare workers contacting them could look like anger, defensiveness, or ambivalence. They don't owe us their cooperation; we must earn it. If we want fathers to trust us to help them gain the skills they need to resolve concerns, effective communication is essential.

Be an empathetic listener. Fathers may need to vent their frustrations or fears. Be calm, even when they're overwhelmed with negative emotions. Don't judge them for what they did or did not do.

Acknowledge the challenges they're facing. For

example, you might say “I can’t imagine what it must be like to have your child enter foster care and then navigate the court system. That’s got to be overwhelming!”

They may have lots of questions about navigating the child welfare system. Explain the process of what’s happening from start to finish. It’s okay to acknowledge the system can be frustrating but reassure them you are there for support.

Ask coaching questions to help understand what they want to improve. For example, “From what you’ve shared, I understand you aren’t happy with how things have been going. What do you wish would be different or better? What do you need to happen to help you get there?”

Listen to what they believe will help them. Their opinions may be different than yours, but if they

## Building a Family’s Safety Network

Child welfare is a constant balancing act of policy and practice. To assess reports of child abuse and neglect based on policy, we must effectively engage caregivers. Effective engagement helps build safety networks and strengthen protective capacities in families to reduce the risk of future child maltreatment. In our interview with two NC Division of Social Services Policy Consultants, Amanda Hubbard and Jadie Baldwin-Hamm, we delved into what creating strong safety networks truly means and how we do that in practice.

In their roles as Policy Consultants, Hubbard and Baldwin-Hamm are committed to weaving family engagement into every facet of child welfare. A safety network is made up of family, friends, and involved professionals who care about the child and family, engage in planning with us, understand the concerns, and are willing to do

feel heard, it demonstrates respect. If you agree to help them obtain concrete support, assistance in navigating resources, or finding an answer to a question, follow through. That will help build trust.

### Resources

**Access and Visitation Program: A regional Family Court resource for non-custodial parents who seek access and visitation with their child.**

**The program emphasizes that both parents should have an active role in their child’s life.**

<https://www.nccourts.gov/programs/access-and-visitation-program>

To access the Child Welfare Information Gateway click [HERE](#)

something to support the family to keep the child safe. Safety networks are a key component of the Safety Organized Practice model being implemented in North Carolina. Hubbard and Baldwin-Hamm have been conducting training and webinars and providing policy guidance around this topic. Here are some of the insights they shared to empower social workers to identify and build safety networks.

- 1. Boosting Protective Capacities:** Safety networks increase protective capacities within families. When these capacities are elevated, families become better equipped to safeguard their children, leading to fewer encounters with the child welfare system.
- 2. Empowering Communities:** It’s not just about families; it’s about building up entire communities. Exploring safety networks not only strengthens families but also bolsters the community. It’s a win-win that creates a wider safety net for

children.

- 3. Investing Time to Save Time:** While time may seem like a constraint, it’s an investment that pays off in the long run. Putting in the effort up front to help families identify their safety networks can ultimately streamline the child welfare process, reducing the need for intervention in the future.
- 4. Overcoming Resistance:** Resistance can be a roadblock when working with families to unveil their safety networks. Remember, what’s masked is not necessarily unknown. Building rapport and demonstrating genuine care for the family’s well-being is the key. Focus on the common goal of ensuring the children’s safety to navigate these challenging conversations.
- 5. Children’s Insights:** Don’t overlook the little voices in the room. Children often have unique insights that caregivers or professionals might miss. Pay attention to who the children mention, such as friends, family members, teachers, and com-

munity figures, as they could be valuable additions to the safety network.

- 6. Engaging Non-Resident Parents:** Children can also provide invaluable information when it comes to engaging non-resident parents and family members. Leveraging technology and social media can be powerful tools to unearth the hidden gems of family safety networks.
- 7. Thinking Creatively:** Sometimes, unexpected support can make the most significant difference.

Hubbard shared a poignant example of a family that faced transportation and childcare challenges. By tapping into the resources of an uncle who could provide transportation, they not only solved an immediate problem but also expanded their safety network. By providing transportation, the uncle was contributing to child safety within his capacity to do so and the family and social worker could then focus on further expanding the safety network to include childcare and supervision

Using a Safety Circle Diagram is one tool social workers can use to explore expanding safety networks with families. This tool helps workers think about what questions to ask and how they can work together to move someone from the outer circle to the inner circle of support for the family.

**Inner Circle:**

- With whom do the children feel the most connected?
- Who are the first people you call when you are in need?

**Middle Circle:**

- Who supports you a little?
- With whom do your children feel a connection?

**Outer Circle:**

- Who have you reached out to, but could see yourself reaching out to in the future?
- Who is willing to support you, but you don't feel comfortable asking for help? What's holding you back?

Also, consider asking the following questions of caregivers as well as collaterals. Doing so will engage them to help find out more about a family's protective capacities.

**Questions for Caregivers**

**Caregiver Resilience:**

- What do you do to take care of yourself?
- What kinds of frustrations or worries do you deal with throughout the day? How do you solve these problems as they come up?
- How are you able to meet your children's needs when you are dealing with stress?

- What are your dreams and goals for yourself and your family? What steps are you taking toward those goals?

**Social Connections:**

- Do you have family members or friends nearby who occasionally help?
- Would you be interested in meeting other parents who also [have a new baby, have a teenager, like to cook, sing in a choir, etc.]?
- What kind of support would you need to be able to get out for an evening?
- How do you and your spouse or partner support each other?

**Concrete Support for Families:**

- What do you need to be able to [stay in your house, keep your job, pay your heating bill, etc.]?
- How have you handled this problem? What is working well and what's not?
- Are there community groups or



other local services that might be able to help?

- Did you know that [local program] provides [free job training, meals on weekends, low-cost childcare, etc.]? What kind of help do you need to get to these services?

### Questions for Collaterals

- In your opinion, what would it take to make the child(ren) safer?
- What do you imagine us doing to make the child(ren) safer?
- Do you think any other agency might be able to help with the situation?
- What do you think this family should do? What are they capable of doing?
- It sounds like this has happened

before. What have you seen the family do to resolve this before?

- Can you tell me what is happening when the situation is OK? What is different about those times?
- Are there times when the caregiver is attentive rather than neglectful? Can you tell me more about those times? What did the caregiver/child do instead? What do you think contributed to the caregiver/child responding differently?
- You said that the child always seems withdrawn. Are there any times when you have seen them come out of their shell?
- Are there times when they call on other people to help them with problems? When do they

do that? Who do they call on?

- What do you see as positive about the relationship between these caregivers and their children?

In child welfare, it's not just about policies and procedures; it's about fostering connections, strengthening families, and empowering communities. Safety networks are a lifeline, offering hope and resilience to families in those times when they need it most.

Click on [Using Safety Circles to Build Safety Networks for Families](#) for further practice guidance and tips.

## NC Approves Payments to Unlicensed Kin Providing Foster Care

Many relatives struggle with the cost of raising family members and the NC Division of Social Services (NC DSS) is consistently striving to improve supportive services and resources for them. One exciting step in a positive direction for children, youth, and kinship caregivers across our state is the passage of Session Law 2023-14 (Senate Bill 20) in May 2023. One component of the legislation, effective November 16, 2023, authorizes financial reimbursement to unlicensed kin providing foster care. Kin must be related by blood, marriage, or adoption. The family does not have to meet the licensure requirements to receive reimbursement. The reimbursement is half the standard board rate, which varies by age range. The cost of the monthly reimbursement is shared equally by the county and the state (50/50).

The reimbursement rates are as follows:

1. \$351.00 per child per month for children from birth through age 5.
2. \$371.00 per child per month for children aged 6 through 12.
3. \$405.00 per child per month for children at least 13 but less than 18 years of age.

NC DSS is hopeful that the unlicensed kinship care provider payments will assist in offsetting

expenses families incur while caring for their loved ones. Payments can assist kinship caregiver's costs for food, school supplies, clothing, normalcy activities, etc. County child welfare agencies must provide the necessary documentation for kinship care providers to receive payment and kinship



care providers must confirm they are the payee for the child(ren).

On September 28, 2023, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) published a final rule which became effective November 27, 2023, regarding licensing and approval standards for kinship placements. The rule allows for Title IV-E agencies to utilize separate licensing requirements for kinship homes and distribute payments to kinship providers.

NC will exercise the option to develop a two-

track licensing system and will submit this intent to ACF by February 8, 2024. This is a tremendous win for potential kinship providers.

**For stability, “sometimes you really do need financial assistance or need some resources.”  
- Uncle providing foster care**

With the new rule, we can create separate standards for kinship providers to reduce barriers to placement and increase the pool of relatives or fictive kin that can care for children. This could

increase the number of kinship placements available to children in the system. When developing kinship licensing requirements, we will still include the appropriate safety considerations and collect psychosocial information to assess placement suitability. Separate kinship requirements must also follow federal licensing regulations.

NC DSS will continue to build upon legislation to improve support and services.

For more information, click the [“Dear County Director”](#) letter and [attachment](#) or contact Mary Mackins, Adoption Manager, at [mary.mackins@dhhs.nc.gov](mailto:mary.mackins@dhhs.nc.gov).

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