

CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL

Permanency Committee

Recommendations for the Development of the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support

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Introduction

The Permanency Committee of the Child Welfare Council has held the goal of supporting “Family Finding” practice statewide since its inception. We see a unique opportunity to support, guide and provide feedback to the Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support to further successful installation and implementation of a Kin-First and Family-Centered practice statewide which engages, welcomes and involves parents, family and “kin” in all planning and decision making activities that impacts children and youth in foster care and probation, as well as to prevent unnecessary separation of children from families or their entry into foster care or via delinquency. We strongly believe that inviting, welcoming, and involving family members in all planning and decision making is one of the strategies necessary to address the lack of equity for families disproportionately impacted by the child welfare system.

**Center for Excellence in
Family Finding,
Engagement and Support**

This program, as chaptered into Assembly Bill (AB) 207, is designed to provide counties with funding and workforce development/programmatic support to implement up front family finding and engagement. This support will be provided via a Center for Excellence in Family Finding and Engagement.

Vision

The center shall provide, or contract for the provision of, multitiered, culturally appropriate training and technical assistance to county child welfare and probation departments, participating tribes, and foster care providers to enhance their practices, policies, and efforts for family finding, support, and engagement. This may include, but is not limited to, any of the following:

- (1) Conducting evidence-based, organization-specific assessments of implementation activities.*
- (2) Strengthening trauma-informed practices and programs related to finding, engaging, and supporting relatives, and in the case of an Indian child, extended family members, as defined in Section 224.1, and the children with whom they interact as caregivers or as providers of other support toward reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement in a child's life.*
- (3) Developing and training workforce regarding how to support family finding and engagement, including, in the case of an Indian child, ensuring due diligence to inquire pursuant to Section 224.2, and improving staff skills and practices regarding reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement of relatives or extended family members in a child's life.*
- (4) Providing guidance and research on evidence-based family finding and engagement models and practices.*
- (5) Providing peer-to-peer learning opportunities for counties, participating tribes, and providers to share and leverage best practices for family finding and engagement program and practice development and sustainability.*
- (6) Other relevant training and technical assistance for counties, participating tribes, and providers regarding reunification, permanency, or other ongoing involvement of family members in a child's life, including, in the case of an Indian child, the child's tribe and tribal community.*

Top-Line Implementation Recommendations

Prioritize and Define Kin-First and Family-Centered Principles

The Center establishes, via its partnerships and relationships, a set of criteria and values that describes the terms Kin-First and Family Centered and assures that its coaching and support align with these principles. Executing a “Family Finding” type practice requires a principle-based approach that prioritizes “family” as a primary asset essential to co-creating successful solutions to the challenges faced. The resources allocated and support provided must be in alignment to these principles to maximize the benefits of the opportunity.

Align Statewide Leadership to support Counties

Statewide Leadership should include, but not limited to:

- a. Juvenile Courts, legal advocates, and court appointed special advocates (CASA).
- b. Behavioral Health.
- c. Probation.
- d. Those with lived experience/expertise (parents and youth),
- e. Community based organizations (CBOs) wraparound agencies,
- f. Congregate care agencies

Once alignment for Kin-First and Family-Centered values and principles are established at the state level, leadership should assist counties to work through policy, procedure and practice obstacles that inhibit the prioritization and development of Kin-First and Family Centered practice.

The Center should focus its outreach and engagement to sites via cross systems gathering of leadership that discuss the values and practices identified, and to develop a plan which outlines their commitment and alignment. Assessment tools can be developed to assist with this process, and the staff/consultant of the Center must be prepared and confident to help convene and facilitate these conversations to establish alignment in any site before decisions are made.

Prioritize Adaptive Leadership via partnership with County sites ahead of Technical Strategies

Focus on supporting the culture change necessary to establish successful family centered practice in participating county sites. Therefore prior to training, hiring, and model selection, the center must focus on assisting systems to understand the purpose and value of the work, and insisting that resources only be used to support a kinship-first system anchored in family centered practices. These values include:

- a. Families, beginning with parents, are the primary asset needed for the health and safety of their children.
- b. Families, beginning with parents, are the foremost experts in their own lives, and the lives of their kin.
- c. Therefore, all decision-making about family must include those family experts, beginning but not limited to, parents.

Leadership within the county system must come together to align with and commit to these

values and install a process in which they monitor the progress (big picture) of the work and attend to the process, policy, practice and value barriers that are present or arise in systems where cultural shifts are in process.

Those with lived experience/expertise (youth and parents) must be an essential part of any effort designed to forge this alignment, including those who have experienced the probation system.

Focus includes preventing disruption of families and their living situations, keeping children with their families, when temporary removal is necessary, prioritizing placement with kin (inclusive on non-related extended family members), when placement with kin isn't possible (should be very rare) keeping kin connected with the youth to minimize the trauma of separation, while building networks/social capital for the youth.

For serving youth who have endured months and years of separation, damaging their relationships and belief in a future, incorporation of specialized post permanency services which includes assisting them to grieve their losses, clarify their past and integrate their experiences so they can successfully repair and restore relationships as well as to build new ones.

Establish a technology platform (i.e., Connect Our Kids) as standard tool statewide to promote effectiveness and evaluation

The Center should recommend all CA child welfare professionals use an integrating family finding software tool, similar to "Family Connections" (from Connect Our Kids) to document, collaborate in, and measure this work. ⁱ

Connect Our Kids has found that one of the biggest challenges to professional family finders is a lack of support or reach-back resources.

The Center for Excellence should create a small team of professional family researchers who can provide expert "call-back" support for especially difficult cases, or for new family finders just learning the techniques.

The Center for Excellence should consider collecting unparalleled metrics to showcase the impact of the work being done in California.

- a. Family Connections software has built-in metrics at the team level showing progress of a case, number of connections by type, number of phone calls made, etc.
- b. The following metrics are possible and would create a Center of Excellence surpassing any other state's foster care metrics in family finding work; a conversation with Connect Our Kids would be needed.
 - i. A metrics roll-up to the organizational level (such as by region, type of agency, or all-CA).
 - ii. Metrics verifying compliance with family search efforts as defined in CA Welfare and Institutions Code Section 309.

ⁱ Social workers report finding six times as many connections for a child, in half the time previously expended to find connections, by using Family Connections.

The software is user-friendly, modern, and intuitive. Training and support are always available with quick response times.

Engagement templates and family finding flowcharts are available to support family finding, search, and engagement, and to supplement any professional training that a child welfare professional has attended.

Family Connections works with all family finding programs – including Upfront Family Finding, P3, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids, 30 Days to Family, Independent Living Programs/ young adult transition programs and all family search hybrid programs. For professionals without a program, the Connect Our Kids technology platform offers a strong foundation for the basics of family finding and engagement.

This software is free to social workers, family recruiters, family lawyers, judges, and CASA volunteers. A library of short, engaging training videos are available on YouTube to support users’ questions on-demand, any time, day or night.

Family Connections allows teams to collaborate in a supportive environment and allows supervisors to better support their teams through increased transparency.

Connections Matter Academy, a trauma-focused video series aimed at youth and young adults invites self-reflection and discussion with a mentor as the youth/young adult works to build a healthy family support network during independence.