

WELCOME 2 REALITY



FACES OF FATHERHOOD LISTENING SESSION REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Introduction

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC received an inquiry from the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) Subcommittee in July 2021 to address issues related to increasing fatherhood engagement with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS) in the state of Maine. The goal was to hold a listening forum comprised of fathers who were involved with DHHS to explore what their experience was like working with the agency and to identify areas in which engagement could be improved.



*“A truly rich man is one whose children run into his arms when his hands are empty”
-Ziad K, Abdelnour*

Planning & Preparation Phase

On October 4, 2021, after several preliminary meetings, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC sent a proposal indicating:

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC will assist the Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP) by guiding the committee through planning, organizing, and developing a process that will lead to strengthening relationships and enhancing existing fatherhood engagement.

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC agreed to provide are as followed:

Phase 1: Information Gathering and Project Design

Phase 2: Strategy Development and Implementation

Phase 3: Project Summary and Recommendation

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC participated in several virtual meetings with the (MCWAP) committee members from November 2021 through February 2022, solidifying a plan of action to ensure the goals would be met. On December 12, 2022, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC received the MCWAP 2021, Annual Report to review which highlighted OCFS father-focused practices for 2020-2024, along with other fatherhood engagement recommendations. This report provided Welcome 2 Reality, LLC with further insight as to the goals of DHHS regarding fatherhood engagement and inclusion.

Based on several factors; it was determined, timeframes previously discussed would not provide the team and Welcome 2 Reality, LLC adequate time to achieve outcomes initially identified. As a result, a no cost extension of the proposed contract was granted.

In the following weeks Saige Weeks, Deputy Director of Family Enrichment Service of Penquis CAP joined the team and was identified as a team member and co-facilitator for the panel discussion.

Shortly thereafter, the group met minimally once a month to finalize recruitment language & strategies, ground rules for participants, questions for participants, promotional flyers, releases, and submission timeframes of the final report.

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC later provided templates for recruitment language, ground rules, releases, questions for participants, and a promotional flyer.

After multiple meetings and project discussions, the team identified four potential dates for the panel discussions to occur over a period of 4-6 weeks beginning April 2022. The group agreed to the following:

- The forums would be two hours in length
- The forums would be held at various times to accommodate potential panelist
- The panel would not exceed 10 fathers (7 was the preferable number of participants)
- All sessions would be recorded (specifically for team members of Welcome 2 Reality, LLC to review for the purposes of provided suggestions and recommendations)
- Participants could opt out if they felt uncomfortable being recorded
- All participants would receive a \$100.00 Amazon gift card for their participation

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC recommended pre-screening each participant prior to the forum to increase the fluidity of the session, and to gain a better sense of their individual backgrounds and experiences working with DHHS.

On January 9, 2022, the promotional documents were approved and were disseminated by MCWAP committee members. Committee members shared the recruitment material for the event with staff, community providers and other constituents.

Transitioning from the planning phase of this project the date for the first session was slated for February 15, 2022. Unfortunately, there were barriers in the recruitment of fathers. As of February 10, 2022, of the 29 men who initially responded to the Faces of Fatherhood: Listening Forum Interest Form, only one provider inquired who wanted to sit in on the session.



Promotion/Recruitment

As a result of low interest, the group reconvened and decided expand recruitment and promotional efforts by utilizing social media through the Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, Inc. (AFFM), Maine Child Welfare Advisory Panel (MCWAP), Department of Health and Human Service (DHHS), Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), and by spreading the message internally and externally.

- AFFM selectively shared it among resource family mentors and facilitators and on social media
- The Opportunity Alliance shared it internally
- The Children's Trust shared it with the Prevention Councils and Maine Families program managers
- OCFS disseminated the information to all child welfare staff encouraging them to share with fathers

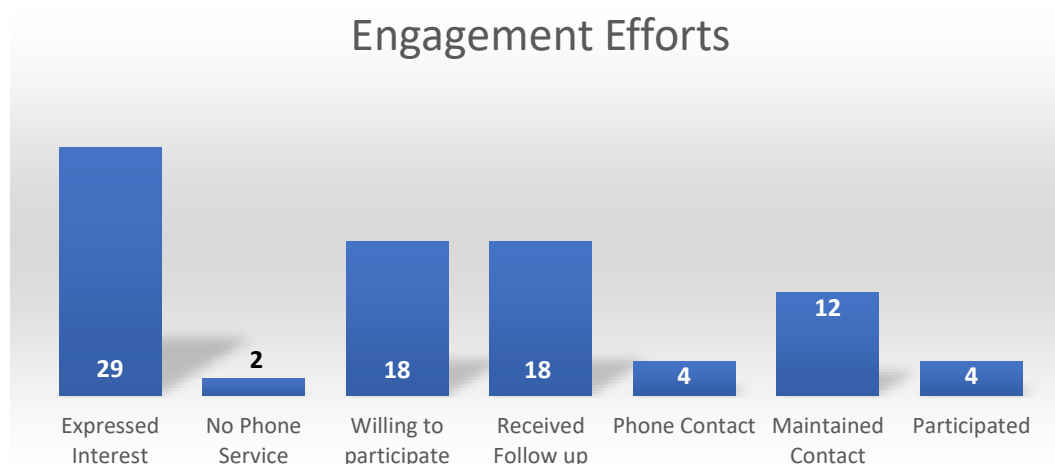
These efforts increased the pool of participants from 0 to 11 potential fathers. By March 23, 2022, the number of fathers increased to 18 interested fathers. As a result of the increased interest the MCWAP subcommittee identified the first two dates of four sessions: April 19, 2022, at noon and April 20, 2022, in the evening.

In preparation for the listening forum, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC and Saige Weeks of Family Enrichment Service of Penquis CAP, reached out to all interested panelists via phone calls and emails.



Listening Forum Engagement Efforts

The April 19th Session



All 18 identified fathers who express interest at a minimum, received a phone call. We were able to have direct phone contact with three of the fathers. All three of these men appeared to be hesitant to talk and requested to continue the discussion later but did agree to participate.

*(*Please note: Welcome 2 Reality, LLC was able to have a follow up brief conversation with these men, but they all were working and had limited time to speak. They were all informed they would receive the ground rules, releases, and questions via email prior to the forum.)*

Those who did not answer our calls were left a detailed voice message explaining the role and purpose of the forum, their expectations as a participant, the need for their feedback to improve engagement of all fathers involved in Maine Child Welfare and contact info for further discussion and clarification. Each of these fathers received 2-3 follow calls, text, or emails from Welcome 2 Reality, LLC which yielded minimal response via text. Two of the father's phone numbers were no longer in service.

Saige Weeks, of Family Enrichment Service of Penquis CAP also reached out to all 18 fathers via email and received approximately six replies from the 18 identified fathers who said they were willing to participate in the April 19th session.

In total, between Saige Weeks and Welcome 2 Reality, LLC, there were approximately 10-12 fathers who confirmed their willingness to participate. Unfortunately, only four fathers participated in the April 19th session. By April 21, 2022, \$100.00 gift cards were sent to each participant.

On April 29, 2022, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC and Saige Weeks followed up with the remaining fathers who previously expressed interested in participating in the forum but were not present for the April 19th session.

Welcome 2 Reality, LLC initiated several calls, text, and emails to illicit a conversation with the fathers prior to the next session, but none of the fathers initially responded back. After numerous attempts, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC was able to talk to a small number of fathers who verbally confirmed, but once again, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC was only able to do limited prep work prior to the next scheduled session.

On June 3, 2022, the committee agreed to forgo the prep process and move forward with the next session as this became a barrier to moving forward. The committee agreed to June 23, 2022, as the date for a second session. Welcome 2 Reality, LLC continued to reach out to the fathers via email, providing them with an overview of the expectations, contact information, ground rules, releases, and the questions they would be asked as participants. As a result of this effort, three fathers confirmed their willingness to attend.

On June 13, 2022, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC and Travis Bryant of Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine, Inc. (AFFM) made a joint effort to call the remaining fathers who responded to the interest survey. The reason for the joint call was to see if these fathers would respond or answer a call from a Maine phone number versus a Connecticut area code. There was approximately a 20% success rate in getting a live person. Once again detailed messages were left with all the fathers who did not answer, and they were asked to confirm if they got the message and planned to be in attendance.

On June 15 and June 21, 2022, Welcome 2 Reality, LLC left messages for the fathers via phone and email to inform them that Welcome 2 Reality, LLC was available to answer any of their questions or concerns about the forum.

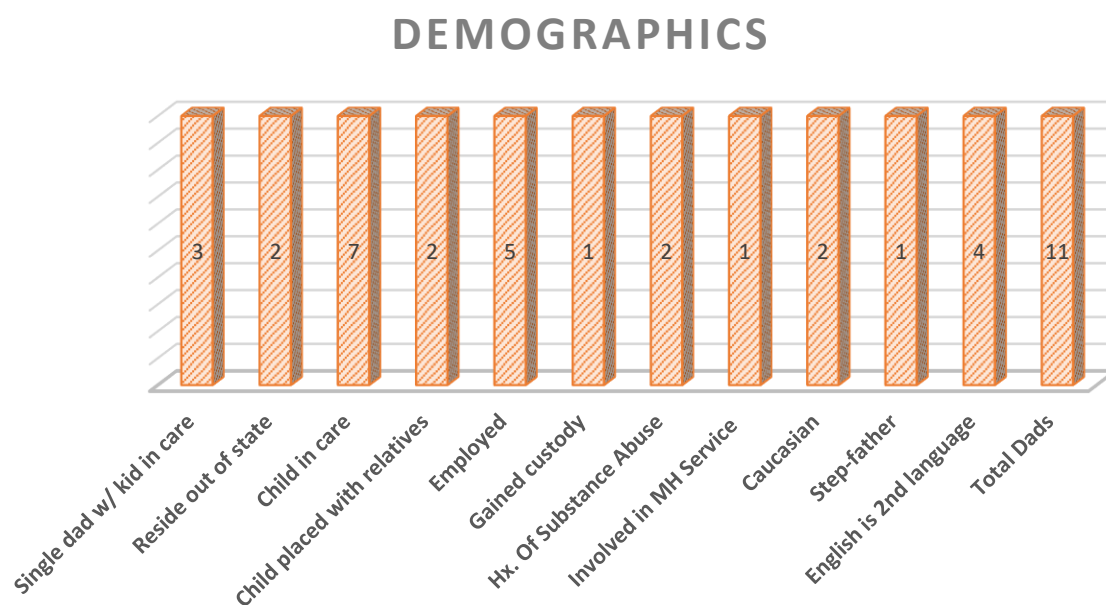
On June 23, 2022, the second listening panel session was held, and seven fathers participated. By June 28, 2022, \$100.00 gift cards were sent to each participant.

Based on the lack of responses from the remining fathers who completed the interest survey, it was decided the attempt of hosting two additional sessions was no longer warranted.

Participant Demographics

There was a total of eleven fathers who participated in both sessions. Four fathers attended the first session, and seven fathers attended the second session. We were unable to determine the racial makeup of the fathers as many of them did not turn on their camera.

Due to the inability to meet with the fathers in advance and do the prep inquiries we were unable to clarify what brought them to the Department's attention. The below graph describes what the fathers shared regarding their current circumstances:



**All 3 single fathers were widowers, and their children were currently in care at the time of the forum. It must also be noted that the fathers who spoke English as a 2nd language, it was difficult to transcribe their comments.*

Session Feedback

The men in both sessions (April 19, 2022, and June 23, 2022) were asked for feedback in the following areas:



1. What was communication like (with the agency)?
2. Were you involved in the planning of your case?
3. What was your visitation experience with your children like?
4. Were appropriate services put in place to assist you and your children?
5. What was your interactions like with the agencies?
6. Did you feel heard?
7. What practices could improve engagement of fathers?

Their responses have been compiled and outlined below: (some are direct responses, and other are compiled into themes we were able to identify) It should also be noted that due to time constraints all participants were not able to answer every question.

Initial Contact

Initial Contact with the Department of Health and Human Services

There were four fathers who were upset because DHHS spoke to their child prior to them being notified DHHS was involved. As a result, one father only communicated through his attorney. Because DHHS spoke his child alone and he lost all trust in the system. Another father reported the agency contacted him three days after talking to his child. There were three fathers who stated they were notified by the mother of his child.

One father who resided out of state said he found out his children were involved with CPS for through his ex-girlfriend and was concerned about the picture she may have painted of him.

One father who was well known within the community said he was the first point of contact by (DHHS). He believes his notoriety in the community was a factor in why he was the initial point of contact. He did state if the agency had talked to his child without his permission he would have been upset.

The last father who responded to this question said DHHS spoke to him and his spouse at the same time.

**It should be noted, despite the timeframe of notification, all the participants were informed in person not by a letter.*

“After finding out DHHS spoke to my child without my knowledge or permission I felt portrayed, disrespected and lost trust in the system; a child could say anything”

-Listening Forum Father



DHHS-OCFS Communication

How To Improve Agency Communication?

The participants agreed that the first point of contact should be with the parent. Four out of the eleven participants reported having sporadic and inconsistent contact with DHHS, for example, waiting as much as 2-3 weeks for email responses. Some claimed receiving returned calls varied from a few days to a week. One father reported these timeframes were also applicable to his attorney response and providers.

Another father suggested increased face to face contact with the social worker could improve communication. He reported *"communication started out on the wrong foot as it went from face-to-face contact to communication via letters."* He continued, *"when possible, all communication should be by phone or in person."* Most of the fathers stated they prefer face-to-face contact.

Equally there were few positive statements regarding DHHS' engagement and responsiveness:

- Two fathers stated they were well informed on the status of their case.
- Another father stated, *"despite the slow response time of the agency, which was frustrating, I feel my needs were always met"*
- One father said DHHS was always responsive to him until he got custody of his child, but when he needed support to get his child's name changed, they became were less responsive and he had to that on his own.

Prior Notice for Meetings: regarding both DHHS and providers participates said the timeframe ranged from a day to a week's notice.



"I felt like I was the one always reaching out to the worker, I think if we had more face-to-face contact we could have gotten a better feel for each other"

-Listening Forum Father

Involvement in Case Planning

When asked about the case planning process and how often they were involved in that process, one father said he was not aware of what case plans, or the case plan process was. After others shared their case plan or family meeting experience, he said that communication from the Department would have been helpful as he was not sure what the agency expected him from him.

One of the other fathers shared that he wished he could have been more involved in the case planning process. Another father reported most of his contact came via letter and does not recall being involved in the case planning process at all.

One father, who on several occasions, stressed how his work schedule impacted his ability to attend meetings, particularly without being given enough notice. He said all fathers should have a chance to be more involved, but feels the process was a waste of time, but he wants his child home.

Another father felt the meetings were too personal and ineffective. He also did not like that everything he said was written down.

One father reported that as a stepfather who was not the perpetrator, he felt he was pulled into the planning process when the agency needed him to fill in the gaps about mom.

Three of the eleven fathers reported having a good case planning experience.

Support and Attendance at Family Meeting

- One dad stated his mother attended the meeting and felt that was helpful for him
- Two fathers reported no one attended to support them
- One father stated sometimes the mother of his child would “step into meetings when he could not be there”

Inclusion in Other Meetings (i.e., medical, dental, school, etc.)

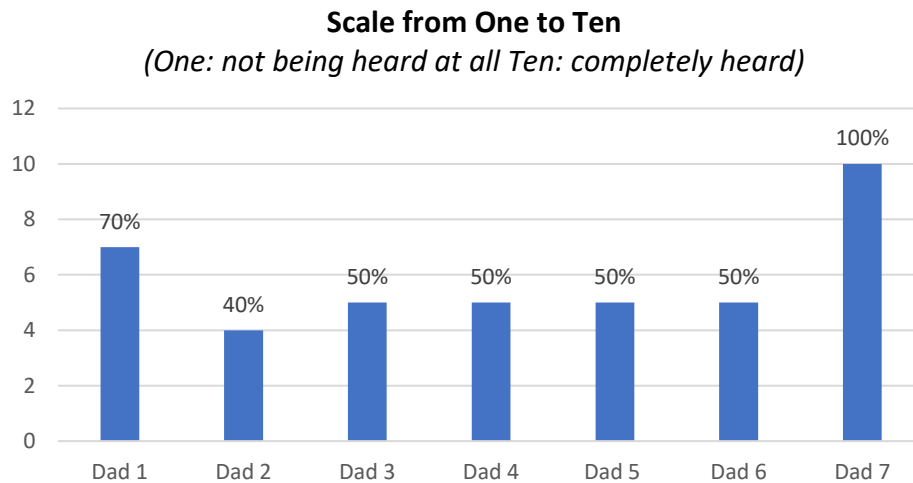
- One father reported when he was in Maine he was included in other meetings because he felt his lawyer pushed for it
- One father stated he did not feel there was an option for the meetings to be at a different time, so it impacted his ability to attend other meetings

*** Only 2 fathers answered this question

“After attending the review, I became more involved in the planning process moving forward.”

-Listening Panel Father

Did You Feel Heard



Rationale for ratings by fathers:

- Was only taken seriously/heard because of his attorneys
- DHHS set the parameters on which way the case would go
- First time involved with the system and had no advocate to fight the government
- Just hoped the agency made the right decision because he didn't know how the system operates.

During the April 19th session, one father felt the tone of his voice impacted if he was heard or not. He felt the agency already had their plan in place prior to the meeting.

The father who rated seven out of ten, stated when he asked for services to be put in place for his child, it didn't happen. The father who rated this area as a ten out of ten said the agency response time to meet father needs still needs improvement. He went on to say, *"I still saw the agency respond immediately to mother even when she was messing up."* He said mothers get so many chances to mess up fathers don't.

The final response in this area was from a father who believes fathers don't know the system, but fathers know their children better than the system. He said it was a 50/50 process, but he will do what's best for his children, and the agency should respect this decision.

Visitation

All the fathers had face to face visits except for the one father who resided out of state. About half of the fathers talked about the lack of flexibility in visitation time. Visitation times varied from a half hour bi-weekly to one-hour visits twice a week.

It should be noted, the father who was visiting for a half hour biweekly was doing so because of his child's mental health issues. He shared that he leaves the visits in bad shape because he does not feel like a responsible father and his child is not able to see him enough. He went on to say the visitation setting also does not allow them to do much with his child.

The two fathers, whom children are placed with relatives, reported they visit as often as they like.



"I wish DHHS could provide recreational activities during visits so fathers can teach their kids sports and things, like we would do at home

-Listening Forum Father

It must be noted; the father who resided out of state did have face to face contact with his child via zoom. He was very appreciative but felt that the visits were not consistent and reported they were cancelled frequently and verbalized how upsetting this was for him.

Service Delivery

One father felt that service delivery was good for him, but he has primary custody of his child and his experience with DHHS seems to be a bit different from other participants.

Another father shared that the providers involved in his case had a slow response time, like DHHS. He then said he wished more services were offered to support and guide him through the DHHS process.

It was also reported that the services were primarily for children and there were no limited services offered to support fathers. One of the panelists shared that the services for his child worked well. He also states that the visitation center service made him wait every time and that needed to improve.

One father felt the providers did their best and if he had to grade them, he would give them a 65 out of 100. He also shared that his schedule fluctuates, and the providers were not accommodating to him.

Two of the fathers were only referred to a visitation center and had no concerns to report.

There were two fathers who were referred to co-ed parenting classes and would have preferred a male only class so they could have learned from other men's experiences.

One father reported engaging in mental health services and had no complaints about the provider.

The father who had the in-home case reported that his wife was referred for classes and services, but he was not.

The father who had an attorney stated that he was able to get all he needed from his providers due to his attorney advocating for him.

Due to the long timeframe to receive a call back, another father felt he had no faith in the services, he said *"when I had emergencies, they were not responsive to me"*.

The last father stated he was referred to substance abuse services by a friend not his worker. He was drinking to help him cope with his wife's death.

**Participants were asked if they felt the appropriate services, supports and representation was offered. It should be noted they were also asked about the court system, but there were no responses. Throughout the forum, they did refer to their attorneys.*

Overall Experience Working With DHHS

The first father to respond to what his experience was like working with DHHS said he had two workers assigned to his case. He shared his first worker just wasted his time; however, the second worker was more attentive and responsive.

Another father who had multiple workers shared, *"I didn't have a chance to choose my workers, but I tried to make the best of the circumstances."*

There was a father who stated he worked harder than the social worker. He believes he had to do the investigation himself to ensure the safety of his child, who was in mother's care. This experience was elevated to the supervisor. He shared he had several unpleasant conversations with the supervisor. He felt the supervisor was not respectful, which was very disappointing for him. He was eventually others workers but his current worker has passion for the work and makes time for him and always keeps her word.

The last father reported he had more than one worker and the worker that he has now is cordial and believes the worker is ok and does their best.



"When I get upset and express myself, my voice changes and they feel I am being aggressive, at which point my concerns are no longer taken seriously; that is frustrating"

- Listening Panel Father

How to Improve Engagement with Fathers

There were numerous recommendations from the panelist as to how the agency can improve engagement and inclusion with fathers. Some of the feedback is as followed:

When the agency becomes involved, fathers should be notified immediately. The fathers felt they weren't given a fair chance and needed to work hard just to prove themselves. The fathers also felt they did not seem to be as important as the mothers.

Multiple fathers felt DHHS should include the father's input throughout the life of the case. They believe workers are disconnected and can't see fathers for who they are. *"They just see the report; but need to forgive us for making a mistake; were human too".*

More work needs to be done around flexible with father's schedule as this could improve engagement with father which could increase their ability to visit more. It was also recommended that the fathers needed to know exactly what to do in the beginning of the case. This information needs to be clear and direct. Having a FAQ informational sheet for fathers would also be helpful.

DHHS workers need to have more empathy for fathers who children have been removed from their care. Additionally, when a child is removed, the social worker should always talk to children about their fathers from a strength based prospective. Another suggestion to improve fatherhood engagement/inclusion was to increase father specific services/delivery, make the referrals in a timely manner, and speed up approval times for services.

Face-to-face contact should always be the preferred method to discuss the case; however, when that is not possible, there should be a standard timeframe in which DHHS has to respond to phone calls and emails.



"Men are supposed to be strong and protectors, but when we can't protect our children because they have been removed, they feel let down like we are dead beat dads"

- Listening Panel Father

Conclusion

When fathers are not fully engaged and included throughout the life of a case, many fathers feel like nothing more than an afterthought. Oftentimes fathers feel overwhelmed with working with state systems, particularly child welfare. They interpret their involvement as a fight versus a partnership. The lack of engagement on the part of agencies and fathers' unwillingness to engage with the agency can significantly impact outcomes for children and families.

As in any relationship, you only get one chance at making a first impression. This thought process also rings true for the way child welfare agencies introduce themselves to fathers. Many fathers and their families have unique needs and face significant challenges. Without listening to the father and getting to know their history, trauma, and needs can create barriers to creating a successful partnership. Engagement should be ongoing from the onset of a case at the intake to case closure. This form of engagement has historically reduced fathers' resistance to work with child protection agencies.

Offering fathers, a seat at the table and implementing their goals into the planning process can increase a father's involvement and commitment to achieving the goals set out by the team.

It is unclear why approximately 63% of the fathers who responded to the interest survey to participate in the Listening Forum failed to follow through. Additionally, only 4 of the 11 (36%) who participated in the two sessions were willing to talk to Welcome 2 Reality, LLC prior to their designated session. One can be led to assume that the previous experience with the agency may not have been favorable for them. This matter was perplexing as virtually every message indicated this would be an opportunity to provide feedback that could help improve the way fathers are viewed and engaged in the future. Despite the ongoing effort the turnout only 11 of the 29 fathers participated despite being offered a free \$100.00 Amazon gift card.

It is imperative to locate, engage, and include fathers until the case is resolved. This includes but is not limited to undocumented, teen-aged, incarcerated, step, foster, pre-adoptive, non-custodial, putative, and bio fathers. Embedding partnership, father friendly practices, supports and inclusion into the policy of the agency can be critical in achieving the agencies' goal of helping to create a future where all Maine children and families are safe, stable, happy, and healthy.

The three areas that Welcome 2, Reality LLC would recommend focusing on would be Visitation, Case Planning and Communication with fathers.

Below you will find additional recommendation to consider as practice changes

Welcome 2 Reality

Suggestions and Recommendations

- Offer facilitated father-specific listening forums for staff;
- Offer ongoing Fatherhood Engagement and inclusion Trainings to newly hired and seasoned staff;
- Ensure intentional discussions and direction to engage fathers occurs during supervision;
- Consider creating a fatherhood-specific FAQ as recommended;
- Create a fatherhood specific practice guide outlining agency policy, expectations, recommendation, and search & engagement tools;
- Schedule case plan/family meetings around father's schedule or offer a separate meeting to ensure he is receiving the same information as mother;
- Encourage father to identify supports that can be present during case planning and family meetings;
- Ensure father is an active participant in the case planning process, not after the fact;
- Educate father on all the available services that might benefit him and his family and continue to reassess and address his needs;
- Offer a diaper changing stations in the men's bathroom;
- Provide non-custodial/residential father with monthly updates in writing specifically fathers who are incarcerated or reside out of state;
- Help father establish community supports to increase his social capital;
- Offer coaching for staff who struggle engaging fathers;
- Create a Fatherhood Advisory Council that consist of fathers who were formally involved with the department to guide policy and practice;
- Provide equivalent services for mothers and fathers;
- Create a physical father friendly environment that is inviting to fathers in the office, materials, and the language;
- Survey staff as to what barriers the feel impact father engagement/inclusion.
- Offer male specific recruitment to hire male staff;
- Create a bi-monthly or quarterly newsletter highlighting successes, challenges of engaging father, tip sheets and tools to locate fathers;
- Hire staff who are specifically designated to support staff engagement of fathers;
- Clarify that father understands what he is reading or signing.

