Dear Legal Community,

Collaborative Family Engagement, or CFE, is a collaborative effort between the Department of Family and Protective Services (the state child welfare agency) and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). It has been funded by the 84th through 87th Texas Legislatures. CFE is a process that strengthens collaboration between CPS, CASA, and other professional stakeholders to facilitate authentic family engagement and planning for children in substitute care. The primary goal of CFE is to increase the number of people connected to and serving as a support system for parents and children involved in CPS cases by searching for, engaging with and involving extended family and fictive kin.

The Texas Family Code, CPS Practice Model and CPS policies support CFE:

* Section 262.1095 re: notification
  + Requires DFPS when they have taken possession of a child, to identify, locate and notify adults related to the third degree of consanguinity of the child’s conservatorship and other specified information.
* Section 262.114 re: identify kin
  + Requires DFPS to identify and evaluate potential kin placement for young people and to continue to explore substitute caregiver options. The court is required to inquire about compliance to this. Not one time, but a continual process.
* Section 263.307 (b.13) re: support system including family and friends
  + The factors in determining the best interest of the child should consider whether an adequate support system consisting of an extended family and friends is available to the child.
* Section 107.002 and 107.003 re: GAL & AAL interviewing those who have knowledge of the child
  + This section outlines the powers and duties of a GAL and AAL for the child to include interviewing each person who has significant knowledge of the children’s history and condition, and to seek the name of any adult who could be a relative or designated caregiver for the child and immediately provide those names to DFPS.

The CFE process is carried through by a ‘CFE Team’ consisting of CASA volunteers and staff, CPS caseworkers and other professionals involved with the family, and ideally, including attorneys. The process is used to build a life-long, natural support network for the children and families in CPS cases. The hope is that this natural support network will provide connections for the child long after the CPS case has ended, and the professionals are no longer involved. When there is no support network in place for the child and/or family, the CFE Team of professionals works diligently to search for and build one; when a support network exists, the CFE Team works to strengthen it. CFE is a measurable solution to the loneliness that children in substitute care endure.

This team-based approach shares the workload, decision making and models the need for a network/team-based approach to the family. The CFE Team engages the family to take part in decision making, and every person involved keeps safety, permanency and well-being of the child at the forefront.

CFE supplies tools and resources that enhance searching for and engaging extended family and fictive kin. These CFE searching, engagement and connectedness tools and resources are available to the legal community, along with training, upon request.

**Opportunities for involvement from the Legal Community**

* Place greater emphasis on connection, not just placement, with extended family and fictive kin
* Reach beyond due diligence of notification
* Encourage searching beyond looking for the ‘usual suspects’
* Promote full meaningful engagement with natural support people
* Be a member of the CFE Team
* Participate in family meetings as appropriate
* Encourage client participation in family meetings and engagement with CPS and CASA

Over the last year, we have focused our CASA advocacy earlier on SAPCR cases and have begun engaging family before the adversary hearing. Using CFE before the adversary hearing (known as Early CFE or ECFE) is an early engagement approach for CASA volunteers which uses engagement and connection tools to ensure that the child remains connected to those important safe people in their lives from the earliest point of the case. Working with the parents and family of the child from this earlier time (the first 14 days) helps to build a trusting relationship between the CASA volunteer and the family.

This early partnership ensures that the parents and family clearly understand the role of the CASA volunteer and helps the volunteer gain important information about the family and connections as soon as possible. This information aids the CASA volunteer to help maintain connections between the child and their important people, community and culture. The volunteer can create a calendar of connections and support for the child and family that can be implemented from the very beginning of the case, thus helping reduce trauma and engage natural supports. The information gained from families may allow children to be placed sooner with family or fictive kin, thus ensuring that more children remain connected to their families while in care.

Please refer to the link below for more information and let us know if you have questions or would like to discuss CFE further.

<https://texascasa.org/intro-cfe>

Thank you!