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This publication for child welfare professionals is produced by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program, part of the University of North Carolina School of Social Work.

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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Engaging Stakeholders to Support Responsive, Effective Services



The NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Social Services (NCDHHS DSS) is committed to partnering with communities, local, state, and federal entities, and others to improve health and well-being for all North Carolinians. It uses ongoing engagement to advance strategic priorities. [The Child and Family Services Plan](#) (CFSP), the state's blueprint for strengthening its child welfare system, is a good example. Over the next five years,

engagement of external and internal partners will be key to achieving every one of North Carolina's CFSP goals.

NC's 2025-2029 CFSP Goals

1. Strengthen all child welfare staff's ability to assess ongoing safety throughout the child/family's engagement with child welfare services.
2. Increase access to services for children and their families to keep children in the safest, least restrictive setting.
3. Develop and support a stable, competent, and professional workforce in child welfare.
4. Implement continuous quality improvement.

This issue of Practice Notes provides an update on some of the ways our state is using engagement to achieve CFSP goals and positive outcomes for families and children.

In This Issue

Developing Great Child Welfare Workers: North Carolina's New Approach.....	2
New Program Adds Social Workers to Some Parents' Legal Teams.....	4
Tools to Strengthen Your Practice.....	5
Family Engagement Committees Strengthen Policy and Practice at the Local Level.....	6
Best Practices in Engaging Community Stakeholders.....	9
County DSS Agencies Step Up in the Aftermath of Hurricane Helene.....	11
The Safe Babies Court Program: A Model for Collaborative, Family-Centered Child Welfare.....	12

In this issue, you'll learn:

- The collaboration-focused Safe Babies Court Team program is transforming how the child welfare system works with the courts to support families of infants and toddlers
- Ideas for engaging community partners
- How Family Engagement Committees can strengthen child welfare policy and practice at the local level and more

Developing Great Child Welfare Workers: North Carolina's New Approach

At the heart of Child Welfare Transformation efforts in North Carolina is the belief that we cannot simply hire great workers—we must develop them. This belief is foundational to a new model of training that focuses on partnership, connection, skill development, and knowledge building.

North Carolina's New Model

Since its implementation in 2024, the new seven-week child welfare pre-service training program reflects the state's emphasis on developing staff by ensuring new hires not only learn the technical aspects of the job but also build a strong relationship with their agency, supervisors, and colleagues.

Historically, pre-service training consisted primarily of classroom sessions where new employees were taught theoretical knowledge. This often left workers without a clear sense of how to apply what they learned. Fortunately, our new model bridges the gap between learning and application by fostering knowledge acquisition, skill development, and interpersonal connection.

The new pre-service is interactive and hands-on. Workers begin with a classroom component, followed by time back at the agency. This allows new hires to absorb knowledge and immerse themselves in the culture of their agency. By interacting with colleagues and supervisors in the workplace, new hires begin to better understand how to navigate their work environment and apply the skills more intuitively.

A Guide for Supervisors

To reach their full potential, staff need supervisors to be active partners in their development.

To support this partnership, NCDHHS DSS has created [Supporting New Workers During Pre-](#)

[Service Training: Guide for Supervisors](#). Using this guide fosters alignment between what's taught in the classroom and work reality in the agency, ensuring supervisors and workers are on the same page and working toward the same goals. This tool helps supervisors review and discuss training content with their workers during weekly supervision meetings. Consequently, such dialogue gives supervisors the opportunity to respond to workers' uncertainties and identify areas for further growth.

By regularly checking on a new worker's progress, a supervisor can make necessary adjustments to their training plan, offer guidance where it is needed, and provide feedback on the worker's strengths and areas for improvement. This collaborative process builds trust and shows workers that supervisors are invested in their success. In turn, workers feel supported and are more likely to grow into capable, confident professionals.

Retention Through Connection

Connection is a key factor in worker retention.

Employees who feel connected to their work community are less likely to leave. Connection is cultivated in part through meaningful interactions with supervisors and colleagues and by a sense of shared purpose within the agency.

North Carolina's new pre-service training model facilitates this connection in multiple ways. For example, in the classroom, workers are encouraged to forge relationships with other new hires. This builds a network of support that extends beyond their immediate team or supervisor.

Supervisors also play an essential role by helping workers feel anchored to the agency. By regularly providing opportunities for feedback,

supervisors reinforce the idea that workers are valued and that their growth is a shared priority.

Laura Harrison, a program manager at Caldwell County Department of Social Services (DSS), says her county's experience with the Guide for Supervisors is that it helps workers develop their skills and connect with their supervisors. When workers feel connected and supported, they're better positioned to succeed in their roles, more invested in the mission of the agency, and more likely to stay with the agency.

Not Just for New Staff

The Guide for Supervisors can also be used with veteran workers. For example, suppose a supervisor notices a worker is struggling to conduct quality contacts with families. In the guide, the supervisor can find relevant content and tips for providing targeted assistance to the worker in this area of practice. Using this guide helps supervisors ensure experienced and seasoned workers receive the timely and specific support that they need.

Laura Harrison says she and her team at Caldwell County DSS have found that North Carolina's new training and coaching approach has significantly improved the connection

between supervisors and workers. When they use the Guide for Supervisors, supervisors are more attuned to the strengths and areas for growth of each worker.

The Guide for Supervisors also provides a framework for workers and supervisors to collaborate on continuous improvement. According to Allison Sturtevant-Gilliam and Tracie Cleveland, consultants from Public Knowledge, the guide is meant to be used dynamically. It allows supervisors to refer to material on specific topics as they arise, rather than requiring them to follow a rigid, sequential training schedule. This allows for a personalized approach to worker

development, empowering supervisors to meet workers where they are in their learning process.

Identifying Strengths and Opportunities

The guide also helps agencies identify patterns across teams. For example, after joint visits with families, workers and supervisors can complete [Appendix B: Skill Development Observation Guide](#) to reflect on what went well and what could be improved. The scale used to rate performance in this tool is **Learner**, **Competent**, and **Expert**.

Responses are reviewed to determine if common themes point to systemic issues or individual needs. The supervisor and worker can refer to the section in the guide that provides guidance

on education or skills needing improvement.

At Caldwell County DSS, supervisors bring the observation guide to staffing with the program manager. The goal is to work with supervisors to develop solutions that support staff development and improve service delivery. In partnership, the program manager works with supervisors to assess common themes that support supervisors and workers.

This consistent cycle of feedback, reflection, and action creates a culture of learning in the agency. Staff members

are encouraged to embrace the training process as an opportunity for growth, rather than a one-time event. This fosters a workplace culture that values continuous improvement and professional development.

Conclusion

The Guide for Supervisors helps agencies adopt a workforce development approach that says, "We don't hire great workers, we develop them." Using this guide as a multifaceted tool, supervisors can more effectively build worker skills and foster strong relationships within the agency.

A Community for Supervisors

Do you want to build your leadership skills and support your team more effectively? Consider joining the Supervisor's Community of Practice (CoP). This group, which meets virtually for an hour on the third Monday of each month, is a safe space where supervisors share challenges, exchange ideas, and receive guidance from their peers. Each meeting encourages candid discussion of topics on self-care, coaching, workload management, and more. Participating in this group is designed to encourage child welfare professionals to feel less isolated and more empowered.

Monthly invitations to the Supervisor's Community of Practice (CoP) are released through the Supervisor Listserv. If you are a child welfare supervisor in a North Carolina county DSS and not already on this list, click [here](#) to subscribe.

New Program Adds Social Workers to Some Parents' Legal Teams

Goals are to Improve Legal Representation, Shorten Stays in Foster Care

In North Carolina, a new program that pairs experienced social workers and parent attorneys is strengthening legal representation and improving outcomes for parents and their children. Currently active in Buncombe, Cleveland, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, New Hanover, and Wake Counties, the Interdisciplinary Parent Representation program (IPR) aims to expand statewide eventually. This article explains what this program is and how it is helping parents and children involved with the child welfare system.

Interdisciplinary Legal Teams

Although attorneys of child welfare-involved parents generally agree that advocacy outside the courtroom is key, many lack the time or training to effectively advocate for their clients outside of court. That is where social workers come in.

Parent legal teams in some parts of the U.S. have included social workers since at least 2010. As the sidebar shows, this practice can lead to better outcomes for children and parents. This is why the use of interdisciplinary legal teams is growing and why North Carolina's [Office of the Parent Defender](#) launched the IPR in 2022.

How the Program Works

Under the Interdisciplinary Parent Representation (IPR) program, social workers work with parent attorneys on cases of neglect and dependency (IPR does not serve cases where child abuse is alleged). IPR services are entirely voluntary; parents can discontinue them at any time.

IPR social workers receive assignments and guidance from their team attorney. Sharice Zachary, the IPR Program Manager in NC's Office of the Parent Defender, also provides program social workers with oversight and support by supervising them and monitoring their caseloads.

When they first get a case, IPR social workers reach out to the county child welfare agency worker, guardian ad litem (GAL), treatment providers, and others to introduce themselves and explain their role. IPR services are parent-focused—social workers aim to increase parents'

engagement with services and the court process. They meet regularly with parents to focus on progress and overcome challenges to completing court-ordered services.

IPR involvement in a case does not affect the mandates or responsibilities of child welfare agencies in any way. The hope is that all parties in the case (DSS attorneys, DSS social workers, parent attorneys, IPR social workers, GALs, etc.) will collaborate throughout the life of the case and in the best interests of the child.

IPR in Buncombe County

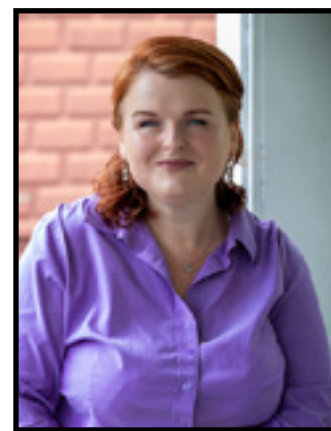
When the IPR program started in Buncombe County in December 2022, there was initial resistance, even some fear from DSS workers on how the program would affect their work.

"Change is hard. It's scary!", according to Liz Harr, a veteran child welfare worker and now an IPR social worker in Buncombe County.

Understanding that a new partnership takes time, Harr steadily and patiently built trust. She reassured Buncombe DSS and parties concerned that IPR is a collaborative program focused on the family's well-being.

There are strong indications Harr's efforts are succeeding. For instance, she reported that her program now receives referrals directly from child welfare social workers who are eager for their clients to receive added support from the IPR team. Harr also says, the local GAL program recently asked her team to share information about the IPR during their new volunteer training.

In her work with the IPR, Harr wears many hats, including those of case manager, legal advocate, and crisis interventionist. She says that one of the most important roles is that of a connector—someone who bridges gaps between DSS workers, families, and other stakeholders to collectively meet the shared goal of family success.



Liz Harr

A Success Story

Harr shared the following example of the impact of IPR support for the family.

Things were not going well for Layla. She is a young mother, her son is in foster care, and there was minimal communication with DSS. Right after IPR became involved in Layla's case, she was incarcerated.

Harr used this pivotal moment to build an authentic relationship with Layla that enabled her to reflect, engage in honest conversation, and discuss a path forward. Using consistent communication, Harr helped Layla understand and navigate systems and bridged gaps between Layla, DSS, and the GAL. By fostering understanding on all sides, Harr shifted the perspectives of those involved and encouraged them to engage emphatically with Layla.

Layla achieved sobriety while in prison and maintained it upon release. Thanks to proactive planning, Layla had stable housing, a scheduled visit with her child, and therapeutic support as soon as she was released. Reunification remains the goal for Layla's family.

This is a great example of how the IPR can keep children connected with their parents even when they are separated. It also demonstrates that when we meet a parent's needs holistically, we set the foundation for long-term stability and success.

The IPR program's holistic approach aims to create deep-rooted change by providing tailored support to families, focusing on their specific needs, and building protective factors such as strong social networks that can sustain them over time. Harr shared that the lasting connections families build in the community are a tremendous buffer to life's challenges.

"Families that are connected," Harr says, "are not the families that have children in foster care."

To Learn More

For more information on the IPR's program, visit their [website](#) and [program guide](#), or contact IPR Program Manager [Sharice Zachary](#).

Supporting Research

Research from states using this approach has shown improvement in high-quality parent legal representation, it has reduced time in foster care for children, and expedited reunifications and permanency. Examples are cited below:

Washington State (2011 study). Interdisciplinary model cut time to permanency: reunification occurred 1 month sooner [average] and adoptions/guardianship occurred 1 year sooner [average] (Partners for Our Children, 2011).

New York City (2019 study). Examined 28,000 NYC child welfare cases from 2007-2014. The interdisciplinary model returned children to families 43% more often in their first year vs. solo practitioners, and 25% more often in the second year. Released children to relatives more than twice as often in the first year of the case and 67% more often in the second. Studied recidivism—kids remained home safely at higher rates (Gerber et al., 2019).

Colorado (2019 evaluation). Children of parents represented by an interdisciplinary team averaged 141 days in out-of-home care vs. the same county average of 172 days (i.e., returned home 1 mo. sooner); reunification rates were nearly 22% higher. In pilot cases in El Paso County, children reunified twice the state rate in 2017 and 2018 (Darnel & Bassett, 2019).

States Using Interdisciplinary Legal Teams: CA, CO, CT, FL, IL, MA, MI, NC, NJ, NM, NY, OR, PA, TX, VT, WA

Tools to Strengthen Your Practice

To help transform its child welfare system, North Carolina has developed clear, well-organized practice standards. These standards describe in behaviorally specific terms how staff should engage and work with children and families and how supervisors and agency leaders should support workers and create conditions for success.

Our state's child welfare practice standards are divided into five essential child welfare functions: **communicating, engaging, assessing, planning, and implementing.**

The practice standards aim to ensure everyone in our field shares the same picture of effective child welfare practice and is working to make

that picture a reality. To help realize this vision, NCDHHS DSS provides training on the practice standards to all child welfare staff. NCDHHS DSS also offers the following tools for assessing and strengthening your performance:

- [Supervisor Practice Standards Assessment](#)
- [Worker Practice Standards Assessment](#)

These tools will help you evaluate the extent to which you

are successfully incorporating the practice standards into your work.

They can be used as self-assessment, peer review, or

360° evaluation. A self-assessment is a solo evaluation of your practice, your behaviors, and your attitudes. Peer review is an evaluation of your practice by others who do similar work. In a 360° evaluation, you solicit feedback on your practice from a variety of individuals, including leaders in your agency, your supervisor, and your peers. Some 360° evaluations also include client feedback.

Action Planning

Both tools provide space to identify specific actions for improving your practice. For example, if after completing the supervisor assessment, you conclude that you could do better with providing feedback on your workers' documentation, you may add to your action plan to take the course, Supporting Effective Documentation: A Course for Supervisors on [NCSWlearn.org](#).

Practice standards assessment results can be integrated with professional development plans (PDPs). These are individualized plans for building

your level of competence that you would regularly discuss with your supervisor.

Fidelity Matters

These tools are valuable in helping professionals focus on applying fidelity to the practice standards. Fidelity means we are all implementing practice standards, as intended. If everyone

shares this focus, agencies should see greater consistency in the way staff are implementing, communicating, engaging, assessing, and planning with

families. This, in turn, will help provide high-quality services and achieve positive outcomes for families. We want families to have a safety-focused, trauma-informed, culturally humble, family-centered experience no matter who their caseworker is.

From Assessment to Competence

Competence is having the necessary knowledge, skills, or abilities to perform a task.

Achieving competence in the field of child welfare takes time, effort, and persistence. It also requires a lot of support, most importantly through regular supervision that includes an exchange of observation and feedback from work peers, families, and training.

Resource

For more information on implementing practice standards, visit the previous Practice Notes article, ["Creating a Standard for Engaging Families."](#)

"The aim of the practice standards is to ensure everyone shares the same picture of effective child welfare practice and is working to make it a reality."

Family Engagement Committees Strengthen Policy and Practice at the Local Level

North Carolina's [Child Welfare Family Leadership Model](#) helps agencies improve services by engaging families and developing them as leaders in the child welfare system. [Previously](#), *Practice Notes* explored how the Child Welfare Family Advisory Council (CWFAC) does this at the state level. In this issue, we aim to highlight the impact that this model can have on the local level.

Family Engagement Committees

Individuals with lived experience, also called Family Partners, are central to North Carolina's Child Welfare Family Leadership Model.

On the county level, Family Partners can collaborate with agency staff to incorporate the family perspective into all aspects of agency operations. For example, some train DSS staff or other parents, they co-facilitate discussions

in the community, and provide peer support to parents receiving services. Others serve on Family Engagement Committees.

A **Family Engagement Committee (FEC)** is a county-level group that meets quarterly to discuss, implement, and support strategies to improve family engagement and permanence for children. Members of FECs always include biological parents who have been involved with child welfare; most of these committees also include others with lived experience and members of the community.

Many counties use Parent Cafés to solicit Family Partner perspectives and recruit parents for FECs. At these cafés, parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system gather with agency partners for structured conversation. Parent Cafés are typically offered in a series, allowing participants to have an opportunity to understand the issue being discussed and to get to know each other. These cafés are useful for sharing information, obtaining feedback on best practices, and developing parent leaders.

Durham County's Story

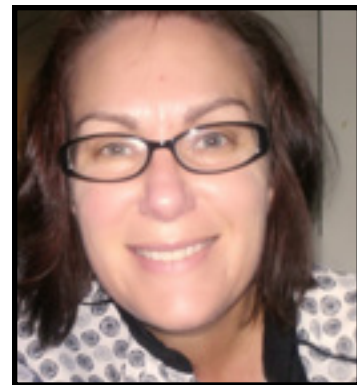
To better understand Family Engagement Committees and the impact they have, consider the story of Durham County Department of Social Services (DSS). Formed in May 2018, Durham's Family Engagement Committee (FEC) focuses on biological parent engagement, family involvement in CFTs, and supporting kinship families. Durham's FEC informs practice and policy on the county level, providing recommendations to agency leaders and strengthening child welfare practice by gathering and sharing family perspectives.

Durham's experience shows that building an effective FEC takes time.

By the end of 2018, Durham's FEC had a charter and held a Parent Café to begin recruiting additional members. In 2019, they updated parents who attended the café about their goals and what they had been working on. In 2020-21, the FEC held "Dining with Child Welfare," an event that informed parents what the agency was doing to respond to their concerns. During that same period, a subcommittee of foster parents and agency staff also developed an application for family members who wanted to join the FEC. In 2022, the FEC updated its charter and began

developing a manual. In 2023-24, the FEC continued to revise tools and documents, focused on recruitment and retention, held meetings about data collection and their model, and presented at an international conference.

Creating and sustaining Durham's FEC has not always been easy. Challenges included scheduling conflicts, reimbursement delays, and competing work priorities. Recruiting and maintaining Family Partners requires an ongoing effort, but Durham DSS is committed. They are working to raise awareness among county commissioners



Kristen Dismukes

and other officials on the impact of the FEC on child welfare practice, including the families served. They believe that this may lead to greater support, increased funding, and reduced bureaucracy.

Today, Durham's FEC is working to prepare families for Parent Cafés and other meetings, participating in Family Agency Collaborative Training Team (FACTT) meetings, and speaking at joint FEC and CWFAC meetings. FEC members say that Durham DSS leaders are committed to being at the table to learn from families, and they value the FEC as a safe space for uncomfortable conversations.

Kristen Dismukes, a Family Partner on Durham's FEC, is hopeful. "The FEC is committed to preparing a platform for family voices and serves as a liaison between families and agency staff members," she says. "My goal is that my journey through the child welfare system will benefit families in Durham County and will assist in policies and procedural changes."

As a veteran Family Partner and CWFAC member, Teka Dempson states, "Invest in us and we will invest in the process for better outcomes in our life and service system."

How to Form an FEC

Be strategic and intentional from the beginning. Child welfare staff, agency leaders, and families must be invested. Being a Family Partner requires a time commitment and a willingness to engage

Ways Family Partners Can Help with Programming:

- Review and provide feedback on a flyer
- Help to lead a support group at your agency
- Solicit feedback from other families
- Co-train staff members
- Co-facilitate Parent Cafés
- Co-present on your program to the community
- Serve on agency committees, boards
- Serve on a family advisory council/committee

in difficult work.

Agency staff must be motivated to find families willing to challenge the system. Recruit more Family Partners than you think you will need so if someone is unavailable, you have others to turn to. It takes dedication to create the processes needed to build trust, but it is worth it. Expect that some families will be triggered by topics discussed; be ready in advance to support them.

When implementing a Family Engagement Committee, consider the following:

Readiness. Families and agencies need to be able to assess their readiness to engage families as partners.

- Spend time planning, preparing, and developing processes before recruiting Family Partners. Ensure roles and expectations are clear. For example, Family Partners should be the only ones to bring up their history with child welfare in meetings/events.
- Create opportunities for Family Partners to start where they are comfortable. For instance, if families are not ready to serve on a committee, they might still be willing to help improve programming for other families (See box X. for ways Family Partners can help with programming).
- Be prepared to listen to feedback and experiences from families.
- Expect topics that will require the committee to slow down and brainstorm to ensure processes will be implemented effectively

and have an impact.

- Develop readiness questions and an application process for potential Family Partners. Ensure that they are ready and able to contribute to the process (i.e., their case has been closed by DSS for a certain period), and they have access to county training and policies.

Infrastructure. Consider what infrastructure your agency needs to sustain the FEC and ensure agencies and Family Partners are full partners in the process.

- **Hold Parent Cafés.** This is an effective strategy for soliciting Family Partner perspectives and recruiting parents for FECs. Ensure Family Partners are involved from the beginning.
- **Create a charter.** Co-develop, review, and update a charter that provides clarity to the roles and expectations for FEC membership (e.g., training and meeting participation requirements).
- **Develop a clear plan for a mentorship process with a seasoned Family Partner.** Family Partners should receive support to participate in meetings; this includes sharing materials and information before meetings and providing opportunities to debrief afterwards.
- **Provide monthly meetings at DSS, including “Lunch and Learns.”** Create a protocol for what is needed for families to attend meetings or events. For example, the agency should provide childcare, food, and opportunities for families to talk in large and small groups.
- **Co-create a manual to onboard new Family Partners.**
- **Establish a plan for training and skill development** (e.g., co-creating presentation materials, holding regular practice sessions, providing ongoing education about the child welfare system).
- **Ensure financial support.** Demonstrate that you value Family Partners by financially compensating them for their time and work.
- **Create feedback loops and DSS updates.** This should include the voices of families who are not Family Partners. These processes keep everyone invested in the work,

demonstrate respect, support transparency, and build trust.

To Learn More

For more information on how FECs may help your county, please reach out to the Department

of Social Services in Durham through [Erika Ward](#) or [Natasha Harcum](#).

Thank you to the NCDHHS DSS' Deborah Day, the CWFAC's Teka Dempson, and Durham FEC members for contributing to this article.

Best Practices in Engaging Community Stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders is a key component in improving child welfare outcomes. Several challenges that children and families face tend to be complex; therefore, implementing solutions requires a multi-faceted approach. County departments of social services (DSS) cannot do it alone. It is often challenging to engage stakeholders in meaningful ways to be at the table and to actively participate in the process. Even when concerned parties participate, since DSS is the responsible party, they are often the driver, and stakeholders are there to help. It's also difficult to keep stakeholders engaged for the long term, which is required to address complex challenges.

In 2017, the Capacity Building Center for States identified the following key elements for successful collaboration:

- Strong leadership and commitment at all levels
- Communication and engagement
- Shared understanding of needs, strategies, and goals
- Trust
- Collaborative infrastructure
- Community-oriented and family-centered efforts

These elements should seem familiar because they mirror those strived for when engaging families. However, how they are implemented with community partners is not easy. Let's review some specific strategies.

Strong Leadership and Commitment: In a nationwide evaluation of successful System of Care efforts, the role of leaders was highlighted as key to success. Leaders set the tone, ensure buy-in, provide regular and ongoing communication, and provide opportunities for partners to participate and impact the work at DSS agencies. Key takeaways from a five-year evaluation (National Technical Assistance Center,

2010) found that leaders should:

1. Assess their organization's readiness for change and determine the supports and resources needed to facilitate the change process
2. Model the behavior they want staff members to adopt
3. Dedicate considerable time to developing and communicating the vision for partnership
4. Ensure there is a succession plan so the work can continue under a leadership transition

Communicating and Engaging: As a starting place, leaders should be following the NCDHHS DSS practice standards for Communicating and Engaging (*see box for specific standards that apply to engaging and communicating with community partners*). In addition, the Administration for Children and Families recommends that leaders communicate regularly and frequently with both internal and external stakeholders on progress with overall goals (National Technical Assistance Center, 2010). Strategies identified for communication include holding cross-agency staff meetings to address client-based concerns, developing a glossary to use common language and clarify professional jargon, encouraging and expecting transparency about challenges and capacity, and, when possible, providing written documentation to facilitate clear and open exchanges of information (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017).

Shared Understanding of Needs, Strategies, and Goals: Before shared goals can be developed, it is important to identify the right partners for the project. Consider all partners who have an interest and role in improving outcomes. Often, it's easy to use our "go-to partners" for all stakeholder engagement rather than widening the pool and customizing who is engaged for different contexts. Consider faith-based organizations,

Leader Practice Standards

Communicating Standards

- Actively listens to concerns from the community
- Encourages and responds to questions from the community
- Responsive to questions from the community when issues escalate
- Uses clear, specific, and understandable language in oral and written communication within the agency and to the community
- Sets regular meetings with providers and stakeholders in the community to clearly explain agency direction, protocols, and initiatives
- Works with providers and the community to ensure they understand the “why” behind certain decisions
- Presents agency data, reports, and outcomes in a clear and concise manner
- Articulates agency goals and outcomes in a clear and concise manner

Engaging Standards

- Holds regular meetings with internal and external stakeholders to gather and share information
- Utilizes a teaming approach in meetings and partnering to accomplish goals and move the work forward
- Solicits input and opinions from stakeholders both before and after meetings to engage them in the process
- Is open to hearing all feedback, even negative feedback
- Involves a variety of stakeholders in the development of new strategies

Click [here](#) for the full list of leadership practice standards.

family and youth voices, and small community organizations that are doing good work. The more partners you have at the table, the more likely the issue will be explored and addressed in new and innovative ways. “Committed, hard-working members are the foundation of a thriving community partnership. They should represent a diverse group of people from various agencies,

organizations, and community groups, as well as individuals who are involved with populations similar to those being served or are concerned about related issues” (Children’s Bureau Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2010).

Once stakeholders are at the table, identify shared goals. Different stakeholders have different priorities, which can be a barrier to successful collaboration. Therefore, take the time to develop new partnerships and understand the mission and vision of the organization, and work to find areas of common ground. Identify goals and outcomes that will meet the needs of all partners and the community, even if it means that your top priority is not the first item to be addressed under the agenda. Working on a common goal ensures the work is truly shared. As one director stated, it is important to “share the risk [and] the success” (National Technical Assistance Center, 2010).

Trust: Building partnerships requires the development of trust among stakeholders, some of whom may have never before been invited to collaborate with a child welfare agency. As with any relationship, partnerships with the community need to be nurtured over time to create long-term commitments to working collaboratively. Consider creative ways to build trust and understanding with your stakeholders. Examples of effective strategies include:

- Inviting partners to sit on agency committees
- Engaging in cross-training with staff from multiple organizations
- Meeting with each partner, individually, to build relationships and participate in meaningful ways
- Inviting partners to cross-agency meetings to share what you do and who you serve (National Technical Assistance Center, 2010)

Where to Begin

Whether you are establishing new partnerships or re-establishing old ones, assessing agency readiness and capacity is an important first step. The Capacity Building Center for States (2017) recommends considering the following questions:

- What are some of the unresolved challenges you have with your existing or potential provider partners?
- What gaps exist in your service array that could benefit from new collaborations?
- What strengths do you bring to the table,

and what do your provider partners bring?

- Are there external factors, such as the political environment, other existing collaborations, or certain community dynamics that can help or hinder your collaboration?
- Have you set aside time for implementation planning?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities do staff have related to relationship building?
- Do staff have capacity, training, time, and resources available for effective collaboration?
- What tools do you have to help orient staff toward more collaborative work with

providers?

In addition, there are tools and resources to help you get started. The Children's Bureau highlights a [collaboration primer](#) developed by the Health Resources and Educational Trust that includes checklists, key questions, and strategies for overcoming challenges.

Children and families exist in communities; therefore, communities must play a key role in ensuring that all families can thrive. While opening the doors of a DSS agency and inviting others to partner and share responsibility for change may be intimidating, the potential positive outcomes for concerned parties make it worth the effort and risk.

County DSS Agencies Step Up in the Aftermath of Hurricane Helene

County DSS Agencies Step Up in the Aftermath of Hurricane Helene

When Hurricane Helene struck on September 27, 2024, it brought historic rainfall, strong winds, and tornadoes to our state. Western North Carolina was hit especially hard. Severe flooding and landslides washed out roads and bridges and destroyed buildings, and homes. In some places, cell towers, phone lines, and power lines were out for days. Some municipal water systems were severely damaged, leaving residents without potable water.

More than 100 North Carolinians died, including 42 in Buncombe and 11 each in Henderson and Yancey counties (NCDHHS, 2024). Damage from Helene has been estimated at more than \$59.6 billion, more than three and a half times the financial impact of Hurricane Florence. President Biden declared a Major Disaster; 39 counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians were made eligible for federal disaster assistance (NCOSMB, 2024).

Transportation and communication network disruptions and widespread damage made it hard for child welfare agencies to respond right after the storm. When they could get to work, many staff, in addition to their regular duties, also had to help with unfamiliar and stressful disaster-related duties, such as opening emergency shelters and operating the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP).

Dee Hunt, Director of Rutherford County DSS,

spoke for several county DSS agencies in the west when she told Carolina Public Press soon after the storm, "It's been emotionally tough on all of us" (Thomae, 2024).

News of the devastation triggered an immediate response in other parts of the state. "This disaster touched our hearts," said Deborah Walker, child welfare program administrator with Craven County on the coast. "As you know, we have had to endure a number of hurricanes."

To help affiliate agencies in the west, Craven DSS's income maintenance program manager, April Rollins, and her team dedicated many hours assisting with D-SNAP. In addition, Rollins traveled with a group from her agency to help shelter Helene survivors.

Craven DSS staff wanted their peers in the west to know they were thinking of them, so they sent \$5 gift cards to well-known coffee chains. "We know from experience that simple things become luxuries overnight when a hurricane hits," Walker said. In the end, her team sent 115 gift cards to lift the spirits of child welfare staff in Yancey, Transylvania, and Rutherford counties.

Lots of other counties stepped up, as well. According to David Richmond, DSS Director in Moore County in the middle of the state, the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services paired counties affected by Helene with counties of similar size elsewhere in the state. His county provided Haywood County with assistance with D-SNAP and other economic services. After

Moore County commissioners passed a resolution pledging to help Transylvania County recover from Helene, Richmond's agency worked with other Moore County departments to donate and deliver holiday gifts to children and youth in foster care in Transylvania County.

Catawba County DSS also focused its energies on holiday gifts—in their case, for children in care in Buncombe County. According to Catawba DSS program manager Janine

Szymanski, her agency made this decision not only to benefit young people but to lessen the burden on Buncombe staff at this challenging time.

Although Catawba DSS didn't hesitate, it was a major undertaking. Their agency was just about to start the annual effort to provide holiday gifts for the 170 young people in their foster care program. Buncombe had twice that number: 341 children and youth in care.

With approval from the county manager,

Catawba DSS sent a county-wide message to supervisors and staff explaining the situation and inviting them to contribute. "We made it clear this was entirely voluntary. The response was amazing. Many of the gifts people bought were delivered straight to my house—I saw a delivery truck in my

driveway every day for two weeks straight."

Szymanski said that once they were well into this effort for Buncombe, someone asked if they were doing the same for Avery County. When Avery DSS

"The damage was so unexpected...it is overwhelming. We do essential work. Could folks even get to work? And if they could, could they do their jobs with all the disruptions to water, power, and communications?"

Janine Szymanski
Program Manager at Catawba County DSS

gladly accepted their offer of help with holiday stockings, Catawba added 21 more young people to its gift list.

According to Szymanski, funding for all gifts came through individuals, either people directly employed by Catawba County or from their church.

Reflecting on the experience, Szymanski said, "I couldn't be more proud of our community. It is easy to forget the heart that people have. What we were able to do for others after Helene was a

The Safe Babies Court Program: A Model for Collaborative, Family-Centered Child Welfare

The Safe Babies Court (SBC) program is transforming the way the child welfare system works with the court system to support families of infants and toddlers. By focusing on collaboration and promoting early, intentional intervention, the Safe Babies Court seeks to move towards permanency sooner and restore and strengthen family bonds. This article explores how Safe Babies Court is impacting New Hanover County and offers suggestions for counties that are not yet involved in this pilot program.

Background: The Foundation of the Safe Babies Court Program

Safe Babies Court launched in North Carolina in July 2023 as a pilot initiative under the Administrative Office of the Courts at the

recommendation of the Chief Justice's Task Force on ACEs-Informed Courts. The program is modeled after the Zero to Three initiative, which operates in over 150 sites and across 30 states.

As Jessica Frisina, Foster Care Coordinator for NCDHHS DSS explains, the Safe Babies Court (SBC) was designed in response to the fact that infants and toddlers, whose early years are critical to brain development and attachment, face unique challenges when placed in foster care. The goal is to streamline court processes, provide trauma-informed interventions, and reach permanency decisions quickly for children ages 3 and under.

Currently, Safe Babies Court is operating in five counties (Brunswick, Durham, Mitchell, New

Hanover, and Yancey), with expansions planned for McDowell and Rutherford. Pilot counties were selected based on court continuance rates and their desire to improve reunification efforts. In addition to these factors, New Hanover was chosen for its intensive reunification program, aligning effectively with SBC.

A Shift: Increased Collaboration and Communication

The Safe Babies Court (SBC) program aims to improve communication and collaboration between social workers, attorneys, judges, guardians ad litem, resource parents, community partners, and caregivers, and ensure that the focus is on the child's well-being and permanent placement.

New Hanover County Department of Social Services (DSS) currently has social workers from three units that handle SBC cases. Social work supervisor Dave Kuehner says his agency initially expected the program to require significant effort. However, he has observed that it is not the case because Safe Babies Court aligns existing efforts through a more collaborative approach.

Success, Kuehner says, hinges on frequent and consistent communication. "Reunification is the first goal. We all need to be on the same page, so we can reach permanency in a timely fashion."

Families involved with Safe Babies Court meet with the team at least twice a month, rather than long delays between court hearings. This includes one judicial status hearing per month and one Family Team Meeting per month. This allows social workers and other court personnel to stay aligned with the goals for the child and family. These meetings help ensure families are not caught off guard by unexpected delays or changes in their case plan. Frequent meetings also keep resource parents informed about birth parents' successes and challenges, which has strengthened shared parenting and built trust between families in New Hanover.

Instead of the typical courtroom setting, which can be intimidating, SBC provides a more relaxed environment. The judicial status hearings are often held in a circle without the formal presence of a judge's robe or gavel. Judge Corpening, Chief District Court Judge in New Hanover County, has been involved in SBC from the beginning of the program and has seen the benefits firsthand. He

describes these meetings as parent-driven, with the judge guiding the conversation around what families need to achieve permanency.

"What else can we do to support you on your journey?" is often asked in these meetings. This question fosters a sense of partnership. Families are encouraged to take ownership of their situation, and the collaborative nature of the SBC process helps them feel heard and empowered.

Empowering Families: Increased Engagement and Connection

A standout feature of the SBC program is the monthly judicial status hearings with the judge and the monthly Family Team Meetings. Frisina emphasizes how increasing the frequency of court touchpoints can be incredibly helpful in ensuring that families stay on track with their case plans, or "life plans" as Judge Corpening calls them. For example, when a parent is ready for unsupervised visits with their child, assuming there is not a court order preventing it, these should be scheduled as soon as possible, rather than waiting for the next review. More frequent interactions between the court and families can help identify potential issues early and address them before they become obstacles to permanency.

Safe Babies Court strongly emphasizes maintaining and strengthening the bond between parents and children. Kuehner says that since implementing SBC, New Hanover has seen an increase in visitation and contact between children and their parents. Parents are supported from the very beginning by being connected to services and programs that assist them on their journey; thus, the collaborative nature of the program.

Celebrating Success

Judge Corpening offers a heartwarming example of the essence of the SBC program.

A mother who had been incarcerated and separated from her child was able to see her baby during a judicial status hearing. But she was worried her baby would not recognize her.

"I sat beside her," Judge Corpening says. "When the baby smiled at her, I said, 'He remembers.' We were both in tears."

Through ongoing support and planning, this parent was able to reunite with her child shortly after her release, transitioning directly into a rehabilitation program where she could live with

her child.

To Corpening, success is empowering families to make lasting changes.

It's a parent being able to grasp, at an early stage, the significance of making a change and finding the strength to make that change. Parental decisions to participate in substance use recovery, deal with mental health challenges, set boundaries, and show up for themselves and their children are all celebrated as victories by New Hanover's SBC team.

To Kuehner, success is also collaboration between client attorneys, DSS attorneys, GALs, judges, child welfare workers, resource parents, community partners, and caregivers. Kuehner says that for everyone to be transparent and on the same page is a beautiful thing that is truly making a difference in children's lives. For example, SBC collaboration recently made it possible for a parent who had previously lost custody of their first child to regain custody of their second child. The team celebrated with a party and gifts, and will continue to support the family with care.

Suggestions for Counties Interested in SBC

Following the pilot, the goal is to eventually expand SBC to the entire state. Counties that are not yet involved in the program can, however, implement best practices based on the principles that have made SBC successful. One important step is fostering a collaborative environment across all stakeholders, including social workers, judges, attorneys, and community partners. "It can be difficult as a worker when you feel like you're working in silos," says Frisina. "The level of collaboration and problem-solving in the SBC program is great and exciting."

Kuehner and Judge Corpening offer additional best practices that can be applied. Kuehner stresses that counties need not feel overwhelmed by the idea of taking on the program. "It's not as cumbersome as it sounds," he explains.

"It's a process, not a program." Kuehner also encourages social workers to see SBC as a way to create a more permanent, stable future for children. By working collaboratively from the outset, counties can reduce the need for termination of parental rights and ensure everyone is informed and focused on permanency goals.

Judge Corpening adds that one of the most important steps for any child welfare system and court system is adopting trauma-informed practices. "How we talk to people and treat people in court has a profound impact," he says. Shifting to a strength-based, trauma-informed approach, where professionals focus on what is working, can go a long way in creating a supportive and encouraging environment for families. Corpening uses a trauma-informed lens, starting with the premise that everyone has experienced trauma—including lawyers, DSS workers, community workers, and court personnel. He strives to use trauma-informed practices at "hello."

Lastly, both Kuehner and Judge Corpening emphasize the value of learning from counties with pilot experience in SBC. They encourage anyone who would like to learn more to reach out to other counties to understand how the program works. Recently, staff from Johnston County visited New Hanover County to observe the program in action.

Safe Babies Court is a promising shift in how the child welfare system approaches families with young children. As the program expands to more counties, its impact is expected to grow, and the hope is that other counties will embrace the core principles of the program.

For more information on Safe Babies Court, contact the Foster Care Coordinator for NCDHHS DSS [Jessica Frisina](#), Social Worker Supervisor [Dave Kuehner](#), or [Polly Handrahan](#), State Safe Babies Court Director.

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