

# Meaningfully Engaging Families



Capacity Building Center for Courts | U.S. Children's Bureau

Child & Family Services Review Round 3

This spotlight is drawn from *CFSR Round 3 Report for Legal and Judicial Communities*, which summarizes states' performance in meeting safety, permanency, and well-being needs of children and families as a result of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) conducted between 2015 – 2018. The report shares results in four areas in which the legal and judicial communities play a key role: achieving timely permanency, promoting and maintaining family relationships and connections, **meaningfully engaging families (this spotlight)**, and keeping families together.

## What the Federal Reviews Assessed

The federal reviews assessed states' efforts to meaningfully engage families in child welfare proceedings using the following information:



**Performance on Well-being Outcome 1:**  
*Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs*



**Case reviews in four practice areas associated with Well-being**

**Outcome 1:** (1) Assessment of needs and service provision for children, parents, and resource parents, (2) child and family involvement in case planning, (3) caseworker visits with child, (4) caseworker visits with parents

When a family becomes involved in the child welfare system, how court and agency professionals engage the family—the child, parents, and other family members—has a bearing on case outcomes. Meaningfully engaging families the following benefits (see *CFSR Round 3 Report*, p. 16, for citations):

- ✓ **Improves safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes** by:
  - reducing incidences of children's removal from their home,
  - increasing the likelihood of family reunification when a child is removed, and
  - reducing future child maltreatment.
- ✓ **Expands placement and permanency options for children** by:
  - identifying relatives and fictive kin early in the case who can serve as placement resources, and
  - providing opportunities for relatives and fictive kin to play a supportive role for the family.
- ✓ **Empowers and encourages parents and children to engage in case planning and court hearings** by:
  - inviting them to actively participate in developing and carrying out their case plans,
  - providing them with quality legal representation in court hearings, and
  - informing them of their right to directly participate in court hearings and giving them opportunities to be heard so they feel they have been treated fairly in court.

Round 3 of the CFSRs assessed how well state child welfare agencies meaningfully engage families in child welfare proceedings. As a lawyer or judge handling child welfare cases, understanding the CFSR results in this area can help you identify states' strengths and challenges at engaging families. It can offer insights as you work to promote and support the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families in your cases.

### This spotlight highlights:

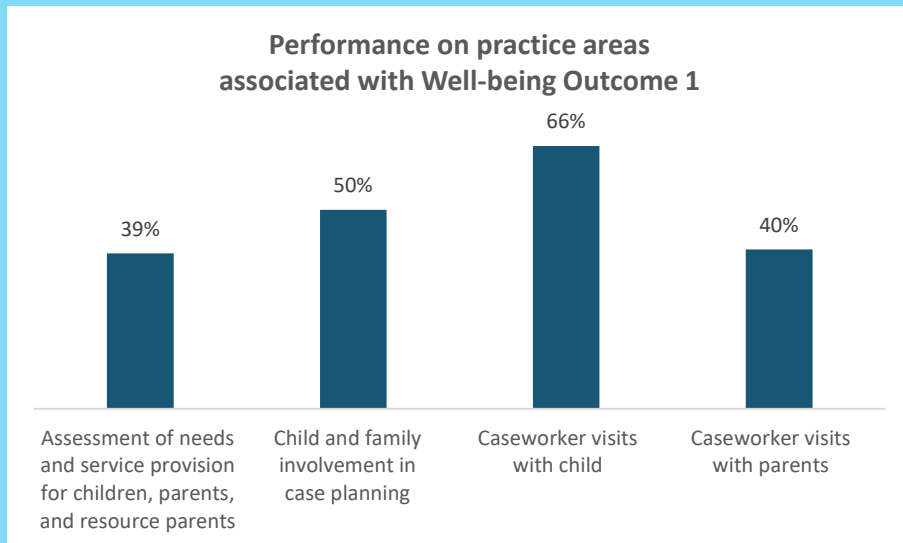
- ✓ what the federal reviews reveal about how well states meaningfully engage families in the child welfare system,
- ✓ states' practice strengths and concerns around meaningfully engaging families, and
- ✓ how the legal and judicial communities can contribute to efforts to improve family engagement in child welfare proceedings.

## What the Federal Reviews Tell Us

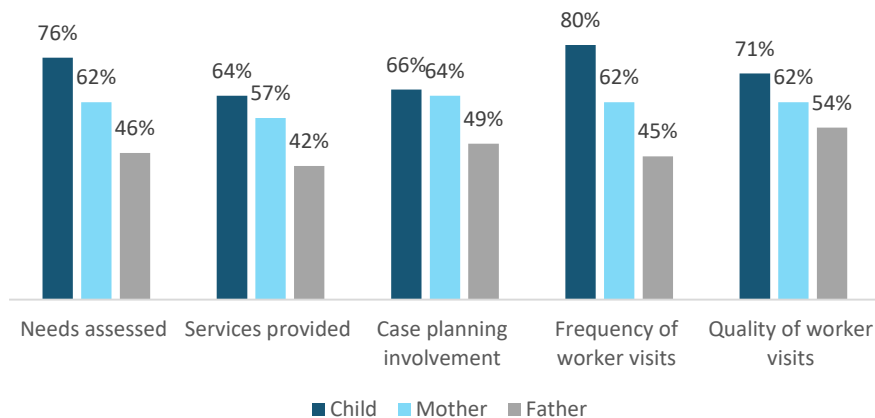
### No state performed well on all four practice areas associated with meaningfully engaging families.

The CFSRs examined child welfare system performance on Well-being Outcome 1: *Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.*

- ▶ Across the 50 states and the District of Columbia, 36% of 4,067 cases involving children in foster care and children and families receiving in-home services substantially achieved Well-Being Outcome 1.
- ▶ Case reviews across four practice areas showed performance on individual items was stronger than combined performance across the four practice areas associated with Well-Being Outcome 1.



### Percentage of strength ratings for meaningfully engaging families by family role



### More efforts are needed to engage parents, especially fathers.

The CFSRs examined performance on Well-Being Outcome 1 practice areas by family role (child, mother, father). It found that efforts to engage children were more likely to be rated a strength than efforts to engage mothers and fathers. Efforts to engage fathers were much less likely to be rated as positively as efforts to engage mothers. The diminished performance regarding efforts to work with fathers is an ongoing pattern in the CFSRs.

## What some states are doing well

- ▶ Making sure parents' needs are voiced and considered during case-planning meetings and in court hearings.
- ▶ Involving children and parents in case-planning activities.
- ▶ Providing parents support to help them follow through with their court-ordered services.

## What some states need to improve

- ▶ Avoiding ordering parents to participate in services focused on treating symptoms instead of underlying issues.
- ▶ Improving their engagement with children and families, especially fathers.
- ▶ Providing parents legal advocacy to secure appropriate services.
- ▶ Scheduling hearings at times that consider the availability of youth and parents.

## How to Get Involved



### ✓ Learn more.

Read the [full CFSR report for judicial and legal communities](#). How is your state and jurisdiction doing? What reforms are needed? What are other jurisdictions doing to address areas in need of improvement?"

Visit the [Children's Bureau's](#) and the [Capacity Building Center for Courts'](#) websites for information on the Child and Family Services Reviews.



### ✓ Seek ideas and inspiration.

See the [full CFSR report for judicial and legal communities](#) to learn what Nevada is doing to improve practice and strengthen their structures and child welfare system to better engage families.

- ▶ Nevada's child welfare agencies and the legal and judicial communities are working to improve family engagement in the state's mediation program. The program allows parents and other parties to voluntarily resolve legal matters pending before the dependency court in lieu of a contested dependency court hearing. Preliminary evaluation results show the program improves family engagement in the judicial case process, increases the likelihood of reunification, and reduces time to permanency.



### ✓ Join or initiate systems change.

Join collaborative systems reform work between courts, attorneys, and child welfare agencies already happening in your jurisdiction. Take the initiative to create and lead systems change.



### ✓ Improve your own practice.

Steps to take include:

- ▶ Appoint counsel for parents and children before the first appearance in court.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for all parties, including, youth, parents, and resource parents, to be present at hearings.
- ▶ Meaningfully engage parents and youth in the court process (e.g., call them by name, give them an opportunity to speak directly, ask them if they have questions).
- ▶ Engage in ongoing discussion of statutory requirements relating to individual families to promote informed decisions.
- ▶ State judicial findings clearly on the record.
- ▶ Prevent continuances.
- ▶ Promote stability of professionals assigned to cases.



### ✓ Get involved in your state's federal Child and Family Services Review.

Contact your local [Court Improvement Program](#) (CIP) administrator or CIP multidisciplinary task force member to learn more about the federal Child and Family Services Review and how to get involved.



This document was produced by the [Capacity Building Center for Courts](#) (CBCC) with funding from the Children's Bureau. CBCC focuses on building the capacity of court improvement programs to improve child welfare practice in the courts and legal community.