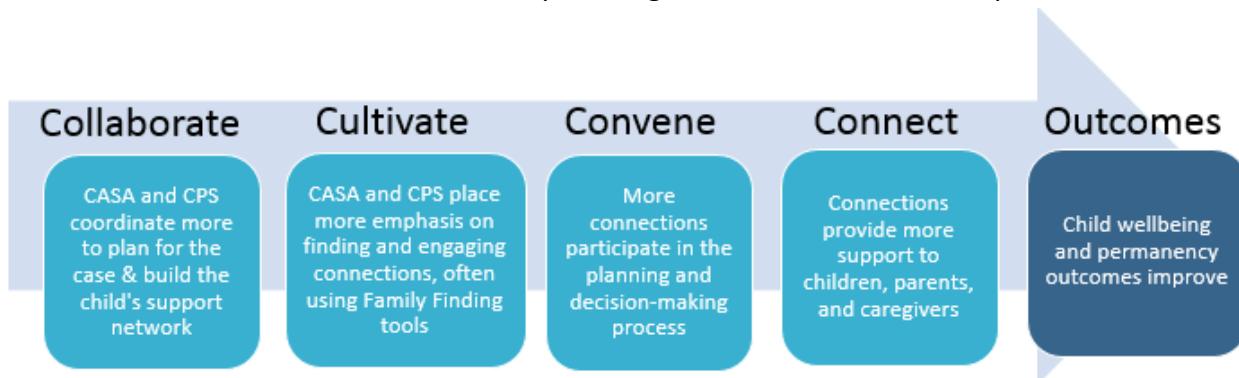


Evaluation of Collaborative Family Engagement

Summary of Findings from the 2019 Evaluation Report to Texas CASA

Over the past decade, child welfare research has demonstrated the value of involving family members and fictive kin (close family friends) in children's lives while they are in foster care – not only to provide a place to stay, but to serve as a support system for the child during care and afterwards. To increase family engagement in Texas, Texas Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) created the Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) process in 2015 with funding from the 84th Texas Legislature, and continued implementation with funding from the 85th Texas Legislature. The 86th Texas Legislature provided funding for CFE to continue in Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021. CFE rolled out progressively to sites across Texas, and as of the end of Fiscal Year 2019, 31 local CASA programs in Texas are implementing CFE, with more sites expected to join in Fiscal Year 2020.

CFE was adapted from the Family Finding™ model developed by Kevin Campbell, and provides Child Protective Services (CPS) and CASA with a variety of tools and resources to find and engage with family members and fictive kin (who are referred to as connections). Once connections are located, CASA and CPS host a series of Family Meetings to involve connections in the planning and decision-making on the case and encourage connections to commit to supporting the child and family while the child is in state care and after the case ends. The primary purpose of CFE is to develop a lifetime network of support for children and families, with a focus on increasing collaboration between CPS and CASA, to improve child wellbeing, placement, and permanency outcomes for children in CPS conservatorship. The figure below shows the CFE process:



Findings Summary: Collaborative Family Engagement Evaluation

July 2019

Texas CASA contracted with Dr. Cynthia Osborne and the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin to evaluate Collaborative Family Engagement. The primary purpose of this report is to provide Texas CASA, CPS, local implementers, and other stakeholders with an understanding of the extent to which CFE is working to facilitate improved collaboration, family support, and child placement, permanency, and wellbeing outcomes. We focus on outcomes for cases that were open and had a CASA volunteer assigned at any point during calendar year 2018, including cases that began in 2018 and cases already open at the beginning of the year, across 18 Year One, Two, and Three CASA programs sites that provided CFRP with program rosters (N=3,681). Our final sample includes cases for which we matched CPS case outcomes data with a CASA volunteer survey on case activities and intermediate outcomes. To ensure that most CASA volunteers only had to complete one survey, we prioritized the longest-served case for CASAs who served multiple cases during the year. Our final sample includes 1,140 cases.

Though CASA and CPS work together to select cases for CFE services, CASA and CPS may also apply some or all of the CFE approach to other cases at their discretion, and some sites are using components of the CFE approach universally across cases. Therefore, instead of using a treatment versus comparison approach to compare cases selected for CFE with cases not selected for CFE, we use a more rigorous and nuanced approach to create an index of four key components of CFE and assess the extent to which having a higher CFE index score, or receiving more components of CFE, is associated with key outcomes. The four components of the index include: 1) Training: the CASA volunteer on the case attended CFE training; 2) Buy-in: the CASA volunteer reports a strong family engagement orientation; 3) Engagement: CASA volunteer or staff participation in family engagement; and 4) Meetings: at least two Family Meetings occur on the case. The following section highlights key outcomes findings from Year Four of the Collaborative Family Engagement evaluation. For more detailed outcomes findings and more information on implementation of the CFE approach, see the full report.

Collaborate

Using more of the CFE approach, as measured by a higher CFE index score, is associated with more frequent communication and improved collaboration between CASA and CPS. As the CFE index score increases, CASA volunteers report more frequent communication with the CPS caseworker on the case, indicating a closer working relationship. Similarly, as the CFE index score increases, CASA volunteers report higher quality collaboration with CPS. Specifically, more CASA volunteers report dividing casework tasks and planning for the next steps in the case together with CPS as cases receive more CFE.

Findings Summary: Collaborative Family Engagement Evaluation

July 2019

Cultivate

The CFE process involves searching for and engaging with family and fictive kin connections to cultivate a support network for the child and family. CFE provides CASA volunteers with the training to search for and engage with families and fictive kin connections, allowing CASA and CPS to share responsibility on a task that had previously been CPS's role. Among cases with high CFE index scores ("3" or "4"), more than three-fourths of CASA volunteers report spending substantial time identifying or engaging connections for lifelong support, compared to fewer than half of CASA volunteers on cases that did not use any elements of CFE. These results indicate that use of the CFE approach is associated with increased emphasis on family engagement among CASA volunteers.

Convene

As CFE teams work to identify connections who could be part of a support network for the child and family on a CFE case, CASA and CPS invite the connections to attend Family Meetings to become involved with case planning and decision-making and, eventually, decide if they can commit to being a part of the lifetime support network. As the CFE index score increases, a greater number and variety of connections attend meetings for children on the case. Parents and grandparents commonly attend case planning meetings across all cases, however, use of more CFE elements is associated with increased participation specifically by extended family and fictive kin connections.

Connect

After connections are located and brought into the case process through Family Meetings, the next step of CFE is to determine ways that each connection can provide support to the child, current caregivers, and/or birth parents (if they are involved in the case). As cases receive more CFE, support to children and parents increases, though support to caregivers is similar across CFE index scores. Among cases with an index score of "0", connections support children and parents once a month or more on approximately half of cases. On cases with a CFE index score of "3" or "4", nearly three-fourths of children and approximately 60 percent of parents receive support at least monthly from connections. Use of the CFE approach, as measured by the CFE index, is also associated with a greater number of supportive adults connected to the child.

Placement, Permanency, and Wellbeing Outcomes

CFE aims to improve wellbeing, placement, and permanency outcomes for children in substitute care through increasing supports for the child and family. We find that more children on TMC cases with a high CFE index score ("3" or "4") move into kin placements compared to cases with a low CFE index score ("0", "1", or "2"). For children on PMC cases, movements into kin placements are similar regardless of CFE index score. Another goal of the CFE process is to

Findings Summary: Collaborative Family Engagement Evaluation

July 2019

decrease the time spent in congregate care or other specialized substitute care placements and move children into more family-like settings. We find a preliminary trend indicating that children on cases with a high CFE index score may spend less time in congregate care than children on cases with a low CFE index score.

Permanency goals for CFE include facilitating safe reunification when possible and, when reunification cannot occur, identifying a permanent placement with family or fictive kin. Our findings indicate that CFE is not associated with increased reunification, permanency with kin, or overall permanency among TMC or PMC cases. Similarly, child wellbeing, as reported by the CASA volunteer, is similar across cases regardless of CFE index score.

Conclusions and Considerations for The Future

Our findings indicate that the CFE approach, as measured by the CFE index, is associated with the four key intermediate outcomes: increased CASA and CPS collaboration, increased CASA volunteer emphasis on cultivating a support network, increased attendance from extended family and fictive kin connections at case planning meetings (e.g. FGCs, permanency conferences, Family Meetings), and increased support provided to children and parents. We find mixed results as to whether CFE is associated with better placement, permanency, and wellbeing outcomes for children and families.

During focus groups and through short answer survey items, CASA and CPS identify key challenges and considerations for ongoing CFE implementation. First, Family Meetings are only implemented on a small minority of cases across CASA programs, yet CASA and CPS consistently emphasize the value of Family Meetings. Decreasing barriers to holding more Family Meetings, such as holding meetings at convenient locations to decrease travel and supporting CASA to take on the work to prepare for Family Meetings, could promote wider use of Family Meetings. Similarly, sustaining family engagement remains an ongoing challenge, emphasizing the need for ongoing efforts to share best practice strategies for facilitating family follow-through with CFE teams across sites. Another key recommendation provided by CPS staff at numerous focus groups is to ensure that CASA volunteers are thoroughly trained in CPS policy and that local CASA programs work to ensure all CASA volunteers use the same criteria for safe placements and connections to ensure that CASA volunteers can best serve children and families.

As CFE implementers continue to develop new strategies to overcome challenges inherent to child protection work and build upon the numerous strengths of the CFE approach demonstrated through the evaluation, CFRP will continue to track the extent to which CFE moves the mark on strengthening Texas families and promoting better placement, permanency, and wellbeing outcomes for Texas children.

Findings Summary: Collaborative Family Engagement Evaluation

July 2019

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The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.