

Family Connections Oregon Demonstration Project: Executive Summary

Oregon's Department of Human Services – Child Welfare Program

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University Partner: Child Welfare Partnership, School of Social Work at Portland State
University

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OVERVIEW of FAMILY CONNECTIONS OREGON

The State of Oregon was an early implementer of family-centered practices to improve child welfare outcomes by effectively engaging families so that children avoid placement or spend less time in care. Despite this promising history, statewide availability of such practices had not yet been attained. With the support of the Family Connections Grant, Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) partnered with the Child Welfare Partnership at Portland State University’s (PSU) School of Social Work to address this need. Family Connections Oregon’s (FCO) three project goals were substantially realized:

1. Demonstrate the effectiveness of a combined Family Finding and Family Group Conference model.

The model was designed to bring family voice into meetings, and to apply culturally-responsive, strengths-based, and trauma-informed lenses to practice. The service level intervention was evaluated in three sites representing specific regional and cultural child welfare service settings.

The FCO **service-level intervention** showed promise in rural and mid-sized areas, and was particularly successful with African American families served in an urban site.

2. Install system supports for statewide sustainability. The FCO Task Force was convened to apply an approach to system change using a nationally-recognized implementation model to identify and install sustainability supports for full implementation of the combined model statewide.

The FCO **system-level intervention** (1) consulted stakeholders and engaged leadership, (2) addressed infrastructure needs, including sustainable funding, and (3) designed workforce development strategies to help Oregon bring the practice up to scale.

3. Provide ongoing dissemination to stakeholders. The system intervention was informed by the service intervention through a continuous feedback loop between the FCO Evaluation Team and decision-makers and stakeholders statewide.

Findings and success stories were shared with legislative allies and field staff, and incorporated into caseworker training and graduate-level coursework.

EVALUATION RESULTS

The FCO **process evaluation** identified key implementation drivers at the system and service levels.

Driver	System level	Service Level
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve a large number of stakeholders Develop work plans with clear goals/objectives Involve parents in leadership structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Champions at multiple levels Ongoing leadership & staff communication Address staff concerns about FCO practice Clearly support Coordinator role
Workforce development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create and fund non-case carrying full-time dedicated facilitator positions Clear job descriptions Robust training, coaching, and supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive and ongoing training/coaching Support in promoting practice among staff On-site supervision from someone familiar with practice
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2017 legislative funding package Funding for Parent Advisory Council Improve tracking in OR-Kids data system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full-time Coordinator co-located in branch, with access to data systems and case files Address barriers to Coordinator-caseworker communication

The **system-level outcome evaluation** documented the following accomplishments:

- Developed the **Continuum of Five Meetings Model** accepted by DHS leadership, and now the basis for a policy option package for the next Oregon legislative session.
- Informed the **design of Oregon’s new Title IV-E Waiver** Demonstration project planning to further test family meeting and parent advocacy practice.
- Developed and funded a state-level **Parent Advisory Council**.
- Informed the design of a **new meeting facilitator training** for child welfare staff.
- **Family meeting practice course** now a permanent offering at the School of Social Work at PSU.

The **service-level outcome evaluation** was a randomized control trial involving families with at least one child in his/her first week of an out-of-home placement and likely to stay in care for at least 60 days. One site focused on African American families only. Overall, the FCO service’s primary impact was on family engagement, with potential longer-term effects on permanency. Key findings include:

- **It was challenging to provide the complete service to all families:** 2 in 3 cases had enhanced family search and initial contact; 1 in 2 cases participated in a Family Group Conference (FGC). African American families were more likely to participate in meetings.
- **Time spent on each case varied widely by case and by site:** 29 median total service hours per case when family had a FGC; ranged up to 55 hours per case, suggesting a time-effective model.
- **Families and caseworkers generally satisfied with service:** focus on strengths improved family and caseworker attitudes; family voice valued at meetings; improved information sharing and communication; amplified for African American families with culturally-matched Coordinators.
- **No clear impact on child well-being and family support:** both FCO and Control children’s well-being improved equally; no change in family protective factors or perceptions of support.
- **Promising impact on child welfare outcomes:** FCO children spent fewer days in paid foster care than Control children (not statistically significant) and were less likely to return to foster care after trial reunification than Control children.
- **Cost was inversely related to fidelity:** More time was spent to deliver FCO services in an urban setting with African American families, which resulted in a higher meeting rate.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The FCO project provided important lessons going forward. Conclusions and recommendations are:

- **Agency leaders at all levels must have a clear vision for the role of family meetings.** The vision should be regularly communicated to staff and backed by an investment in workforce development, branch culture values alignment, and ongoing sustainability planning. It is also recommended that agency leaders invest in organized and systematic advising structures to hear from Parent Leaders with personal experience in the child welfare system.
- **Family meeting coordinators need a robust system of support.** Coordinators need ongoing training, coaching, and on-site supervision from someone familiar with the practice. It is recommended to build in expectations and time for Coordinators to spend in training, coaching, and supervision, and adequate resources for trainers, coaches and supervisors to provide support.

- **Preparation for family meetings takes time but results in more meetings.** The highest cost site spent the most time engaging and preparing families for meetings, and it also had the highest meeting rate. Investment in full-time, non-case carrying dedicated positions provides support for Coordinators to do this more intensive work.
- **Practice should involve the use of tools and assessment processes that are driven by strengths-based, culturally-responsive, and trauma-informed values.** The use of such tools gives Coordinators a concrete way to exercise values-based practices. The Strengths, Needs, and Culture Discovery assessment tool and process, for example, helped Coordinators focus their practice on family strengths, to make planning about bringing resources to family-identified needs, cultural and trauma considerations, and to prioritize family voice.
- **Family Finding, engagement, and meetings should start early in the case, but should not end within 60 days.** Family Finding efforts that prioritized reconnecting the family network, bringing the “right” people to the table to develop a network of support, and building trust helped bring families to meetings. However, conducting a FGC within 60 days proved challenging for most families. More sustained efforts, in the form of ongoing engagement and regular family meetings, could help to strengthen the link between engagement and child well-being and/or child welfare outcomes. FCO services promoted family voice and engagement.
- **Family meeting practice may be especially important for families who are not from the dominant white culture.** Overall, African American families served by African American FCO Coordinators had the greatest FCO service involvement. Coordinators spent a good deal of time building trust with the families and bringing the family’s perspective to the agency, and the families noticed a clear difference in this approach compared to business as usual. An investment in recruiting and preparing DHS branches for culturally-matched Coordinators could improve family engagement and perhaps have longer-term positive effects on child welfare disproportionality.
- **The Coordinator role is complex, especially when they are not from the dominant white culture.** A Coordinator’s role involves finding, engaging, and preparing family, and conducting meetings. It also involves developing collaborative relationships with caseworkers and other service providers, and navigating the demands of the child welfare system. Coordinators working with families where they shared a cultural heritage different from the agency culture also act as a bridge between family and agency cultures. This work can be met with resistance from caseworkers who disagree with the Coordinator’s perspective or feel uncomfortable having their decisions challenged. Leadership should help prepare staff for practice shifts and support Coordinators by publically authorizing them to be both a family advocate and a collaborative agency partner.
- **Caseworkers benefit from a Coordinator’s work.** Optimal benefit comes when caseworkers embrace the underlying values of family meeting practice, understand the purpose of the meetings and the unique role of the Coordinator, and see how it compliments their own role. Leadership should establish expectations for Coordinator-caseworker collaboration, and on-site supervisors can help develop relationships and resolve conflicts.
- **Future funded projects would benefit from** using system and sustainability interventions guided by implementation science; meaningfully incorporating consumer voice in planning and implementation; investing additional resources in training and coaching for Coordinators; an enhanced focus on bringing research findings to policy and practice; and longer projects that allow for start-up implementation and follow-up periods.