

## **Rethinking Investigations and Case Planning: Families' Experiences with the Front End of the System**

In early 2022, three foundations, researchers, a national nonprofit and parents came together to design and implement a participatory research project that explored the front end of the child welfare system. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Stand Together, and the Aviv Foundation funded a project to determine if the current approach to child abuse investigations and case planning is appropriate and helpful. While the child welfare system has the potential to use the investigations process as an opportunity to connect struggling families to needed supports, there is a sense that the existing system too often treats families struggling with poverty and other issues as subjects under investigation rather than as caregivers in need of support.

For Phase One, the project involved gathering insights from parents, youth, and other stakeholders about their experiences with the investigations process and services offered to prevent further involvement with the system. Perspectives were also gathered on how the overall process and services could be improved to meet the goals of:

- keeping children safe
- keeping families together
- supporting children's well-being
- building trust between communities and the child welfare system.

This project was intentionally co-designed and implemented with five parent partners who have experience in the child welfare system. The funders also partnered with:

- JL Brooks Consulting as the research consultant
- Children's Trust Fund Alliance to lead the work of partnering with parents to gather data from 100 other parents
- Think of Us to lead the work of gathering data from youth
- The American Bar Association to recruit attorneys
- National Child Welfare Workforce Institute to assist in recruiting judges and child protective service (CPS) workers.

The project had two goals:

- 1) to research and develop a new, less adversarial approach to child abuse and neglect investigations so that families can more openly share challenges and receive the support they need
- 2) to research and develop a new model for case planning when families are receiving services in their homes to prevent further abuse or neglect, or a foster care placement.

Data collected in this project included:

- 100 interviews with parents who have experienced an investigation (interviewed by other parents)
- 31 interviews with youth whose families have experienced an investigation.
- 2 focus groups with a total of 16 parent attorneys
- 29 judge survey responses
- 282 investigative worker survey responses

A unique partnership developed between the three foundations, researchers, Children's Trust Fund Alliance and parents with lived experience when planning and implementing this participatory research project. Parents with a high level of expertise gained from their own lived experience were asked to conduct the interviews. They were able to engage other parents during the interview process while providing a safe and non-judgmental space for the parent's perspective to be fully heard. It was hoped that parent interviewees would feel more comfortable talking and sharing with another parent who had similar experiences with the child welfare system.

Because of the topic and the past trauma of parents being interviewed, it was particularly important to ensure that the five parents on the project team had a strong voice in determining many of the elements of the project. These parents had important voices in the following areas:

- 1) Determining who was interviewed
- 2) Determining parents who were recruited
- 3) Determining how to set up the interviews so that the respondents felt safe and comfortable
- 4) Developing interview questions
- 5) Leading interviews
- 6) Identifying themes from the interviews to determine findings.

At the end of Phase One, the project team shared how the momentum of the project stayed strong because the team members were able to work together as equal partners. They recognized the importance of: (1) valuing the process as much as the outcome; (2) having agreed-upon values and being intentional about honoring them; (3) investing in relationship-building, communicating openly and honestly; and (4) asking people for their opinion and actually being open to making changes.

The project team felt a great responsibility to do no harm to the 100 parents who were being interviewed and created a number of supports such as (1) an introductory video; (2) compilation of resources for support; (3) follow-up calls and written notes from the parent interviewers; (5) honorariums; (6) a respectful tone throughout the interview and (7) the opportunity to stop the interview at any time and still receive the honorarium. Through this work, the members of the project team were able to gain a better understanding of how the child welfare system works and its impact on families.

Phase Two will include replicating this participatory research process in 3 - 5 local communities to develop new approaches that will be piloted in those same areas. Next steps include identifying key local partners and funders who can implement this process in those communities.