

Ensuring Family Voice While Navigating Multiple Systems:

The family team meeting strategy in supportive housing

Challenge

Families facing severe housing instability who are also involved with the child protection system are likely already involved in multiple public systems or become involved as they seek to achieve their personal goals and meet the requirements of their child protection case plans. Their needs are complicated, requiring wide ranging information and practice knowledge and one worker, no matter how skilled, cannot know and do everything. The work with families often requires multiple professionals and others, including the family's own natural support network, to address family needs. At the same time, family trauma histories and experiences with institutional responses to trauma and needs often leave family members wary of systems and service providers (and sometimes even their own family members), feeling powerless and reluctant to engage.

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Importance

Supportive housing is not a time-limited intervention. Rather, it is a long-term investment with families. In addition, a fundamental principle of supportive housing is a commitment to empowering clients by ensuring that their voices are heard and that they participate in decision making processes. Engaging with families, case managers are called on to multi-task: assist families in achieving housing stability, navigate multiple systems to coordinate services, connect family members to community resources and re-engage family and other natural support networks that might have been fractured over time. Helping a family build – or rebuild – a supportive team of professionals and informal relationships alike can be a critical strategy for family supportive housing. It is a strategy that, when done well, can give both case managers and families a wide circle of effective support, a team upon which to rely over time.

A component of effective teaming with families is the Family Team Meeting (FTM).¹ Within the child protection agencies, FTMs *“strive to maximize a family’s strengths. The basic assumptions that all families can harness their strengths and capabilities to enter into partnership with both informal (relatives, friends) and formal (agencies, service providers, courts) in order to make decisions that protect and nurture their children.”*²

Born out of the communal decision making traditions of aboriginal communities in New Zealand as an approach to addressing youth involvement in the juvenile justice system, FTMs have grown from a “boutique” practice to standard operating procedure in child protection agencies and mental health systems of care across the country. As promising as FTMs may be in many systems, an examination of the practice has taught us that *successful family teaming is not a single event but a process that is dependent on authentic engagement and partnership with the family.* We now have the opportunity to further our learning by examining FTMs used in the context of family supportive housing.

Three of the demonstration sites are using a well-defined family teaming strategy: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, San Francisco and the State of Connecticut. All three sites built on the family

¹ A “Family team” meeting as considered in this field note is used interchangeably with other names used in the field for the same practice of teaming with the family to achieve family goals. Different names for the same fundamental process include Family Team Decision Making, Child and Family Team, Family Team conference.

² See Bringing Families to the Table, p1, 2002, found at <http://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/child-welfare-misc/bringing-families-to-the-table-a-comparative-guide-to-family-meetings-in-child-welfare.pdf>

team meeting practice established by their partnering child protection agency. Supportive housing staff at these three sites has embraced the practice of teaming with families as an essential component of the strength-based, trauma-informed approach of Housing First and have created their own, independent capacity to hold family-involved team meetings for addressing family service needs.

What We Are Learning

- **Families must be present, prepared and supported.**

Simply stated, meetings held without the family present are not family team meetings. To involve families, meetings are scheduled at times when family members can be present. But simply having the family present is not sufficient. Active efforts must be made to prepare and involve family members for where the meeting will be held and what will take place at the meeting. The Cedar Rapids practice guide acknowledges that an FTM may be “a foreign or even frightening concept for families, especially for women who have a history of trauma”.

Practice in Cedar Rapids, Connecticut and San Francisco includes preparing families for and supporting families during the meeting. Over time, this preparation and support pay off as families feel more empowered and learn to lead their own meetings (in the presence of and with the support of a trained facilitator), thus taking responsibility for discussing and getting their needs met and holding both themselves and other team members accountable for the content and decisions made at meetings.

Preparation Tips

Cedar Rapids

- *arrange to have the family arrive 10-15 minutes early to see the room and select their position at the table*
- *be on alert for signs of distress and take breaks, as needed, to check with the family*

San Francisco

“if the client has already expressed their worries to me or our case managers then we start with the worries, try to have them always feel better when they leave the meeting”

Connecticut

“client feels welcomed, supported by a team working for them”

In Connecticut, supportive housing case managers report seeing a difference in parent response to family team meetings over time – in the beginning parents act like this is “just another program” but by three months, they “feel more control”.

Family preparation includes:

- discussing meeting ground rules with the family, asking what rules they want established to protect them from additional hurt and ensure everyone’s voice is heard;
- helping families identify their strengths, name their concerns, consider potential barriers to success and think about the goals they want to achieve and the help they may need and what they need to ask of the assembled team;
- identifying who the family wants to be present at the meeting – who do they consider to be part of their team.

In Connecticut, preparation also includes making an effort to have the child(ren) represented at the meeting. Either they attend or they are asked to write a letter that can be shared at the meeting. Children are often asked to write about “your mom’s greatest strength” or “what would a new home mean for you.” In Cedar Rapids, the state requires that children age 14 years or older be present at the meetings to participate in the decision making and planning.

Supporting the family during the meeting can start with choosing the meeting location. Connecticut and San Francisco conduct the meeting in family homes, once a family has moved in. When family homes may be too small for family team meetings and are held in an office or court space, Cedar Rapids makes sure there are snacks for the team since they have found that bringing people together with food helps to set a positive tone for the meeting.

How the meeting is facilitated is also critical to establishing a welcoming and safe space for families. Ground rules are created or added to those enumerated by the family during the preparation phase. One site’s FTM expert noted, “if not done correctly, meetings can become negative”. If any participant acts negatively or disrespectfully, the ground rules help the facilitator re-direct that participant. Cedar Rapids and Connecticut supportive housing

case managers make a point of uplifting family strengths in the meeting as “clients don’t always recognize their own strengths”. Cedar Rapids case managers also prompt parents to talk about “what they want to accomplish, what they are struggling with”.

Both formal and informal team members who are present at the meeting offer support. For example, the Iowa Department of Human Services makes available to families Parent Partners (individuals who have had their children removed, then reunified and trained to help other parents). In their supportive role, Parent Partners attend FTMs and are available to step out of the meeting with parents should the parents need particular support and encouragement when struggling with difficult issues.

- **Successful meetings don’t just happen: the importance of protocols, training and coaching**

Essential Agenda Items

- Purpose of meeting
- Ground rules
- Confidentiality
- Family strengths
- Family worries
- Team concerns
- Family Goals/Service Plan
- Plan of Action

Essential Tools

- Portable Flip chart/white board
- Markers

FTMs are shaped by pre-meeting worksheets and written guidance for supportive housing case managers to help family members become comfortable with the process of sharing their strengths and concerns as well as the agendas followed during the meeting. Connecticut uses a worksheet before the meeting to prepare the family for what to expect and for developing service plan goals. Connecticut and Cedar Rapids case managers work with families before the first meeting to review the family service plan domains and goals they have in each domain. As a result, family members may enter the first meeting with a partially completed service plan based on their input. The service plan is then used to guide the discussion at the FTM. In subsequent FTMs families use the plan they helped to develop to guide the discussions of what has been accomplished, what they want to accomplish and where they are

struggling to meet goals.

Cedar Rapids and Connecticut also use an agenda that focuses on recognizing family strengths at the beginning of the meetings and staying solution-focused. In San Francisco, families direct the flow and sometimes choose to begin the session by addressing their worries; the facilitator tries to focus on what the family is doing and how other team members can support them. All three sites encourage parents to say what they need and

how the other team members can help. In Cedar Rapids and Connecticut, the team leaves with action steps for how the family can be supported to implement the service plan

In San Francisco, service providers sometimes meet before the family joins in. This is done to ensure that the providers have a shared understanding of the family and are “on the same page” so as not to confuse or give conflicting directions to families.

Checklists, worksheets and agendas help facilitators and team members – family and professionals alike – stay focused. Used properly, checklists can also add to the fidelity of the meeting, or the extent to which it adheres to commonly established guidelines. But these are only helpful tools. Facilitators need to have the skills to modify the agenda as necessary to respond to family needs and the dynamics in the room. Initially, all supportive housing case managers in each of the three sites were trained by the child welfare agencies or their training partners at the start of the federal demonstration’s implementation. Since initial training, supportive housing service providers in Connecticut are conducting their own training and coaching of new staff. In Cedar Rapids, all newly hired case managers attend the state-required training delivered by a state-designated trainer. Each person trained as an FTM facilitator receives a certification and facilitator number from the Iowa Department of Human Services.

The “third leg” of ensuring family team meetings are authentic and provide a safe environment for families is supervision and coaching. In Connecticut, the supportive housing supervisor monitors the quality of family team meetings through individual and group supervision. The supervisor meets with individual case managers during the preparation phase and reviews how the case manager is preparing the family. The supervisor also often observes and participates in family team meetings, offering individual feedback and coaching to case managers. In group supervision, she may focus on a recent family team meeting as a case study for training staff. The Iowa Department of Human Services requires that individuals who facilitate family team meetings for families with open child welfare cases be initially certified and then re-certified every two years. A senior case manager in Cedar Rapids oversees the training and certification process, making sure everyone has fulfilled certification requirements and maintains certification. Cedar Rapids also has an FTM satisfaction survey that asks the family participants about their FTM experience.

- **Efforts to identify and engage informal supports are continuous and aimed at expanding the family’s team**

Family teams should include friends, family members and caring community associates as well as professionals. Teams are not a sustainable support if they rely solely on professional members such as agency workers. When families are successful in having their child welfare case closed, the child welfare caseworker is no longer part of the team. Likewise, once a parent achieves a certain degree of mental health, the therapist may no longer be part of the team. But the family still needs healthy social connections that will help them sustain the gains they have made. Thus, there is a need to explore with families from the very beginning and continuously who is and could be part of their on-going support system. When families first enter supportive housing it may be difficult to identify and engage members of the family’s own support network. They have often “burned bridges” with family members or they “don’t have sober friends”. Cedar Rapids family team experts note that families often do not want to burden friends and relatives who would have to make special arrangements at work in order to attend the meeting. In these circumstances, FTM experts at the sites note that case managers model for parents how to advocate for themselves and request family members and friends attend the meetings. This may require families to think about other days and times that may be more accessible for family participation and also encourages professional members of the team to work outside traditional office hours to meet the needs of the family. Families may not get informal supports to the table right away but eventually family participation picks up.

Connecticut questions used to identify informal supports:

- Who baby sits for you?
- Who gives you rides?
- Who has helped you in the past?
- Who helps others in your family?

The Connecticut team believes that acknowledging the importance of significant others and inviting them to meetings early is important, even if they do not initially attend the meetings. The invitation helps these informal supports feel comfortable with other interactions such as home visits where they may be present. While there is limited formal tracking of the success of engaging family and friends at meetings in any of the sites³, one San

³ It is important to note that the University of Connecticut is conducting an engagement study that may lead to further insights about the degree to which family team meetings provide opportunities for family voices to be heard and active roles in case planning. It will also examine the relationship between the nature of the meetings and family outcomes.

Francisco observer believes informal supports are present for about half of the families. And, families report the value of having informal supports present to support them.

- **Regular meetings provide team accountability but interim follow-up is essential**

To help a family accomplish its stated goals, team members need to hold each other accountable. Regular team meetings provide an opportunity for team members to reflect on progress, identify what has been accomplished and what have been the challenges. All three sites have established schedules for convening the meetings, San Francisco convenes meetings monthly, and Cedar Rapids follows a monthly schedule initially, but tapers to less frequency after the first four months of service if the family is doing well. Connecticut holds meetings every 90 days. Team members can also request a meeting whenever they have a pressing need that requires team input.

Actions resulting from the meeting may be a revised plan, changed services or a revised set of goals. The results are recorded and shared with all team members. One San Francisco family team meeting expert noted that the meetings keep providers accountable because it reinforces what they were going to do, as well as what the client said they would do. Cedar Rapids requires the case manager to distribute the meeting notes within a certain time frame. Connecticut encourages clients to advocate for themselves and to express their concerns in the meetings; their self-advocacy has sometimes taken other team members by surprise. Some families in San Francisco report looking forward to the meetings and asking providers “what can you do for me?”

Meetings do not eliminate the need for constant follow up to avoid things from “falling through the cracks”. Cedar Rapids and Connecticut conducts frequent home visits between meetings during which the supportive housing case managers review goals and progress, and acknowledge family achievements and struggles.

- **The intersection with the child welfare decision making and case planning process varies**

Although this federal demonstration is specifically designed to engage and support families involved with child welfare systems, the supportive housing providers are often required to be “system-neutral” as they build a trusting relationship with families. If supportive housing

service staff are viewed by families as an extension of the child welfare system (or any other system), families may not be willing to share or disclose information that could be essential to effective services delivery. In order to maintain neutral non-threatening relationships with families, it is critical that “protective” job functions remain in the child welfare system. Using the teaming approach allows supportive housing staff to communicate and coordinate with child protective staff as needed, while maintaining an appropriate separation of roles and responsibilities.

Currently in Connecticut, FTMs are required by the Department of Children and Families Services (DCFS), the child protection agency, when a child is removed from their home or a foster care placement change is being considered. However DCFS continues to build a process that will include a blend of small group conversations/meetings as well as large group meetings throughout the life of a case.⁴ For families in supportive housing, a child welfare representative attends the first family team meeting organized by the Connecticut supportive housing case manager. Child welfare staff is always invited to subsequent quarterly meetings, but they do not always attend depending on the demands of their caseloads. It is also possible that child welfare may convene a meeting without formally inviting the supportive housing case manager, but supportive housing staff can attend at the invitation of the family.

The family team that is convened in Cedar Rapids by a supportive housing service coordinator does serve as the required Family Team Decision Making (FTDM) meeting for the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) and the DHS case manager is required to attend as are the attorneys for the parents and children. The meeting results are given to all participants and they become part of the report that is submitted to court. Thus, the notes become a part of the official legal record of the family.

In San Francisco, both supportive housing case managers and child welfare staff convene meetings. While child welfare often attends the meetings convened by the supportive housing case managers, they do on occasion hold their own meetings, to which the parent and child attorneys are invited.

⁴ Connecticut’s Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) continues to build a teaming continuum that ensures that child and family voice is heard throughout every stage of the child welfare process. Teaming is DCFS’s family engagement strategy to ensure case plans are strength based and responsive to each family’s unique needs and values. DCFS believes this collaborative approach that fully engages families in developing and identifying solutions will lead to better outcomes for children and families.

What More Can Be Done

Family supportive housing service providers have an opportunity to further refine the family team meeting practice used by other systems and understand its contribution to families achieving the core supportive housing outcomes,⁵ service integration and system change.

Continuous quality improvement and evaluation efforts in the demonstration sites should consider:

- Tracking success of expanding family teams by engaging a family's own informal supports and those to whom they can be connected in the community.
- Documenting and describing
 - Experiences of families: how the family team meeting process helps to support them and give them voice in decision-making and how the process could be improved.
 - Challenges and strategies to ensuring service providing team members attend regular meetings given multiple demands on them and the implications for partnership agreements;
 - Methods for streamlining meetings and consolidating service plans across multiple systems employing FTMs such that families involved with multiple systems are not burdened by having to attend multiple meetings or having multiple plans requiring simultaneous tasks for the family members, or competing service goals.
- Evaluating the role of teaming in helping families achieve other core supportive housing outcomes: staying housed, improving their physical and mental health, and increasing their income and employment.

⁵ According to the Dimensions of Quality for Supportive Housing, the core positive outcomes are: tenants stay housed, have social and community connections, are satisfied with the services and housing, improve physical and mental health, and improve their income and employment. See the Dimensions of Quality guidebook at http://www.csh.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/CSH_Dimensions_of_Quality_Supportive_Housing_guidebook.pdf

About the Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center

The [Child Welfare and Supportive Housing Resource Center](#) provides technical assistance to the five sites taking part in *Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System*. This federal initiative is based on successful efforts, such as [Keeping Families Together](#), supportive housing designed to meet the needs of families experiencing housing instability and involved with the child welfare system.

Led by [CSH](#) and the [Center for the Study of Social Policy \(CSSP\)](#), the Resource Center provides one-on-one expertise and coordinates tailored assistance for each site. In addition, the Resource Center encourages and supports peer-learning, building on local capacity and sharing experiences of people working in the field.

These periodic notes from the field are designed to explore and promote ideas, and share snapshots, with innovative leaders in the public and private sectors involved with the delivery of services to children and families.