



FACTSHEETS | APRIL 2023

Court Improvement Programs: Collaboration Between Child Welfare Agencies and Legal and Judicial Communities

Child welfare agencies and legal and judicial communities have many common goals and a history of collaboration intended to improve outcomes for children and their families. The Court Improvement Program (CIP) provides Federal funds to State and Tribal courts to support efforts to improve child welfare court practices. Every State, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and seven Tribes receive CIP funding.

One of the goals of the CIP is to support collaboration between courts and the title IV-B and title IV-E child welfare agencies (Children's Bureau, 2023). This can be accomplished through different

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approaches and include additional partners, depending on the needs and resources of the State and potential strategies that emerge. This factsheet focuses on collaboration and relationship building between legal and judicial communities and child welfare agencies and provides several examples of successful and promising approaches throughout the country.

WHAT IS THE CIP?

The CIP is funded by a Federal grant under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau. The grant funds State courts to conduct assessments of their roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness in carrying out State laws regarding child welfare proceedings. (See the "[Tribal Court Improvement Program](#)" notice of funding opportunity, which closes on June 15, 2023, for information on how Tribal governments and Tribal consortia can apply for CIP funds.) It allows State courts to take actions to improve the safety, well-being, and permanency of children in foster care. This includes assisting in the implementation of State Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) resulting from the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) and title IV-E Foster Care Eligibility Reviews (Children's Bureau, 2021).

CIP collaboration includes the development of strategies among legal and judicial communities, along with child welfare agencies and other key partners, to improve outcomes for children and families throughout the State. Legal and judicial communities may include attorneys for children and youth, parents, and agencies; judges; court administrators and personnel; and mediators (Children's Bureau, 2023). Among other efforts, joint strategies may include developing or improving the quality of legal representation; improving hearing quality; developing, analyzing, or sharing court data; enhancing parental engagement in hearings; improving timeliness and quality of permanency; collaborating with Tribes; and preventing children and youth from entering care in the first place (Children's Bureau, 2022).

HOW COLLABORATION WORKS

Some State child welfare agencies and legal and judicial communities struggle to develop collaborations that will improve outcomes for children and families. Different staffing, structures, responsibilities, expectations, and communication between agencies and court systems can complicate or even stall collaborative efforts. On the other hand, these differing values and perspectives can be leveraged for better overall decision-making (Gatowski et al., 2022). Often these contrasting perspectives naturally lead to opportunities for learning and "out-of-the-box" thinking.

One major recent effort to support the CIPs, including assistance with collaborative efforts, was the development of new model court measures and a suite of tools. The Children's Bureau's Capacity Building Center for Courts, with a diverse group of more than 60 consultants and 20 Children's Bureau staff, developed the [Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance](#) (JCAMP), which focus on a set of key measures for legal and judicial performance. The accompanying suite of tools includes guidance for implementing the measures, information about [related CFSR measures](#), and [guidance](#) on forming collaborative teams to move this work forward.

The following section provides snapshots of collaborations among specific State agencies and their legal and judicial communities that have made significant progress on a variety of strategies. Some collaborations show early progress, while others already have years of positive outcomes and have been replicated throughout their States. These promising approaches may be the products of large steering committees with histories of collaboration that include members from a variety of child welfare domains, including parents and youth with lived experience, and a dynamic CIP coordinator who is devoted to programs that are shown to promote positive outcomes for children and their families. They may be the result of a small group of dedicated attorneys who have leveraged long-term relationships with child welfare administrators and developed programs that help families avoid child welfare courts altogether.

Regardless of the individual project, collaboration between child welfare agencies and the legal and judicial communities involves a two-way effort toward a common vision—a commitment to positive change by sharing the responsibility for identifying, understanding, and solving problems.

EXAMPLES OF COURT AND AGENCY COLLABORATIONS

The following examples demonstrate a range of programs that involve CIP funding and collaboration between child welfare agencies and CIPs and other legal and judicial community partners. The examples feature several States and address a variety of strategies, including collaboration at the State, local, individual, system, and service levels.

COLLABORATION AT THE CASE LEVEL: MULTIDISCIPLINARY LEGAL REPRESENTATION

A 2017 [Children's Bureau Information Memorandum](#) emphasized the importance of high-quality legal representation in helping to ensure a well-functioning child welfare system. It stressed the value of the early appointment of counsel and training and specialization for child welfare attorneys as well as the need for a multidisciplinary team approach to representation. In 2020, the Children's Bureau published a [technical bulletin](#) responding to frequently asked questions about title IV-E funding for independent legal representation for parents and children.

Considered the most effective way to deliver high-quality legal representation, multidisciplinary legal representation typically involves a team of three (an attorney, a social worker, and a parent mentor or ally) to help with court proceedings (Casey Family Programs, 2019). Some legal offices that provide multidisciplinary representation also assist parents in finding housing, education, and employment services to help them address poverty-related difficulties that may have contributed to involvement with the child welfare system.

Judges who may be interested in promoting multidisciplinary legal representation in their courtrooms can find more information in [Ensuring High-Quality Legal Representation for Parents and Children](#), from the American Bar Association's Center for Children and the Law.

Hampden County, Massachusetts

Community Legal Aid's Family Preservation Project (Pilot)

With the support of a grant from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court CIP, Community Legal Aid (CLA) is successfully piloting a project that provides legal and social services to families involved with the child welfare system whose cases were opened due to allegations of neglect that stem primarily from poverty. Participating families are supported by a three-person team that consists of a social worker, attorney, and parent advocate with lived experience. By making internal referrals to other substantive legal units at CLA, the team works together to address the sources of the families' challenges and allows the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to close cases and avoid filing a petition to remove the children from their homes.

The Family Preservation Project is an ongoing collaboration between DCF and CLA. Families are primarily referred to the project by DCF social workers who hear about the project from their colleagues and through the efforts of CLA. Members of the CLA Family Preservation Project have copresented at local DCF staff meetings with a DCF social worker who successfully referred a client to participate in the project and whose story demonstrates how the project supported the family and ensured they could avoid court proceedings and separation.

Outcomes: One hundred percent of CLA's cases (roughly 30 cases within the year) were closed with no court involvement. As of July 2022, no removals had occurred, and DCF had ended involvement with the families in the vast majority of cases. The Family Preservation Project continues to provide quality legal representation to help families avoid entering the system. The success of the pilot and an influx of funding from the American Rescue Plan Act led to four new projects housed in other legal aid programs across the State.

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Families living in poverty are far more likely to be reported to child protective services when compared to families with more resources. Child Welfare Information Gateway's issue brief [Separating Poverty From Neglect in Child Welfare](#).

COLLABORATION AT THE SYSTEM-LEVEL: FAMILY TREATMENT IN CHILD WELFARE COURTS

Family Treatment Drug Courts (FTDCs) have been successful in helping families with parents whose substance use disorder contributed to child maltreatment or neglect. Unlike traditional drug courts, FTDCs recognize the effect of substance use disorders on the entire family, not just the parent or parents with the disorder. Parents enter FTDCs with a referral from a caregiver, a parent's attorney, a guardian ad litem, or a family court judge (Capacity Building Center for States, 2020). FTDC teams may include attorneys, child welfare service providers, substance use disorder treatment agencies, and other community service providers.

Colorado Department of Human Services

Dependency and Neglect System Reform

Dependency and Neglect System Reform (DANSR) began in 2014 by integrating effective family drug court practices into the larger dependency and neglect system. As part of the cross-system collaboration at the State and local level for systems reform, the Colorado Judicial Branch, in partnership with the Department of Human Services and other multidisciplinary partners, developed a set of case management principles that were already applied broadly across Colorado's family treatment courts.

The following case management principles guide the DANSR approach to handling dependency and neglect cases with substance use or co-occurring mental health disorders:

- Provide universal screening for substance use disorders, mental health disorders, and trauma.
- Shorten the timeframe between screening and assessment for substance use disorders, mental health disorders, and trauma.
- Use multidisciplinary team staffing to enhance communication and collaboration and to integrate treatment information into case management.
- Provide timely judicial support and oversight to make the court's case management responsive to treatment needs and permanency.
- Enhance data collection and information sharing across the court, child welfare, and treatment communities.
- Enable State and local teams to coordinate strategy at the system level and participate in collaborative training.

To establish DANSR, Colorado counties brought together community partners, professionals, and people with lived experience to make system-level changes that yielded better outcomes or experiences for families. In 2019, the CIP adopted DANSR as a focus area. That arrangement, which continues today, involves the State court administration of

DANSR and implementation in more counties. The implementation of DANSR does not require continuous funding, but it continues to involve State-level attention, local-level dedication, and collaboration between the two levels. Courts are charged with gathering the right collaborators and establishing various governing structures at the local level.

Local participants were also required to collaborate in implementing the DANSR principles listed previously. Efforts involved establishing multidisciplinary teams led by dependency and neglect judges, and attorneys representing parents, children, and the child welfare agency. Beyond the six principles, child welfare representatives worked with courts and treatment professionals to improve data collection and information sharing. The Colorado Judicial Branch and Department of Human Services participated with local teams to coordinate strategy at the system level and were also involved at the local level with treatment providers. For many counties, it was the first time they brought their behavioral health professionals into the dependency and neglect space and navigated relationships with those professionals. In several jurisdictions, those relationships are still in place.

Outcomes: The individualized, local approaches to DANSR make it difficult to capture and measure outcomes in one system compared with another. Local courts have been able to track their outcomes, but no specific data at the State level are available. Anecdotal feedback includes the following:

- A judicial officer observed a significant reduction in contested hearings from the time he started to incorporate DANSR. He believes that because parents were able to be a part of treatment decisions outside of court, this engagement led to more communication between court hearings.
- After several years, a large county with the capacity to track data and with data experts on staff released information showing that parents who consented to an initial treatment screening at or immediately after the shelter hearing reached reunification with their children 3 months faster than parents who did not consent to a screening right away. This illustrates that early access has a positive correlation with reunification rates.

See the infographic ["What Is DANSR?"](#) for more information on the positive results of DANSR.

The Colorado CIP is committed to expanding the DANSR principles across the State by defining items as best practices for all courts to adopt. See the [DANSR factsheet](#) for more on this program's history and its cross-system collaboration by State and local-level partners.

Contact: [CIP Court Improvement Program](#)

COLLABORATION AT THE CASE LEVEL: ADOPTION

Adoption is primarily regulated through State laws, but multiple jurisdictions oversee the finalization of adoptions. These vary from State to State and often depend on the type of adoption. Child welfare caseworkers and the courts in which they plan for and finalize adoptions navigate many benchmarks in the process. Creating tools to streamline procedures and track differences across local courts can eliminate confusion and expedite time to permanency.

Kansas Strong for Children and Families Grant Project Adoption Tracking Tool

The Kansas Office of Judicial Administration, which is responsible for the CIP strategic plan and implementation; the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF); and the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare collaborated on a number of initiatives, including the [Adoption Tracking Tool](#) (ATT), one of several projects of the [Kansas Strong for Children and Families](#) grant. The need for the ATT stemmed from the State's round 3 CFSR rankings. The State ranked fifth worst in the country for nonpermanent foster care discharges and seventh worst in the country for time to adoption. In addition, the State had an 18-percent increase in time to adoption since 2015. The Office of Judicial Administration, DCF, and others intended for the tool to reduce those numbers through collaboration between courts and DCF case management caseworkers. According to the [Adoption Tracking Tool factsheet](#), ATT aims to do the following:

- Clarify and streamline procedures for adoption
- Improve communication between caseworkers and courts
- Expand efforts to identify barriers to timely adoption
- Increase collaborative accountability

The ATT is a communication and organizational tool submitted to the court by caseworkers and used by judges, attorneys, and caseworkers to help both the court and DCF track the adoption process after a child has been determined to be legally free for adoption. The tool identifies the many benchmarks in the adoption process. It can be used as an information tool in court hearings and as an organizational means to document barriers that impede timely adoption processes.

With the approval of a longstanding group of legal, judicial, and child welfare representatives, and input from the Kansas Supreme Court Task Force on Permanency Planning, the ATT was piloted in 2019 in six counties for 6 months. Positive data compiled from a monthly web-based survey and from focus groups and interviews led to expanding the pilot to three more counties. In July 2021, statewide implementation began.

Outcomes: The following are the outcomes of the pilots:

- ATT was rated positively for supporting milestone tracking, communication, and identifying barriers to adoption.
- ATT was rated positively for its identified objectives.
- Responses varied by role regarding collective accountability.
- Responses varied according to structure of local court reports regarding utility of the tool.
- These pilot findings demonstrate promise for ensuring all case participants have a shared understanding of the status, process, and barriers to completion.

For more information on the Adoption Tracking Tool, see [Adoption Tracking Tool: Differences Across Local Courts Impact Implementation of a Cross-Sector Communication Tool](#).

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COLLABORATION AT THE LOCAL AND AGENCY LEVELS: PROVIDING ALLIES TO IMPROVE PARENT AND CHILD ENGAGEMENT AND REUNIFICATION

Parent partner programs ensure that parents who are navigating the child welfare system do so with the guidance of a parent who has experienced the system and successfully reunified with their child or children. The programs provide parents with a peer—that is, someone who is not part of their case—who can help guide and assure them through their success that reunification is possible. Parent partner programs vary, but many offer evidence of success regarding improved outcomes for families (Casey Family Programs, 2022).

King County, Washington

Parents for Parents

The Parents for Parents (P4P) program is a peer outreach and education program provided by parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system to parents who have recently become involved with dependency courts. The purpose of the program is to promote engagement in court processes and services and encourage relationships with parent mentors to support parents in completing a clear path to reunification.

Since 2005, CIP funds have supported the start-up of each of the State's 39 P4P programs. Due to the program's success, the Washington State Legislature is funding the maintenance of the programs, and P4P is preparing to implement statewide. Currently, the King County program is housed in the King County Superior Courthouse under the umbrella organization [Children's Home Society of Washington \(CHSW\)](#), which receives funding through the State legislature and provides technical assistance, support, and quality assurance to all 17 host organizations in Washington. As communities across the country express interest in establishing new P4P programs, CHSW is available to provide technical assistance to local host organizations to ensure they have the support needed to implement all elements of P4P to achieve model fidelity.

The King County P4P consists of four elements:

- Parent ally support at dependency court hearings: Parent allies engage with parents from the first court hearing to the last, providing assistance and hope as people who have been through the system.
- Dependency 101: A 2-hour class that provides information about dependency case processes and personally introduces parents to professionals with whom they will work (social workers, judges, attorneys, court-appointed special advocates, and others) and the roles they represent.
- Dependency 201: A series of five classes to help parents who are early in the process navigate their dependency case by learning what to expect at each court hearing as well as how to have successful family visits, learn specific communication skills, practice goal setting, and receive help with accessing resources.
- Dependency 301: Support classes addressing education, employment, budgeting, child care resources, and information about family law.

See the [P4P website](#) for more information about these four elements.

The Washington Department of Social and Health Services played an important role in the initial start-up, providing funding and obtaining buy-in and ongoing collaboration from partners. As community needs and legislation changed, and as ways to support parents changed, the Washington State courts (where the P4P staff are housed) maintained ongoing collaboration with all court staff regarding P4P. Program staff often provide information sessions to new attorneys, new court-appointed special advocates, and so on. P4P staff visit the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and talk to the new social workers to bring them on board and ensure that project information stays relevant to them. P4P staff reach out to parents and encourage DCYF to refer parents with whom they are working.

“Collaborating with DCYF staff allows us to wrap our arms around parents from all directions, to make sure they’re getting what they need in whatever state they are in.”
—Shawn Powell, King County P4P coordinator

Outcomes:

- At least 17 projects have been established statewide.
- All 39 counties had P4P programs at the end of 2021.
- Sixty-five percent of all programs offer Dependency 201 classes, with plans to expand.
- In 2021, 60 percent of the parents who signed up to attend the Dependency 101 class attended it.
- Dependency 301 classes are offered in 11 percent of the programs.
- Each P4P program is a replication of an evaluated model. The P4P model achieved promising practice status by the Washington State Evidence-Based Practices Institute. The most recent evaluation was included in the CHSW application to the Federal Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse and is currently awaiting review.

For more information, visit the [P4P website](#).

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COLLABORATION AT THE SYSTEM AND AGENCY LEVELS: REDUCING INEQUITY USING DATA AND EVALUATION

An increasing number of child welfare agencies and experts are using data and evaluation to understand the root causes of disproportionality and disparate outcomes to build evidence and support equitable child welfare programs and practices. For more information on supporting racial equity in child welfare programs and practices, see the Administration for Children and Families Information Memorandum (ACF-IM-IOAS-22-01) [Equity in Action: Prioritizing and Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities](#).

Maine Justice for Children Task Force

Race and Equity Data Collection Project

The Race and Equity Data Collection Project began in March 2022 and is supported by the [Justice for Children Task Force](#), a multidisciplinary and multidepartment task force that convenes as part of the Maine CIP and represents one of the many collaborative opportunities between the CIP director and the Maine Office of Child Protective Services. A committee of six project partners (as well as subcommittees) conducted a self-assessment of their individual agencies to determine how they might pursue an interagency data-sharing assessment. The six project committee partners consisted of the following State groups:

- Judicial Branch
- Department of Health and Human Services
- Office of Child and Family Services
- Child Welfare Division
- Department of Corrections and Department of Public Safety
- Department of Education

The committee began with a self-assessment of each group's current data practices, including the following questions:

- What do we want to know?
- What kind of data about children and families do we want to collect?
- What kind of data were we already collecting?
- How are data collected?
- Who is reporting data?
- How are we storing data?

The committee considered 10 data points, including the following:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Connection with a Band, Tribe, or Nation
- Enrollment or eligibility for enrollment with a federally recognized Tribe
- Sexual orientation
- Income
- Location
- Gender
- Gender identity
- Disability

The self-assessment identified differences among the project partners in the collection of these data points. As a result, the project partners hired an outside consultant to conduct a more in-depth assessment and make recommendations for how to improve this data collection and possibly share aggregated data among the project partners. Developing a request for proposal to hire an outside consultant presented major points of collaboration, including agreement on the scope of the project and determining what the project partners wanted to learn and what outcomes they hoped the project would achieve. With a consultant in place, the committee oversees the consultant's work, which includes a national study of best practices of data collection and interagency data sharing.

Outcomes: The project has not yet yielded formal outcomes, although results from two final reports may be available in 2023. Meanwhile, the team recognizes that the more they know about the populations they serve, the better they can serve them, especially those involved in multiple systems. Moreover, the task force acknowledges that the collection and sharing of aggregated data among the project partners is vital to informing policy decisions, measuring fairness and equity, and providing the courts and agencies that interface with the child welfare system with data about the populations they serve.

Contact: [Maine Justice for Children Task Force](#)

CONCLUSION

This factsheet highlights current and developing collaborations that have shown success or promising approaches to helping children and families navigate the court systems in their States or avoid those systems altogether. These successes have been possible through the help of partnerships supported by CIP funding, attorneys and other court representatives, social workers, and other child welfare professionals who value collaboration and use it to support effective strategies in their States.

The strategies addressed in this factsheet are not the results of one judge or one child welfare administrator. These program examples are the result of collaborations built on years of growing community and professional relationships based on deep desires to improve opportunities for children and families to thrive. Many programs involve team members with diverse voices and lived expertise. All who contributed to this factsheet believe in the importance of collaborative processes and that collaboration is key to their success and improved outcomes.

RESOURCES

Explore these resources to better understand how collaboration between agencies and CIPs can help prevent children and families from entering the child welfare system or help them navigate the system in ways that can improve child outcomes and reunify families sooner and with support to keep families together.

- [Agencies and Courts: Putting Families Front and Center Activity and Discussion Guide](#) (Capacity Building Center for Courts)
- [Court Improvement Program](#) (Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- [Court Improvement Program](#) (Office of Children and Families in the Courts, Pennsylvania)
- [Court Improvement Program \(CIP\) Talks](#) (Capacity Building Center for Courts)
- [Creating and Sustaining Cross-System Collaboration to Support Families in Child Welfare With Co-Occurring Issues: An Administrator's Handbook](#) (Capacity Building Center for States)
- [How Agencies and Courts Improve Outcomes Together](#) (CapLearn; free registration required)
- [Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance \(JCAMP\) Volume I: Measures](#) (Capacity Building Center for Courts)
- [Judicial, Court, and Attorney Measures of Performance \(JCAMP\) Volume II: Implementation Guide](#) (Capacity Building Center for Courts)
- ["Louisiana: A Program Improvement Plan Made Successful Through Agency and Court Collaboration"](#) (*Children's Bureau Express*, Vol. 20, No. 7)
- ["On Legal Representation"](#) (*Children's Bureau Express*, Vol. 19, No. 10)
- ["Partnering With the Courts: Episode 4"](#) (Capacity Building Center for States)

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