



# WHAT IT TAKES TO EMBED COLLABORATIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:

## An Assessment of Local CASA Program Best Practices

## INTRODUCTION:

In the interest of understanding which local CASA programs have embedded the practice of Collaborative Family Engagement (CFE) and what they have done to accomplish this, Texas CASA completed an assessment in conjunction with the CFE team. The assessment took place in the first two quarters of FY 2022. Embeddedness was defined as integrating CFE practices and beliefs into many or all aspects of the CASA program, where growth had been shown in the number of children and families receiving CFE, and how much of CFE was used in practice. The programs included in the assessment were identified by their CFE Coach as programs where CFE was the most embedded.

## THE ASSESSMENT:

The assessment focused on the four practice areas of Collaborative Family Engagement (The 4Cs of CFE): Collaborate, Cultivate, Convene and Connect. Texas CASA believes that to truly embed CFE, elements of each of The 4Cs must be consistently present throughout the program and volunteer advocacy. Through this assessment, nine local CASA programs shared about their practice and how they embed CFE into their advocacy. The CFE fidelity index was used as a reference point. Feedback on how CFE is utilized locally within the CASA program was received from the CASA program's Executive Director (ED), Program Director (PD), CFE Leads, and recruitment and training staff. In some areas, feedback was also received from Child Protective Services (CPS) staff and Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) staff.

LOCAL CASA PROGRAM	YEAR STARTED CFE
CASA Child Advocates of Montgomery County	2015
CASA of the Coastal Bend	2015
Child Advocates of Fort Bend	2015
CASA of Liberty & Chambers Counties	2016
CASA of Tarrant County	2016
CASA of El Paso	2017
CASA of Galveston County	2017
Golden Crescent CASA	2017
Lone Star CASA	2018

*Table 1. CASA programs that provided feedback as part of assessment.*

## FINDINGS:

There were three consistent themes found throughout most, if not all, of the programs identified as being the furthest along the journey of embedding CFE: 1) programs have a demonstrated understanding of the importance of family engagement; 2) leadership has created a culture supportive of CFE; and 3) programs have a designated CFE Lead position in place.





## THEME #1

### THE CASA PROGRAM UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT.

- Supervisors and volunteers clearly understand that utilizing elements of CFE in their advocacy is important and is part of their job.
- Volunteers actively engage children and youth with CFE tools.
- Volunteers engage with parents and extended family with CFE tools—it was found that more engagement is done with family when children are placed in non-relative placements.
- Searching for family is done but only after engagement with known family is unsuccessful.

## THEME #2

### CASA PROGRAM LEADERSHIP HAS CREATED A CULTURE SUPPORTIVE OF CFE.

#### A. THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS REPRESENTED THROUGH MARKETING, RECRUITING, INTERVIEWING AND PRE-TRAINING OF VOLUNTEERS.

- The ED and PD are both supportive of CFE and work to ensure that it is part of any strategic plans.
- The ED ensures funding occurs for the CFE Lead position, training, etc.
- The PD understands that for CFE to be successful, supervisors must be responsible for coaching their volunteers on the CFE approach.
- The recruitment staff understand CFE and family engagement, and probe with potential volunteers their comfort level on engaging with families.
- All programs ask interview questions designed to assess family engagement as part of their recruitment process.
- All programs train on CFE tools in pre-service training and expect volunteers to utilize them on all cases.
- CFE e-learning is utilized throughout pre-service and ongoing training.
- Supervisors in the most-embedded programs coach their volunteers on using tools and engaging with families.

#### B. CFE/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IS INCLUDED IN THE PROGRAM'S STRATEGIC PLAN, AND IN MOST CASES, THERE IS FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR CFE.

- The words "family engagement" are present in either the mission statement or strategic plan.
- The program reports to their board on number of cases utilizing CFE and/or CFE success stories.
- The programs have reunification goals set or report to their board on placement and permanency outcomes with parents, family and fictive kin.





### THEME #3

## ALL PROGRAMS HAVE A CFE-DEDICATED POSITION WHO HAS EITHER NO CASES OR A LOW CASELOAD TO SUPERVISE.

- All programs have a CFE Lead who has only a few cases, if any, and can work with other supervisors and volunteers to support CFE practices.
- CFE Leads participate in pre-service training with volunteers.
- CFE Leads report on CFE metrics to the ED, PD and the program's board of directors, as well as Texas CASA.
- CFE Leads are often involved in family meetings to strengthen that practice.
- CFE Leads are seen as the experts and the "go-to" person for difficult cases.
- The program understands that the CFE Lead is not the only one responsible for ensuring that family engagement happens.
- The CFE Lead may be a staff or volunteer position.

**In addition to the three themes outlined above, elements of each of The 4Cs of CFE were identified within local program practice, contributing to CFE embeddedness.**



### COLLABORATE:

- The nine programs generally have strong collaboration with CPS, Single Source Continuum Contractor (SSCC) and Child Protective Investigations (CPI).
- The legal community is supportive of CFE, and training has often been completed with them.
- Most programs participate in early CFE and work with CPI (some programs are not appointed at removal).
- Information from CFE tools is generally shared with CPS/SSCC and the child's attorney.
- Team meetings are held, although they occur in many different formats.
  - CASA of El Paso, Lone Star CASA, CASA of the Coastal Bend and CASA of Tarrant County designate cases as CFE. Those cases get full team meetings, usually led by the CFE Lead. The fidelity index for collaboration is adhered to and all elements are included (authenticity scale, purpose and goals, etc.).
    - In El Paso, CPS most often designates cases for CFE, however, all cases usually get some form of a team meeting and elements of CFE are present in all cases.
    - Lone Star CASA also meets monthly to discuss CFE cases and often tools are utilized whether a case is designated CFE or not.
  - Other programs utilize CFE for all children they are appointed to, and they either have a specific team meeting (maybe led by CFE Lead, CASA supervisor or Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) facilitator) or incorporate team meetings into other existing meetings (transfer staffings, mediations or hearings). When meetings are combined, the fidelity index is not as strictly adhered to (purpose and goals, action plan and setting a family meeting date are generally included).



### CULTIVATE:

- The use of CFE tools on cases is prevalent in most of the programs whether a case is designated CFE or not.
- CFE tools are taught in pre-service training in all programs.
- CFE tools are generally entered in Optima, although all programs reported this as a challenge.

- The goal of a shared workload is not readily apparent, as CASA generally completed more CFE tools than CPS/SSCC.
- Utilizing the legal community to complete tools with parents occurs when the legal community does not want CASA to engage with parents.
- Connectedness Map, Circles of Trust, CFE Deck of Cards, Three Houses and genograms are the most-used CFE tools; but there is a good understanding of all tools.

### CONVENE:

- A strong family meeting practice is in place for these programs (exception is programs within Community-Based Care areas).
- CFE family elements are included in most family meetings (transparent agenda, family is invited, family has a voice, hopes and dreams are discussed, forward thinking/future focused, strong facilitators are present).
- Connectedness Map and Unmet Needs Statement are included in family meetings designated CFE.
- Action plans are created after family meetings that discuss connections and have actionable items to keep children connected—these are often shared in CASA court reports.
- Successfully integrating elements of CFE into all family meetings, even if not a designated CFE case, is a helpful strategy; the recommended elements to incorporate are the Connectedness Map, Unmet Needs Statement and a calendar.
- Initial and 5th month family meetings occur consistently; a third family meeting is not happening as consistently (CASA and FGDM are supportive of having three family meetings. CPS is often cited as the barrier when it comes to why third family meetings do not happen).
- Connections are usually discussed in family meetings even if an Unmet Needs Statement or a Connectedness Map are not being utilized.

### CONNECT:

- All programs understand the importance of keeping children connected while they are in foster care and work with the child's or family's network to make this happen.
- All programs understand the importance of helping parents engage a network to support them.
- Programs use court reports to record how connections are being maintained.
- There is a greater focus on connections, and more CFE work is done, when child is in a non-relative placement.
- Programs understand the value of creating calendars as a CFE tool and can grow their use; some form of an action plan is created in the programs (again mainly for children who are not placed with relatives or fictive kin).

### OPPORTUNITIES:

Opportunities were identified as part of this assessment, both for growth in the CFE work at the local program and for areas of support to the programs from Texas CASA. These are outlined below as they relate to overall CFE opportunities, or as they relate to The 4Cs of CFE.



## OVERALL:

- Resources that would help supervisors coach their volunteers on CFE practice may be needed (for example, coaching the volunteer on thinking about what to do with the information gained from a CFE tool).
- The fidelity index is generally not being utilized as a tool to reflect on how much CFE was used on a case—programs think of number of cases being served by CFE instead of the amount of CFE used on each case.

## COLLABORATE:

- There is some confusion on the confidentiality policy and what can be shared with CPS/SSCC and the attorney ad litem.
- Information from CFE tools could be shared earlier with CPS/SSCC or the child's attorney, otherwise the result may be that the connecting of children is not happening as early as it should or could be.
- There is more work to be done in some of the programs with CASA supervisors supporting the volunteers' ongoing CFE work.
- Sharing of workload between CASA and CPS/SSCC could improve.

## CULTIVATE:

- Emphasis is needed from CASA supervisors that CFE tools other than genogram should be completed with all parents on a consistent basis to help the parents identify their potential network and for further support for the child while in foster care - this is a struggle when the parent declines initially, and it's unclear how to best re-approach them about this.
- CFE tools are being completed but volunteers don't always know next steps or how to approach CPS with the information.
- Mobility mapping is an important and valuable tool that is underutilized.

## CONVENE:

- Elements of CFE can be better blended into existing family meeting practice.
- More work is needed to strengthen family meetings for youth in Permanent Managing Conservatorship (PMC).
- Opportunity exists for blended Circles of Support and family meetings for youth in PMC; most of the programs do not feel this is a strength of theirs.

## CONNECT:

- Use of a calendar of connections could be more consistent.
- Coaching on family engagement throughout the life of the case could be increased and more focused on.
- Grow the understanding of the value of connections for children, including but not limited to their parents; actively work to connect children with people other than their parents, and help partners, including CPS/SSCC, with this as well.



**CFE**